

Author's note: The show mentioned the distance between Earth and G889 as 22 light-years but it also established that it took the Roanoke 22 years to get there. This is impossible without Faster Than Light travel – as Gerhard has explained so well upon more than one occasion. I decided to take the 22 years of travel time and more or less arbitrarily placed G889 at 11 light-years distance instead of 22.

Thanks go to Bettina for helping me out with a few of the astronomical details. Any mistakes are mine. And as always, a big thank you to Nicole for beta-reading this one!

Hejira (2): Walk along the Road of Creation

Chapter 1

Without a sound, the oblong object hurtled through the cold vacuum of space, as it had done for decades. It had a wide rotund end that gradually tapered off to a flattened prow. As it passed by stars and suns, light reflected from its metallic body in dull flashes. The small, square windows in the nose were dark and the ship's interior was empty of life. Four curved arms stuck forward at an angle, each with a steel clamp at the end. The clamps were designed to fit exactly into the mooring sockets at a space station docking bay, thus securing the craft to the bay.

During the first year of its journey, the ship had accelerated until it reached its cruising speed of almost forty thousand miles per second, roughly one-fifth of the speed of light. At that point, the engines shut down and the ship coasted the rest of the way. Even at this velocity, it needed almost fifty years to reach its destination. Finally the ship neared the coordinates that had been entered into the onboard computer and the autopilot fired the forward thrusters to slow it down.

The human occupants of the ship were totally unaware of the systems' activities. They were cocooned securely in their own private worlds, alone with their dreams while they stood motionless in their glass caskets. Exactly like they had been ever since they fell into a cryogenic sleep. The ship carried twelve cold sleep pods. Six were located in the starboard bay aft of the cockpit and six in the port bay. Only ten pods were occupied.

Deceleration proceeded according to the routines set half a century earlier and the ship's computer activated the life support systems. A computerized voice announced, "Atmospheric conditions restored. Oxygen levels: normal. Artificial gravity: on. Temperature: 24 degrees Celsius. Commencing wake up cycle now."

Somewhere deep inside the ship a warning signal beeped. Lights blinked on control panels as one after another the cryogenic sleep capsules ran their defrost program and

began to wake their occupants. Warm, oxygen-rich air rushed into the cribs in white steamy clouds, until the temperature inside caught up and the moisture in the air no longer condensed. The first of the doors slid open and its resident, a slender blond woman, fell forward to her knees on the cold floor.

oOo

Julia Heller gasped when she took her first breath in fifty years. She tried to swallow and had to work her mouth a few times to get the moisture flowing again. Her tongue felt as thick and dry as a wad of cotton. Several minutes passed before she remembered where she was and what she was doing here on her knees on a hard, metal floor. However, her instincts quickly took over when the other capsules opened and spewed forth their occupants, who were coughing and wheezing while their lungs adjusted to the influx of oxygen.

Julia grabbed for the diagnostic glove that she had left near her capsule before going to sleep. Her brain was sluggish with cold sleep residue and she had some trouble focusing long enough to strap it onto the correct arm. Once she had activated the glove, she crawled from one person to the next, running a quick scan on them all. She'd been concerned about using the old crypts, afraid they might malfunction.

To her relief, everyone checked out fine, albeit somewhat fuzzy after their long sleep. She knew from experience that it would take a while before synapses kicked in completely and everyone was fully awake.

Alonzo Solace, the seasoned cold sleep jumper, was the first to recover, giving credence to the theory that one can get used to just about anything. "I better check our bearings," he said. His chipper tone elicited a groan from Baines; the black man was holding his head as if he were afraid it might come off. Alonzo got to his feet and walked toward the cockpit. A slight wobble in his gait was the only indication he had just woken up after five long decades.

"How's True doing?" was the first thing John Danziger asked after he caught his breath. His daughter was sitting flat on her buttocks in front of her capsule, legs stretched out on the floor.

"True's fine," Julia said, while running her hands once again across the girl's body. She switched off the glove. "We all are. Good job with the cryobeds." She smiled at Danziger. He shrugged and rubbed his face.

"You told us what repairs to make."

"I wasn't as confident as I might've appeared," she confessed with a lopsided smile. To stop the mechanic from commenting, she added quickly, "I'll see if Walman and Cameron are all right too."

Holding on to the wall for support, she climbed to her feet and padded unsteadily to the other cold sleep chamber. The two men hunched miserably on the floor. Another quick scan with the glove informed the doctor that they were also doing well and merely trying to adapt to being awake.

"Never again," Walman grouched. "I swear, it's even worse than the first time. I *knew* it was a mistake to leave the Station Maintenance Authority for this gig."

"It'll pass in a little while," Julia consoled him after she declared him whole and healthy. Cameron remained silent and smiled in gratitude when she helped him sit up and turn so he could watch the cryobed that still held Denner.

Only two beds were still occupied. One bed held Devon Adair; Denner was asleep in the other. They would remain asleep until the ship had reached its destination: New Mars Station, in orbit around Earth. The computer's instructions were to keep the pods activated until told otherwise. The two women fell sick on the planet and the cryobeds had saved their lives; Bess and Magus had not been so lucky.

Julia checked the control panels. Both crypts were still well below the critical temperature of -196 degrees Celsius and she nodded with satisfaction. "So far so good," she muttered.

"How's my Mom?" a small voice asked. Julia turned around to gaze down at Ulysses Adair. He looked up at her with open concern in his blue eyes. She tousled his hair, momentarily experiencing a sense of warped *déjà vu*. More than a half-century ago the boy's mother had been just as concerned about her son's well being.

"She's as well as can be," Julia said, careful not to raise the boy's hopes. "Your mother will remain in cold sleep until we reach the station. We can help her there."

He ambled closer and stared at his mother's countenance behind the misted glass. Then his eyes fell on the wood stick propped up next to the capsule. "I miss the Terrians," he said softly. "They were my friends."

Julia didn't know what to reply. Life on the planet had been harsh and dangerous. They had lacked simple comforts like soft beds and running water. Still, Julia had never felt more alive than during the months trekking across G889. Then the women had started dying... In the end, they had realized it was the planet itself that didn't want them there.

And they did the only thing they could do. They left.

"Let's freshen up," she told Uly. "And I'm sure Alonzo can use some help in the cockpit."

He turned to face her, sudden childish excitement brightening his face. "Think he'll let me fly the ship?" Uly asked.

Julia chuckled. "We can ask him." She held out her hand and Uly took it. Together they left the bay while the machinery that kept the crypts frozen, hummed quietly behind them.

Chapter 2

Alonzo sat hunched over the pilot's console and frowned at the screen in front of him. He toggled a switch and redirected the Doppler pulse to make a wider sweep across the sky. The display remained empty, except for the rotating orange line that told him the beam was properly pinging and trying to make contact with the guidance systems. He muttered something below his breath and reached for another switch when approaching footsteps made him look up. His features relaxed and he stared at Julia with open admiration as she entered the cockpit, Uly following on her heels. Refreshed, dressed in a clean shirt and pair of pants and with her hair pulled back into its customary neat ponytail, she appeared fully recovered from the cryosleep.

Uly climbed in the chair next to Alonzo's. Mesmerized the boy watched the displays in front of him, lights blinking and needles quivering slightly. "Don't touch anything," Julia told him sternly and Uly nodded.

"Okay. Can I fly the ship?" he asked.

Alonzo shook his head. "Not much to it right now, kiddo," he said. "The computer's doing all the work. But you can keep an eye on that screen for me, let me know as soon as you see a spark appear." Alonzo pointed to the small screen set at the far right of the control panel. The thin beam slowly rotated on the empty display.

"Are we where we're supposed to be?" Julia asked.

"Yes," he said, drawing out the word, "right on the dot. Like I said, I haven't missed yet."

She raised an eyebrow. "Then why the long face? What's wrong?"

"I don't know," Alonzo said. "Nothing, really. We're right on course, you can see New Mars Station dead ahead." He pointed out the window. Outside, dozens and dozens of

tiny stars provided a beautiful backdrop for what seemed merely a bigger and brighter light. "But I can't establish contact with the beacons. And the computers aren't picking up the APEX signature. Of course," he continued, "this ship is over one hundred fifty years old. It could be merely a matter of computer systems being incompatible. Or maybe a magnetic storm scrambled the signal."

"That sounds reasonable," Julia said.

Before she could say anything else, True's cry echoed through the ship's bays. "Dad! Dad! I can see Earth!" The girl's voice was slightly muffled. From the sound of it she was looking out through a window further aft.

Uly looked at Alonzo. "Is that true?" he asked.

Alonzo nodded. "Yes, Earth is on the starboard side. That's the right side," he explained with a grin when Uly threw him a puzzled glance. The boy jumped from the chair and scurried out of the cockpit. In his excitement, he seemed to have totally forgotten about his intentions to fly the ship.

"If you look even further back," Alonzo called as the boy disappeared, "you can also see the Moon."

Julia leaned over his shoulder to peer through the window. Earth wasn't visible through the small square that faced forward; instead, she stared at the light that would become their home once again. Her hand rested on his arm and Alonzo felt the tension ooze from her in small quivers. He realized she was more scared about their return than she let on. He was certain that it was too long ago, that nobody would remember, but Julia feared the Council. He knew she was afraid that they would call her to account for her actions, that the Council would consider her a traitor to their Greater Cause. Some cause, Alonzo thought sourly. Kidnapping a little boy. Stealing a planet from its rightful, indigenous inhabitants.

Julia straightened. "How much longer?" she asked in low voice.

"A few hours," he said. He turned in his seat and caught her around the waist, pulling her to him. "It'll be okay," he said looking up to meet her eyes. "I promise." A grin broke on his face. "And I haven't forgotten your promise about us celebrating life," he added. He lowered his voice to a husky whisper and continued, "There's time before I have to take over from the computer... We could start right now... Sneak off to one of the empty bays in back..."

"Lonz, how're we doing?" Danziger's low rumble broke the spell and Julia pulled away.

Alonzo winked at her and her cheeks colored a light pink before she quickly left the cockpit.

"As well as can be expected," Alonzo told Danziger. "We'll dock in a couple of hours."

"Any problems?" Danziger continued. "How's the ship holding up?"

"The old lady is doing just fine," Alonzo said. "The only thing that concerns me is the lack of guidance support. We should be within reach of APEX already."

"Is that a problem?" Danziger wanted to know. He took the seat that Uly had vacated a few minutes earlier and ran a hand through his hair.

"Not right now, no," Alonzo said. "As long as we make contact before we have to start docking."

"I'll ask Baines to come help you," Danziger suggested.

"Good idea." Alonzo nodded before turning back to his console. His main job at the moment consisted of checking and double-checking the data that scrolled across the screens and that was fed into the main computer. The ship flew itself. The only exciting part, he mused, came during launch and docking procedures. And of course when something went wrong. Right now though, he wasn't quite in the mood for things to go wrong. His 'cargo' was too valuable to him. And it certainly wouldn't do to flee the planet to save their lives only to die in sight of the harbor they were headed for.

oOo

He'd never get used to it, Baines thought while standing in the dry shower stall and letting the ultrasonic rays refresh him. Cold sleep. As so often in the past he wondered again what had possessed him in the first place to want to be a communications officer for space missions. A need for adventure, probably.

Alonzo made it seem so easy. Wake up, shake your head a little and off you go! Not Baines, though. Then again, he'd never been much of a morning person to begin with. He grinned at his reflection in the small mirror. At least the shower made him feel like a human being again.

He finished dressing and headed for the cockpit. True and Uly were glued to a small window in one of the outer bays, gesturing excitedly; otherwise the ship was quiet. Cameron was sitting near the occupied cold sleep crypts, keeping a quiet watch. Baines shivered. Using cold sleep for travel was one thing. But using cryo-technology to keep

people alive that should have been dead... However, he quickly forgot his discomfort when he turned the corner and nearly stumbled over Walman. The man had pulled one of the extractable benches out of the wall and was snoring loudly. "That's a way to battle the effects of cold sleep," Baines chuckled to himself.

"So, you finally woke up?" Alonzo smiled in greeting when he reached the cockpit. Baines muttered something below his breath. The pilot's face turned serious when he continued to explain the problem with the beacons.

"It is odd," Baines agreed. "I'll give it a try." He grinned. "I got a few tricks up my sleeve."

Outside the cockpit the children's voices rose in argument. Danziger grimaced and climbed to his feet. He motioned for Baines to take his chair. "I better go check on the kids. See what's going on. Call me if anything changes." Both men nodded and the big mechanic walked away.

Chapter 3

Danziger found True and Uly squabbling in front of the small window, arguing about which was older: Earth, or the Moon. It was just the kind of question Yale would have had an answer to. Danziger sighed; he suddenly missed the wise tutor a lot.

Through the Lexan window behind the kids, he had a great view of the two celestial bodies that were the subject of their argument. Despite the impassive beauty of the two orbs gleaming in the sunlight, Danziger thought that he had liked G889 better. Seen from space G889 had looked like Earth must have been once, full of swirling blues and greens and whites. Nowadays a brownish haze covered most of Earth's surface. Mankind hadn't exactly taken good care of its heritage; maybe G889 had been right to force them to leave. The planet could have taken other means to get the message across though, he thought glumly while quenching the argument and sending the children off to Julia for a final check-up. Bess and Magus dead, Denner and Devon seriously sick... He shook his head.

As by their own volition his feet took him to the cold sleep bays. He nodded in greeting at Cameron and raised his head to look at Devon. She was standing upright in the slightly elevated cryo-chamber and their eyes were almost level. Hers, of course, were closed. She was completely unaware of anything happening around her. Danziger knew she'd be devastated when she found out that the dream had fallen apart so cruelly. Her dream to build a new and healthy home for the Syndrome children.

He let himself slide down the opposite wall and sat next to Cameron on the hard floor, knees drawn up, hands resting atop. Without speaking both men sat watching the

women they loved. At last, Cameron broke the silence.

"What d'you think will happen?" he asked. "When we reach New Mars? Do you think the doctors there can heal them?"

"Julia seems to think so," Danziger replied. What *would* happen, if – no, *when* Devon were healed? They had grown close during their time on the surface, despite their animosity in the beginning. They surely started off on the wrong foot, with Devon's superior attitude toward him. Danziger's hackles had risen the very first time she'd stared down her nose at him and dismissed his advice. And they hadn't lain down again until much later. Well, okay, he admitted grudgingly, his advice *had* often taken the form of defiant orders.

Still, over time things had changed. He'd come to admire her intelligence and her perseverance to succeed, to make her dream a reality. Devon had begun to listen to him, even though he was a mere mechanic and not even supposed to be on the planet. Gradually their differences in status and standing had worn away, faded to nothing. They'd come to appreciate each other as human beings. And on the heels of that appreciation had followed love. Danziger could admit it, if only to himself. He did love her. And he thought -hoped- that she might feel something for him as well.

It was too late to do anything about it now, of course. Station society would never stand for it. Devon Adair, who was born into one of the First Families, romantically involved with a nameless nobody mechanic from the Quadrant? Danziger chuckled bitterly. Impossible. He knew Devon didn't care much for the class differences. But even Devon couldn't force a station full of people to discard their prejudices. Especially not when she was going to need all her family's good standing and money to regain her place in society. He would only be in her way.

No, Danziger thought, he'd take True, and the money due him, and disappear from her life. It would be best for both of them. He compressed his lips. It was too bad really. Finally, for the first time since Elle died he had found a woman worthy of his love and now he had to leave her.

Abruptly something else occurred to him and he cursed below his breath. Cameron looked at him oddly. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," Danziger nodded. "I just remembered something. The Colony ship'll have passed us several years ago. And Syndrome children don't survive past the age of nine..." He didn't need to finish. Cameron's eyes widened in shock.

"You mean they'll all be dead now?"

"Unless the Terrians healed them before they returned, or they found a cure on New Mars, yes." Danziger looked again at Devon.

Poor woman. She had worked so hard, fighting the government and the Council alike to reach her goals. And it had all come to naught.

oOo

He didn't know how long he was sitting there on the floor across from Devon's cryobed, absorbed in his thoughts. But it was hours later when True's voice shook him from his musings.

"Dad! Dad! Alonzo wants you to come to the cockpit. He says we have to dock soon."

Danziger gave a start and a little stiffly climbed to his feet. Taking his daughter's hand, he followed her to the cockpit. Cameron treaded on their heels.

The small room was crowded and abuzz with frenzied activity. The first glance told Danziger something was wrong. Lights were blinking on the displays and the computer offered status reports every few seconds.

"Entering station subspace," the system's emotionless female voice announced.

Uly and Julia were hunched quietly in the far corner, watching. Julia's eyes were dark with worry while Uly observed all the activity with cheeks flush with excitement. Walman sat in the navigator's seat and was calling out numbers scrolling across the screen in front of him. Baines, at the comm desk, appeared anxious.

"Port Control, come in please. This is Venus forty-three, coming in from G889. Can anyone hear me? Hello?" A pleading note crept into Baines' voice. He flicked a couple of switches and dialed in on another frequency before repeating the call.

Through the window ahead, Danziger could see the station rotating slowly on its axis, growing bigger even as he watched. The Sun's glare reflected off its silvery surface and large solar panels were pointed at the bright light, automatically adjusting to its path across the sky. Toroid-shaped, the station looked like a huge ring. Perpendicular to the ring, four service tubes stretched out toward the middle, like spokes. The pipes ended in a rotund node where the central docking bays were.

They approached the node from 'above'. To the passengers aboard the Venus-boat the Station appeared to be on its side, rolling through the sky like a giant wheel. It made

Danziger queasy when he looked at it for long.

Alonzo swiveled his chair when Danziger and Cameron entered the cockpit. His features were tense, jaws clenched and eyes tight.

"What's wrong?" Danziger asked.

"Same thing as before, actually," Alonzo said. "The guidance system doesn't respond to our pulse beam. We have no APEX and Port Control isn't replying. The long and short of it is, I think they've shut everything down."

"Can we go into orbit?" Danziger asked.

"We could, for a little while," Alonzo said. "We have enough air and fuel to wait for the next available window to dock. And maybe the next after that. What worries me is the lack of response. Baines has tried to hail PC for the past few hours. If they decided to ignore us, I don't see them responding suddenly just because we went into orbit."

Danziger turned to Baines. He shrugged. "I've tried every frequency there is. And then some. I *know* we are transmitting, that's the first thing I checked. There's no indication of a magnetic disturbance; there's no reason why our calls shouldn't reach someone. It's almost as if... nobody's there."

"The portal doors are open," Cameron observed and pointed outside. Indeed, the oval doors were folded open like the petals of a flower that turned its heart to the sun.

"Yes," Alonzo agreed. "I've no idea why though, resonance shows no other ships in the area except us. But with the landing lights off, APEX down... Do you know how hard it is to pinpoint a ship this big at an opening that small without computer guidance?"

Danziger thought for a moment. "Can it be done?" he asked.

Alonzo shrugged. "I can try. I don't see we have much of a choice."

"Okay, let's do it. What do you need?"

Chapter 4

Alonzo remained silent for a minute. What *did* he need? Something or someone to tell him where he was in relation to the docking bay walls. He glumly remembered the way they left. They'd had no clearance and Port Control had shut down APEX, leaving him to rely purely on visuals to navigate. There was a certain poetic symmetry in returning

the same way. But getting *out* was a hell of a lot easier than coming *in*!

"I'm going to need you guys give me visual markings. But first I want you to take Julia and the children. Find them a seat, somewhere in one of the inner bays, and secure them to the wall. Make sure they have oxygen masks at hand. If something goes wrong and we breach the hull..." There was no need to explain what would happen if the ship's hull were compromised. The vacuum of space would suck the air right out, along with everything else that wasn't bolted down. Julia and the kids wouldn't have much of a chance if the hull got torn. At least with the oxygen they would gain some time and have a chance to survive.

Danziger nodded and motioned Julia to follow him. She opened her mouth to protest, then thought better of it. When she passed Alonzo, he grabbed her hand. "Julia..." Their eyes met and in that brief moment volumes passed between them.

Finally Julia gave him a quick smile and squeezed his fingers. "You're the best pilot around," she whispered in his ear. "I trust you."

He swallowed down a sudden lump in his throat and watched her walk from the cockpit, the kids in tow. Uly no longer looked excited. Instead fear was beginning to show in his eyes.

"Okay," Alonzo continued when they had left. "Cameron, I want you at the port window aft. Holler when I get too close to the wall. Don't forget to look up and down as well. And secure yourself somehow." Cameron nodded and left the cockpit to take up his station.

"Baines, I need you to take over from Walman. Forget contacting them, PC's not going to miraculously reply at the last moment." Obediently Baines went to sit in the seat that Walman vacated. "Give me positioning feeds every five seconds," Alonzo ordered.

He motioned Walman to the seat next to him, the one Baines just left. "Take that." The pilot's seat wasn't placed in the exact middle of the ship but on the starboard side, with the comm desk to the left. "Keep an eye out through that window," Alonzo pointed. "And let me know how I'm doing with the clamps on that side."

Danziger returned and Alonzo told him to take the aft window opposite Cameron and gave him the same instructions. Then he turned back to his console. Surreptitiously he wiped his hands on his legs and grabbed the control-lever. "Everyone in place? Let's do it. Baines?"

oOo

"Julia? Are we going to crash?"

The overhead lights burned orange behind their protective grating. They cast a dim glow that wasn't bright enough to chase the shadows from the far corners of the cargo bay. Hidden deep inside the ship the bay was largely empty, its metal floor painted a dull green. The paint was marred and scratched; over the years numerous cargo boxes had left their mark on this floor. At regular intervals rings were sunk in the floor and walls for cargo to be secured tightly.

Julia, True and Uly huddled together against one of the walls. Folded sleeping bags offered a padded seat. The sleeping bags were theirs, packed aboard the ship when they left G889. Nobody expected to have a need for them once they reached the stations but they hadn't been about to simply leave their gear behind either; they'd learned the value of their stuff the hard way.

Three oxygen masks dangled from their straps in Julia's left hand. Thick cords around their waists secured the three people tightly to rings in the wall. The floor below them vibrated slightly with the engines' power. And they could feel the ship shift whenever Alonzo fired the thrusters to adjust position.

"No, Uly, I'm sure Alonzo will get us to the dock safely. He's a very good pilot."

"Of course you say that." True giggled nervously. "You're in love with him!"

Julia smiled down at the girl. "Yes, I am. But even if I weren't, I'd say the same thing. We'll be fine. Don't worry about it. Just a little while longer and we can leave this ship."

As if to contradict her promise, the ship lurched violently. True yelped in shock and Uly grabbed for Julia's right hand, squeezing hard. Julia's head jolted back against the wall and she grunted with the sudden pain that laced through her skull. A tremor ran through the walls and floor, followed by a screeching sound coming from somewhere ahead of them. The overhead lights went off, plunging them in darkness.

Alarms started blaring and the emergency lights came on, casting a reddish glow on their faces. True's eyes were opened wide in fear and Uly looked a ghastly pale, as if he were still sick with the Syndrome.

Julia pricked up her ears, listening intently for the telltale moaning of metal giving way under pressure, or the hiss of escaping air. She offered up a wordless prayer that everything remain silent.

A few minutes later there was another, more gentle thud and the overhead lights came back on, brighter than before. The vibration beneath their feet faded when the engines were shut down. Alonzo's voice sounded over the intercom. "Welcome to New Mars Station. The management thanks you for flying Solace Air." The relief in his tone as he made the joke was obvious. "In other words, folks, we've docked safely."

Letting out a sigh, Julia put the oxygen masks aside and turned to help True and Uly release their bonds. Her fingers trembled as she fumbled to undo the knots.

The doors to the bay slid open and Danziger swept in, his eyes immediately on True. "Everyone okay?" he asked.

Julia nodded. "We're fine."

The last of the cords that kept True strapped to the wall came loose and she bounded to her feet, flinging herself at her father. He scooped her up in his arms. "I was so scared," True muttered. "I thought we were going to crash again." Suddenly she seemed to remember she was no longer a little kid and wriggled from Danziger's arms. She cast a sour glare at Uly, daring him to say something.

But the boy had other things on his mind. "Is my mom okay?" he asked. He shifted restlessly, tugging on the cords. As soon as he was free from the wall, he jumped up. "I want to see my mom."

"In a minute," Danziger said. But Uly raced from the cargo bay in search of his mother's cryo bed, leaving Danziger to mumble below his breath.

"What happened?" she asked.

"One of the docking arms hit the launch tube wall," Alonzo replied as he walked in to kneel in front of her. "Fortunately the hull remained intact. Although I suspect the launch tube is in need of repairs." He chuckled wryly. "I'll handle that," he told Danziger, motioning at Julia's ropes.

With a nod Danziger straightened and left the bay. True took the opportunity to remind him he promised her a cat when they came back to the stations. Danziger grumbled something noncommittally in reply.

"Don't open the hatch yet," Alonzo called over his shoulder as their voices faded. "Wait until the jetway is pressurized. That takes a couple of minutes."

He turned back to Julia and regarded her quietly for a few moments. His mouth curled in

a mischievous grin. "I think," he said slowly, "I like you this way: bound to the walls of my ship." Julia groaned and glared at him.

"Are you going to help me or not?" she growled, plucking at the ropes. Alonzo chuckled.

"What's in it for me?" he teased. However, he did lean in to help her. He didn't bother to unravel the knots; instead he pulled his makeshift knife from his boot and slashed the ropes.

He helped Julia to her feet and steadied her when she swayed slightly. "Are you okay?" he asked anxiously, all playfulness disappearing from his face.

Julia raised a hand and felt at the bump on the back of her head. She winced when her fingers touched the egg-shaped swelling. "I hit my head," she said. "But I'll be fine. How's everyone else?"

"Okay, I guess," Alonzo said. He held her until he was certain she stood firm on her own legs. "Except Cameron bloodied his nose. He slammed his face against the window when we hit the wall."

Chapter 5

Cameron rolled his eyes in their direction when Julia and Alonzo entered. He tried not to move his head while breathing slowly through his mouth. Leaning back against the wall below the window, he was pressing a handkerchief to his nose.

Julia crouched in front of him, dagloved at the ready. "Let me see that," she asked gently.

He removed the cloth and was surprised to find that his nose was no longer bleeding. Julia lightly prodded his face with her fingers and he winced. "Sorry," she automatically murmured before straightening. "You're lucky. Nothing's broken. I can give you a painblocker if you want; by the look of it you'll be sore for a few days to come."

"Not to mention blue in the face," Alonzo added with a lopsided grin. "Literally."

"Yeah, well," Cameron muttered, folding the bloodied kerchief inside out, "next time you want to punch me in the nose, you can do it to my face. You don't have to use such a roundabout way. At the least I'd have a chance to punch you right back." His voice sounded stuffed like he had a bad cold.

Baines barged in, boots clanging on the floor. "Hey, Lonz, let's g—" His eyes widened when he caught sight of Cameron. "What the hell happened to you?" A grin broke on his

face. "How's the other guy look?"

"Haha," Cameron grumbled. "Very funny." He grimaced. Even talking hurt. He supposed they were right and for the next few days he would look like he'd been in a bar brawl. But that wasn't important. The important thing was, they made it to the dock alive. And maybe, he hoped, they could thaw Denner soon and make her well again.

"Lonz, you want to do the honors?" Danziger's voice called dimly from further forward. "Pressure's almost established."

The four people exchanged a look. What would they find? Julia looked apprehensive, Cameron thought. Baines appeared eager to get off the ship. Alonzo looked like he usually did, unconcerned and mildly curious for what the future might bring.

The other passengers were already waiting near the hatch. Danziger, with True and Uly, and Walman. The small panel in the wall next to the hatch still showed red lights. But the needles were fast approaching the hundred percent mark. The red light winked off, a green light came on and the pressure in the tube that connected the ship to the terminal matched with the pre-programmed values.

"Here we go," Alonzo said. He pushed down the lever and turned the wheel on the hatch. It resisted his pull and he grunted with effort. Then slowly the wheel rotated. The heavy door swung back on its hinges and there was a brief hiss of air. Cameron was surprised to see no one was waiting for them. He had expected at least an irate Port Control official, demanding to know what they thought they were doing, docking without permission. Instead, the corridor that stretched out in front of them was empty.

The lights in the ceiling cast a cold yellow glare. Several of the lamps were broken, creating dark patches of shadow inside the brightly-lit tube. Somewhere deep inside the tube they heard the high whistle of air escaping.

Walman frowned at the dilapidated jetway. "Someone hasn't been doing their job," he murmured. The six grown-ups exchanged a wary glance and Cameron forgot his throbbing nose. Something was wrong here.

oOo

Something was very wrong here, Walman thought, and he frowned harder. APEX down, Port Control who never replied. And now the jetway turned out to be in a state of disrepair. It was like Baines said earlier: as if nobody was here.

A cold shiver raised goose bumps on his arms while he scanned the deserted hall. He

wondered if the others experienced the same sensation, this sense of emptiness, of lack of life. He turned to face them and realized he wasn't the only one to feel uncomfortable. Julia was hugging herself. Danziger had pulled the children behind him, protecting them with his large bulk. Though they did peek curiously around his legs.

"Where's Yale?" Uly piped up. "He said he'd be waiting."

"Yeah, and Mazatl? And Morgan?" True added.

"Where is everyone?" Cameron asked in puzzlement. He had a furrow in his brow, just above the purplish bruise that was spreading quickly.

"Damned if I know," Alonzo muttered below his breath.

Walman met Danziger's eyes.

"We got a leak," he said to the mechanic. He was referring to the air escaping with a thin, high-pitched shriek. He preferred dealing with practical problems, things he could see and touch.

Danziger nodded. "Best fix that first," he said.

Grateful for something to do, Walman hurried back inside the ship, in search of a breach emergency kit. He found what he was looking for in one of the maintenance cabinets next to the cold sleep crypts. He glanced warily at Devon and Denner. Would they survive if there really was no one here?

With the kit tucked under his arm, he went back to the jetway. Danziger, Julia and Alonzo had fanned out into the corridor. They were searching for the leak and taking a cautious closer look at the jetway. Steel support beams arched at regular intervals and thick, brightly colored hoses hung in loops from the wall to provide air and water and fuel to ships in the docks. Everything appeared coated with a thin layer of fine, sticky dust.

Just as Walman was about to follow them down the corridor, Baines scrambled up beside him, carrying a MagPro. A low, barely perceptible humming told Walman the weapon was armed and ready to be fired.

"What do you want to do with that?" he asked in surprise.

"Just taking precautions," Baines muttered, eyes darting across the jetway. "Just taking precautions."

"Don't be stupid, Baines," Walman said. "You can't use that thing in here. Not without blowing a hole in the wall and killing us all."

"Put it away, Baines," Cameron added, walking up to them. Baines' eyes flicked from Cameron to Walman and back. Reluctantly he straightened and switched off the powerful gun.

"I don't like this one bit," he murmured.

Walman couldn't agree more. "None of us does," he said and stepped out of the ship.

Danziger waved him over. "Found the leak," he said and pointed.

The jetway was made of metal plates welded together. Every forty yards, rubber sheets connected the plates so the segments of wall could slide across each other, like the scales of a fish. This enabled the jetway to be extended or retracted, depending on where the exit hatch on a docked ship was situated. Hidden in shadows, because the two nearest lights both burnt out a long time ago, one of the welded seams was coming apart. No cracks were visible to the naked eye but when Walman trailed his finger along the weld, he could feel the air being sucked out through a hairline crack.

He opened the repair kit and took out the spraycan with liquid sealant. "Better move back," he told the others. "This stuff is toxic when inhaled."

Julia frowned but took a few steps back along with Danziger and Alonzo.

When he was satisfied everyone was far enough away to be in no danger of breathing the fumes, Walman took a deep breath, held it and with a smooth motion sprayed some of the can's contents across the seam. As soon as the vapor touched the metal, it condensed, and instantly formed a thin layer of polyimide that effectively sealed the leak. The shriek stopped. Walman stepped away and exhaled, gulping in another breath.

"Done," he said with a grin.

"Good," Danziger nodded. "Now, let's see where the hell everyone is."

Chapter 6

Julia drummed her fingers impatiently on the armrest of the navigator's seat and shifted on the soft leather. An hour had passed since the men left and there had been no news. They were due to call in any moment now.

With nothing else to do she and Cameron had retreated to the cockpit. Cameron sat behind the comm desk. He had his head propped up against the chair's headrest, eyes closed and he breathed shallowly through his nose. True and Uly had been playing hide and seek in the ship for a while but now huddled quietly in front of the pilot's console.

"I wish you *men* would stop treating me like I can't take care of myself," Julia muttered into the silence. "I hate to sit around and wait." Cameron opened one eye and looked at her with mild surprise.

"Is that why you think Danziger wanted you to stay behind? That you need to be protected? Because you're a woman?" he inquired.

"Well, yeah," Julia said. "And that that's why you have *me* look after the kids. Isn't it?"

Cameron chuckled and opened the other eye too before sitting straighter. "You got it all wrong. Sure, we try to keep anything from happening to you. But it's not because of your gender. And we *know* you can take care of yourself. Julia, you must realize that you're our most valuable group member. You're the doctor. We need you to help Denner and Devon. Plus, the way things are going, we may just need your skills to keep *everyone* alive. Until then, we want to make sure you're safe. Hell, if you were a six foot five heavily muscled man, Danz still wouldn't have taken along you to check out the Station!"

The thought of being a six foot five giant made Julia smile. She hadn't looked at it that way. Cameron's explanation made her feel a little better about being left behind while the others went in search of the station's inhabitants. Still, she wished they would contact her.

And although she was eagerly waiting for it, she nearly jumped out of her skin when her Gear finally beeped. The noise was loud in the silence of the cockpit. She quickly switched on her set and swung the optic feeder forward. Cameron repeated the gesture with the set resting on his head and they both came online simultaneously.

Danziger's face appeared before her eyes.

"John, where are you? What have you found?" Julia asked.

"Julia, Cameron. We found nothing and we've gone down as far as level seven. There's nobody here; the station appears deserted. We've seen traces of small fires but they're old. Life support is functioning, as far as I can tell. I think it's safe to leave the ship. We'll be back shortly and then we can decide what to do and where to go. Danziger out."

Julia swung back the feeder and met Cameron's eyes.

"What does that mean? What fires? And how can everyone just be gone?" he asked her.

Julia shrugged. "I've no idea."

"Maybe everyone's dead," Uly intoned ominously. His eyes gleamed and Julia allowed herself a fleeting smile. He always did have an active imagination. "Maybe this is a ghost station!" He sprang to his feet and danced around, raised hands flailing wildly as he leaned over True. "Boohooo!"

"Uly! Stop it!" the girl cried and pushed him away. "There are no such things as ghosts. Are there?" She looked uncertainly at Cameron and Julia.

"Not that I know," Julia assured her. "I'm sure there's a logical explanation why the station's deserted. And I don't think ghosts have anything to do with it."

oOo

Alonzo strode through the darkened hallways on level seven, back to the escalators, with Walman following closely. Danziger had just called an end to the search, at least for today, and told them to head back.

Upon reaching the living quarters, situated in the outer ring, the four men had split apart in two groups. That way they could cover more ground. Even so, they only were able to explore a fraction of the huge station's grounds: the first seven tiers in what was called the Blue sector. To thoroughly search the whole station would take days, if not weeks.

It was strange, Alonzo thought, to walk these familiar hallways that seemed so unfamiliar now. The silence was oppressive and made him feel ill at ease. Gone were the voices of people, talking and laughing. There were none of the usual intercom announcements or news flashes on the public displays. No longer did he have to jump aside for voice-controlled taxis whose patrons were in a hurry. Only the hum of the life support generators and air recycling units penetrated the utter silence.

They passed a row of shops, windows dark and empty. A thin layer of dust was all that remained where proud shopkeepers once displayed their goods. And there, Alonzo realized with a start when he caught sight of sidewalk bar, was where he'd said goodbye to Judy, the brown-haired woman whose picture had graced his console aboard the Roanoke. He couldn't stop a shiver as he wondered what had happened to her. Although, he added mentally, some seventy years had passed since he said goodbye. For all he knew, she might have died a happy grandmother.

The tiny hairs in his neck stirred and he suddenly had the creepy sensation of eyes resting on him. He spun around, searching, but saw nobody.

The sudden movement surprised Walman. He couldn't stop in time and bumped into Alonzo. "What's gotten into you?" he asked in an urgent whisper.

"I thought I saw something," Alonzo whispered back. "Don't you feel... watched?"

Walman turned around and scanned the hallway behind them. Nothing moved and there were only shadows where the lights had dimmed. According to Universal Station Time, it was just past midnight and the computers had lowered the lights a short while ago, casting the tiers in gloom.

"No," Walman replied after a moment. "I don't. There's nobody there. Man, you've been on one cold sleep run too many. And why are we whispering?"

Alonzo shrugged uneasily. "I s'pose you're right." No longer whispering, he kept his voice low nonetheless.

"Let's go," Walman told him and headed off for the conveyor belts that would take them back to the ship. After another wary glance around Alonzo turned to follow him. He suppressed the urge to rub his neck where he still felt the prick of unseen eyes.

oOo

A short while later the four men returned to the docking area. Cameron sat up straight when they entered the cockpit of the ship. "And?" he asked. "Did you find out what happened here?"

Danziger shook his head. "Nope. Perhaps Baines can access the station records tomorrow. They might hold the key to what's going on here. For now I think it's safe to assume the stations are deserted. At least this one certainly is."

A long and uncomfortable silence fell. Had they come all this way to find the human race gone? At last Cameron broke the silence. "What about Denner? And Devon? Can you still heal them?" he asked Julia.

Julia ran her fingers through her hair and thought for a moment. "If the hospital's computers still function and the equipment I need has been left behind... Yes, I think I can," she said slowly. "We have samples of their original DNA so I should be able to extract the gene that the planet mutated and thus restore their chromosomal make up."

Cameron looked relieved.

"We have another problem though," Julia continued. "Food. We've only got a couple of ration bars and five liters of water left." Upon departing the planet, they had left most of their supplies with Morgan, Yale and Mazatl who had agreed to stay behind and warn the people aboard the Colony ship. They'd just brought enough to provide breakfast after the fifty-year night. Danziger frowned. This could be serious. "Life support's still functional," he said. "The air purifying systems are up, the computer even maintains the day and night cycle. With a little luck, the gardens and water recyclers are also operative." He yawned behind his fist, triggering a string of similar yawns among the others. "We'll have to find out tomorrow. And then we've got to find ourselves some living quarters. I'm not going to stay on this ship forever. For now, let's all get some sleep. It's been one hell of a day."

Julia couldn't agree more and before long Alonzo was leading her back further aft to one of the cargo bays where they would have some privacy.

While he was spreading out the sleeping bags, he told her about the unseen eyes he had felt watching him.

Julia chuckled. "Have you been talking to Uly? He thinks the station is haunted."

"Do you think I'm being paranoid?" Alonzo asked her, his dark eyes meeting hers uncertainly. He made himself comfortable on the sleeping bags and reached for her hand to pull her down next to him.

Julia shrugged. "No, I don't. A sense of being watched is a quite common occurrence in abandoned places. One theory says that it's hyperphysical. Vibrations left in the air that are being picked up. And seeing your experience with the Terrians – you might be especially sensitive."

"Great," Alonzo muttered sourly. "So now I'm sensing people that are no longer there?"

Julia wrapped her arms around his torso and snuggled up against him. "It's only a theory," she soothed sleepily.

Alonzo stared up at the ceiling for a long time though. The feeling had been so strong...
Chapter 7

"Welcome to Lana'i Garden." A woman's voice greeted them warmly when the doors slid close behind them.

Walman yelped in surprise and whirled around in the direction of the sound. His heart had jumped in his throat and he swallowed when he discovered the thick steel column. About four foot high, with a small built-in screen near the top, it gleamed dully among the lush green plants beside the entrance. The screen lit up, showing a neatly coifed and made-up female face.

"Please do not litter. Littering will be fined with fifty credits," the woman on the screen continued pleasantly, unaware of the commotion she caused. "Stay on the paths. Leaving the path will be fined with one hundred credits. Do not pick the fruits. Picking fruits will—"

"Shit!" Walman breathed the crude remark while the woman droned on with her long list of rules and fines. "That nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Walman!" Cameron hissed with a warning glance at Uly. But the boy wasn't paying attention to the men. He craned his neck to look up at the palm trees forming a dense canopy high overhead, coconuts hidden in the shadows among their pointed leaves.

Satisfied that Uly wasn't picking up any bad habits, Cameron added, "The Park Ranger is still functioning."

"I can see that!" Walman snapped, quite annoyed that he had let a robot startle him so badly. He should have remembered the Ranger. Hell, he'd been part of its maintenance crew once!

The Ranger was a smart, computer-controlled supervisory system. It kept track of the goings on inside the park and regulated the air temperature, its humidity and the fertility of the soil automatically.

The parks were not a part of the original space station design. In the early years, shuttles flew food in from Earth, in addition to the synthetic foods produced on the premises. But prices of importing fresh produce had risen exorbitantly over the years when Earth crops failed more and more often. So much so that at last even the First Families and the Council Citizens were unable to afford them. Thus the stations attempted to put together a system of self-sufficiency. The carefully climate-controlled gardens had been designed. Some produced vegetables, others fruits. There were gardens with a tropical or subtropical climate and gardens with more moderate climates. Not hampered by Earth's changing of the seasons the stations' garden parks provided a steady supply of fruits and vegetables, ranging from strawberries to bananas and potatoes to carrots.

The park they had entered, Lana'i Garden, was a subtropical one. Lush green surrounded the two men and the boy. Flowers bloomed everywhere, from tiny yellow spikes to

luscious purple and red orchids. Gnarled mango trees were interspersed with spindly, six-foot shrubs. Banana plants stood high, heavy with green fruits and their leaves as tall as a man. Closer to the ground the short stalks and pointed leaves of pineapple jutted up.

The air was warm and humid and Walman quickly shed his jacket, sweat already breaking out on his brow. "Looks to me that the gardens are also functioning," he commented dryly, walking a few paces away from the door and the Ranger column. "I think we can safely assume that our food problem is no longer a problem," he added with a cocky grin. "And I don't think anyone will fine us for picking what we need." He chuckled.

The gardens had never produced enough to feed the millions that lived in space. They simply weren't big enough. The poorer folk, those who lived on the lower levels, continued to eat the cheaper artificial foods that tasted like plastic. In Walman's youth, fresh fruits and vegetables had been a luxury only to grace their table on holidays.

At least the gardens had been free; anyone could visit them to take a leisurely stroll along the paths and enjoy the sweet smell of the flowers and fruits that grew here. As long as they abided by the stringent rules that protected the vegetation. Penalties were high and the Ranger's electronic eyes didn't miss a thing.

"I guess so," Cameron replied absentmindedly. He walked further down the path, a thoughtful vertical wrinkle between his eyes. "Don't you think this garden looks just a little too ordered?" he wondered aloud.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Walman asked. To his eyes, the park didn't look much different from what he remembered.

"It's too neat," Cameron muttered. "Everything indicates the Station was abandoned a while ago. Wouldn't you expect the parks to run wild? You know, paths overgrown, plants vying for the best spots, that sort of thing?"

Walman blinked and looked at the greenery with new eyes. Cameron was right. The wall of green ended neatly near the edges of the path. Except for the palm tree canopy high above their heads, nothing overgrew the paths. And there were no dead branches, no overripe fruits to be seen anywhere.

"Maybe they programmed ZERO units to tend the gardens?" Walman suggested dubiously. While the Ranger controlled the climate and kept its eyes on visitors, humans had still been needed for the delicate jobs of harvesting the ripe produce and pruning the trees.

"Possibly," Cameron said. "We've been gone a long time. I'm going to take a look a little deeper into the garden. You coming?"

"Sure," Walman said and together they walked further down the path. Uly bounded ahead eagerly.

As they got deeper and deeper into the park grounds, the greenery became less ordered. Vines started sneaking across the walkways, some with feelers that attempted to cling to the metal floors. Creepers clung to branches overhanging the paths and they had to duck beneath them to continue. The green wall lining the path was thicker, impenetrable to the naked eye beyond the first two feet or so. The air changed too, the musky smell of earth and rotting leaves becoming increasingly pronounced.

"This is odd," Cameron said at last. "Here nature has clearly taken over. Why hasn't it in the areas near the entrance?"

"Dunno," Walman muttered. The theory of the ZERO units seemed no longer valid; the robots wouldn't stop until they had covered every inch of the grounds. However, something more important had attracted his attention and pushed the incongruously ordered state of the park out of his mind. He wandered over to a couple of large bushes with dark green, oval leaves. Small green and red berries hung in thick bunches from the bush. "Now *this* is what I call a treasure!" Walman grinned broadly.

Uly ambled nearer. "What are they?" The tiny round fruits didn't look very appealing to him.

"Coffee beans," Walman replied. Uly wrinkled his nose in disgust while Walman began picking the berries that looked ripest .

"We better gather some other things too," Cameron said. "Things that are actually *edible*. Julia will have our hide if all we bring back are coffee beans."

"Yeah," Walman said reluctantly, his pant pockets already bulging with berries. They turned away from the coffee bushes and began collecting edibles in earnest.

oOo

Impatiently Alonzo leaned over Baines' shoulder to look at the screen. Data scrolled across the display. New windows opened and others closed while Baines' deft fingers flew over the keys. But the same message popped up again and again: "You are not authorized to access this file. Access denied". The two men were using the computer console they found in a small cubicle office located in the government sector on Blue 3.

The offices were mostly cleaned out of anything useful and they hoped the computer would provide some answers.

"Dammit," Baines growled at last. "They've encrypted everything. Without the correct passwords and decryption keys we can't access station records. I can't get past the security checks. Morgan might've been able to break them but..."

But Morgan wasn't here. They had expected him to greet them, along with Yale and Mazatl; the Colony ship should have come back here twenty-five years ago. And who knew, maybe it had. There was no way to tell what had happened without access to the records.

Alonzo straightened with a sigh and began to pace the small office. "We have to know what happened here. Millions of people can't just have gone up in smoke. It took Devon six years to get the Eden project off the ground. You know how long it takes before the government reaches a decision: officials write papers, they have committee meetings that have written minutes, reports are filed—" He halted mid-sentence. "Reports..." he repeated slowly. He slammed one fist in the open palm of his other hand. "That's it!"

Baines looked puzzled.

"Reports! Reporters. Newspapers, Internet Satellite... The media have archives too. If we can access those, that's as good as the government records. Maybe even better. And I doubt they'll be encrypted."

Baines' eyes started to glimmer. "Of course," he said. "Good thinking, Lonz. Let's go visit the library."

Chapter 8

"You are not authorized to enter this area." A humanoid robot, painted a bright blue, stepped from its niche in the wall and blocked their path. Julia, Danziger and True had reached the hospital a little while ago, taking a voice-controlled taxi whose battery hadn't gone dead yet. This particular hospital was situated in the Red sector and stretched down a dozen tiers.

According to Julia it was the best-equipped medical facility of the station, privately funded and catering to the rich and wealthy. At least, when there had been rich and wealthy people on New Mars Station. Like the rest of the space station, the hospital was now devoid of life. The medicine cabinets were largely empty – except for dust. However, most of the heavier equipment was there. Julia had gone straight for the Advanced Genetics research laboratories, on Red 10. And that's where they found the

robot blocking their path.

"I'm a doctor. Of course I can enter," Julia tried to reason with the machine.

"You are not authorized past this point," the ZERO repeated, unperturbed.

"Don't act dumb," Danziger growled. "Let us through. Or I'll pour water in your circuits." True giggled.

"That would not be pleasant, sir," the robot said politely. "May I remind you that water, or any sort of liquid, will short-circuit my systems?"

Danziger snorted and tried to walk past the ZERO. A thick arm of cold steel and mylar barred his way. "You are not authorized past this point, sir."

"I think we are," Julia said. "My ID number is Delta oh-four-nine-one-seven."

The ZERO-unit was silent for a minute. The lights on its chest display flickered while it dug through its memory banks. "That is a very old code," it said at last.

"Yes," Julia agreed. "I've been away for a long time. But my clearance still holds, doesn't it?"

Again the robot said nothing, while lights blinked rapidly.

"Of course, Dr. Heller. You may enter." It stepped aside and moved back into its wall-niche.

Julia breathed a sigh of relief. Danziger could have put the ZERO aside by force if necessary. But if the hospital had secured the research labs by posting a robotic guard, chances were high that the guard was linked into the mechanism controlling the emergency doors. And when those doors closed, nothing short of a nuclear blast would force them open. After all, those doors were designed to seal off compartments of the station in case of a pressure drop or hull breach.

She briskly continued past the robot and down the hallway to the genetics lab. She remembered these laboratories from her brief stint as an intern before signing on with Dr. Vasquez and the Eden project. "I hope the equipment hasn't changed too much," she muttered, abruptly realizing it was over seventy years since she last worked here. Seventy years was a long time in science and technology.

On the other hand, genetic science hadn't changed that much since the major discoveries

of the late twentieth century and the mapping of the human genome early in the twenty-first. The discoveries had enabled mankind to eliminate most hereditary diseases, and allowed them to invent the sort of genetic skewing that led to her inclination to be a doctor, Julia remembered. The basics of gene therapy remained the same though: splice the genes, rearrange them in the desired order and reinject them in the subject, preferably a fetus.

Pushing through the double doors, Julia entered Lab Two where she'd done most of her research. She quickly scanned the room and smiled in approval. It looked as if everything she needed was still there.

"Wow," True said, impressed with the vast array of vials, drips, tubes and devices that filled the room.

Slowly Julia circled the room, listing her needs aloud. "DNA detractor, gene splicer," she muttered while passing an inconspicuous gray cylinder. She opened a closet and surveyed the content. "Purification filters and fluids. Good." She powered up a computer. After a few moments, the screen lit up and Julia nodded with satisfaction. "Mapping software and sequencing programs."

Danziger hovered quietly near the door, although his eyebrows climbed in puzzlement while Julia counted down her catalogue. "Think you can do it?" he asked at last. "Heal them?"

Julia whirled around, startled. Absorbed in her thoughts she had all but forgotten about the Danzigers being there. "Yes," she said with a grin. "I can do it. I have to run some tests, make sure everything is working properly before I start working on their DNA. You and True better go back, I'm going to be here quite a while and you'd find it very boring."

"I was thinking we should relocate to this area," Danziger said. "Near the hospital. We have to stay somewhere. Here's as good as anywhere in my book."

"It's a good idea," Julia agreed. "Even when I've restored their DNA, Devon and Denner will need to stay here for a while to get their strength back. I suppose we can use the interns' living quarters. They're on the thirteenth level. I wouldn't like to become a squatter in someone else's apartment."

"I'll start moving our things from the ship. And do something about that dumb robot or it'll give us a hard time every time someone wants to come here," Danziger said. "True? You coming?"

"Can I stay? Please?" True asked her father. He exchanged a look with Julia.

"I could use an extra pair of hands," Julia admitted.

"Okay," Danziger said. "But you listen to Julia, okay?"

"Sure Dad," True nodded.

oOo

Baines pressed 'enter' and the Internet Satellite logo, a blue and silver planet with five white stars circling it, filled the screen. "Go to Archives," Alonzo advised and pointed. The two men had relocated to the Main Public Library, near the former Adair Industries offices on Blue 6 where Baines started up a terminal to access the news archives.

"I know that," he muttered, a little piqued, and touched the appropriate icon on the screen.

"Woof." A virtual cartoon dog with sad eyes and large ears sprang up on the screen. "Welcome to the Internet Satellite Archives. I'm Radar, your faithful sleuthhound. What you seek is what I find. How may I help you?"

Baines chortled while the dog finished its line. "They got a new avatar! I think I like this one." A search box had appeared on the screen below the image of the dog. "What are we looking for?" he asked over his shoulder. "Dunno. Try today's date, last year," Alonzo suggested and chuckled when the dog on the screen barked another impatient 'woof'.

Baines entered the date and tapped 'search'. The dog raced off the screen and reappeared a moment later, droopy-faced. "There are no records for that date," it announced. "Do you wish to try again?"

"Let's see," Baines said. "Five years ago." Again, the droopy-faced cartoon informed the two men there were no records. They continued entering dates, going further back in time. Ten years ago, twenty years, thirty. Finally, as Baines entered a date forty years ago, Radar yapped happily and came back with results. More than two hundred listings filled the screen. Baines touched the top link.

'President says he'll turn out the lights,' the headline read. Alonzo frowned and leaned forward, his hand resting on Baines' shoulder.

"President Paul Giacomo promises he will be the last person to board The New Ark III, scheduled to depart New Mars Station on March 23rd, next year," Baines read out loud,

his eyes flickering across the screen. "He has vowed he won't leave until every last citizen has been taken to safety. Today, the president attended a farewell lunch for Citizen Holland and pledged to be the one to 'turn out the lights'."

"They have video to go along with that," Alonzo observed. He had no idea what the transcript was talking about. Hopefully the report it belonged to would explain a little further. Baines touched the little onscreen camera and the video started.

"Millions have already left the space stations and our colonies on Mars and the Moon since the evacuations began last year. Humanity has never seen an exodus on a scale like this, that is much grander than the 2081 skylift," the reporter, a blond-haired young man, said. He was standing in the Station port terminal, the jetway doors yawning wide open behind him. A long line of weary-looking people shuffled through the archway. Men, women, and children, with suitcases and duffel bags. "The mass exodus is a desperate attempt to rescue the human race from extinction. Man's survival is at stake. According to the departures' schedule, The New Ark III, a renamed Saturn-class freighter modified to hold ten thousand souls, will be the last ship to leave our Solar system."

Alonzo plopped down on a nearby stool and barked a short, incredulous laugh. "They left the Solar system? But why? And where did they go?" He shook his head in disbelief and pulled out his Gear set. "You better download that stuff," he said, handing the set to Baines. "I'm sure Danziger and the others will be *very* interested to hear this. And let's see what else we can find."

Baines nodded and plugged in the Gear's library module to start downloading.

Chapter 9

Hours later Julia was still in the lab, staring in concentration at a monitor display. True had left a long time ago. The girl's attention span wasn't as wide as Julia's.

The doctor moved her eyes away from the screen and adjusted the settings on the probe microscope. The display changed immediately and she clucked her satisfaction. Straightening, she knuckled her back and rolled her head. Sitting in nearly the same position for most of the day had stiffened her.

Julia felt exhausted yet satisfied. The equipment was working properly. The purifying and analysis instruments had been her main concern; she would need those to determine which sections of the patients' DNA the planet had altered. She would have to compare a fresh DNA sample with the one on file, taken before the departure of Eden project. Once she knew what changes had been made, she could revert them by replicating the proper

DNA strands and inserting those into the women's systems. After that, it would be up to Mother Nature. It was a risky procedure and Julia realized she would only get one chance to do it right. It was also the only chance Devon and Denner had to survive.

"Hey Doc. Working late?"

Julia turned at the sound of the familiar voice behind her. "Hi there," she greeted Alonzo. She lifted her face for the kiss he was more than happy to give her. "What have you been up to all day?"

His dark eyes grew serious. "You won't believe what we found."

Julia raised a curious eyebrow and Alonzo shook his head. "You got to see for yourself. You won't believe me if I tell you. How have you done today?" He motioned around at the lab. "This looks quite state of the art."

"It is," Julia agreed. "At least, it was, seventy years ago. The instruments haven't changed much since then." She frowned. "I don't understand, but I'm grateful for it. At least I know how to work with these tools." She smiled up at him. "Lonzo, I can do it. I can make them better."

"That's great," Alonzo nodded, brushing his fingers lightly along her jaw. "Tomorrow, okay? You look exhausted. And you've got to come and see the show."

Her curiosity was sufficiently piqued to abandon the lab and follow him.

oOo

When Julia entered, she realized that everyone else was already gathered in the central room amidst the former intern's quarters. Adjacent to the common room, small cubicles provided private quarters and bedrooms for the team members. The furniture in the main room was sparse. The chairs and the two folding tables were typical hospital issue, unimaginative but functional. Danziger must have found the furniture in the hospital cafeteria.

Fruits and vegetables were piled up on a crate in the corner of the room: the harvest that Walman, Cameron and Uly brought back from Lana'i Garden. The sight of the fruit reminded Julia abruptly that she hadn't eaten all day and her stomach growled.

She collected a few mangos and bananas for dinner and Alonzo handed her a glass of water. "It's all we have at the moment," he said with an apologetic shrug. "Walman is working on making coffee." Surprised, Julia looked at the crewmember who grinned

proudly.

"We found coffee beans," he told her. "I'm trying to figure out how to roast them."

Danziger cleared his throat to draw everyone's attention. "Baines and Alonzo have something they want to show us," he told them. "They say they found out what happened here and where everyone went."

Baines took out his Gear. "I downloaded several files from the Internet Satellite databases," he said. "If you get your sets and go to video mode, I'll show you."

Julia put her Gear set on her head and swung the optic feeder forward. The image sprang up in front of her right eye and through the haze she dimly could see the others mimicking her motions.

"This might shock you," Alonzo warned. "It certainly took us by surprise."

"The first clip is from a specialized medical program, about fifty years ago," Baines explained and started the projection. A white-clad man of middle age, supposedly a doctor, appeared before their eyes.

"Yes," he told an invisible reporter, "the Syndrome has only been known to afflict children in their infancy. I'm afraid that is no longer the case though."

The image cut to the reporter, a pretty, dark-skinned woman in her twenties. "So this new strain is more dangerous?"

"Yes," the doctor admitted. "But I want to stress there's no reason for concern. We have our best people on it and I'm sure we'll find a cure very soon."

There was a brief flicker when Baines switched to another video file. "This one's from seven years later," he announced.

Julia recognized the section on Blue 1. The government resided in these buildings: the president's office, the Senate, and the Council's quarters – although not many people were familiar with that last bit of knowledge. A crowd of angry people filled the square in front, with more approaching and filling the station's hallways from wall to wall. They were waving banners and shouting slogans. A peace keeper force formed a human cordon, blocking access to the government quarters.

"The third demonstration against the disease," a voiceover said, "got out of control today when angry and frightened citizens clashed with police forces in the Blue sector."

Protesters demanded more funds for research and the development of a cure. When the police, on orders of the Council, tried to break up the demonstration, violence erupted. Shops were looted and several small fires broke out. All fires were contained immediately by the automatic sprinklers; according to the authorities, there was never any danger to station integrity. The police arrested six demonstrators, five of which are still being held."

"People are scared," a commentator in the network's studio said when the newscaster asked him to explain the day's violence. "It has been seven years since the first cases of the Adult Syndrome were diagnosed. No cure has been found so far. People have lost friends and family and the epidemic rages on."

"But the Syndrome's not contagious, is it?" the anchorwoman asked.

"No, not as far as the doctors can determine. Syndrome specialist, Dr. Vasquez, who was killed in a spacecraft accident thirty years ago, predicted that the disease would annihilate mankind. He suggested it wasn't a disease per se, but a reaction caused by the sterility on the stations. It seems that after all these years he has been proven right. That's why it's so difficult to find a cure."

The image flickered again while Baines fast-forwarded to the next segment that he and Alonzo had downloaded. A serious-looking man, graying at the temples appeared in front of Julia's face. He was sitting at a desk, looking straight at the camera. The caption below read his name: President Giacomo.

"Today, after consulting with the Senate and the Council, I reached an important decision that will affect us all," he began. "In view of the recent outbreak of the Syndrome, we will begin to evacuate the stations. For years, the Council has been searching for viable planets where mankind could live. They have kindly shared this information with us. We will depart for a planet eleven light-years from here, in the G8 system. The government has set up an evacuation schedule that will relocate our entire population—the people on the stations as well as on Earth and our bases on Mars, the Moon and Io—over the course of the next two years. You will receive details from your local section representative. I thank you for your attention."

The image disappeared and Julia slowly folded back the eyepiece. Everyone appeared as shocked and startled as she felt. The silence was long and heavy. "They went to G889?" she whispered at last. "Oh my God..."

Chapter 10

Danziger hopped off the escalator and walked down the jetway to the ship. It was late and the lights were dim. The quiet of the empty cargo bays pressed down on him as soon as he entered. Tomorrow, he thought to himself as he made his way to the unmovable

form of Devon in the crypt, tomorrow...

The shock of discovering what had happened to the station's populace wore off and it became even more important that Julia heal the two women in cold sleep. If her theories about the planet were right, she, True, and the two sleeping women might very well be the last living females of the human race. For days, the doctor had locked herself up in the hospital laboratories to isolate the mutated DNA strand.

"We can wake them tomorrow," she finally told Cameron and Danziger earlier in the evening. "I've replicated their original DNA. Once I insert it in their systems, it'll be up to their bodies to accept it. Devon and Denner will be very sick for a while. And I want you to remember they could still die. But I'll do my best to make sure that won't happen."

"I know you will, Julia," Danziger said sincerely. "Your best is all we can ask for." Cameron nodded in agreement.

Danziger had made a habit of paying a brief visit to the ship, late at night just before seeking out his bed. Sitting on the floor across from the crypts, he related aloud the events of the day. In his mind, John could hear Devon argue with him sometimes, about decisions he needed to make. It helped him to put things in perspective. Still, he'd be glad to pass back the burden of responsibility to Devon.

This night though, before he reached the cryo-bay, he stopped dead in his tracks when he heard voices. Childrens' voices, giggling. Annoyance flared briefly. Dammit, the kids were supposed to be asleep! Couldn't Baines be trusted to keep an eye on them even for a few moments? "True! Uly!" he called, resuming his pace. "What are you doing here?"

For a moment the shocked silence was almost tangible, then small, quick footsteps clattered away, fading deeper into the ship. "True! Get back here!" Danziger barked as he rounded the corner. He halted briefly in front of the two sleeping women and muttered an apology before continuing. "Ulysses Adair! True Danziger! I'm not in the mood for games. It is past your bedtime and you're supposed to be asleep. You two better get your little butts over here or..." He let the threat hang and followed in the direction of the footsteps, entering the first cargo bay.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught movement behind a couple of stacked boxes containing stuff they had no need for. Moving surprisingly silently for such a big man, he made his way to the pile. Before he could pull the top box away, someone coughed and he froze, his hands on either side of the box. That cough — it sounded just like Uly had when he was still sick.

Suddenly afraid of what he might find, Danziger grabbed the box. Two sets of frightened green eyes greeted him. The eyes belonged to two children, a boy and girl, dressed in clothes that were too big for them. Their lanky light-brown hair hung to their shoulders. They had to be brother and sister, he thought in astonishment. The likeness was impossible to miss. The girl, the smaller of the two children, coughed again and wheezed for breath.

Despite the fear that was obvious in his eyes, the boy placed himself between Danziger and the little girl. "Who are you?" he asked, puffing up his chest and adapting a stance that would have been threatening in a grown man. For a long moment, Danziger was speechless, too shocked to think. His mouth worked as he tried to find the words.

Before he could, however, the boy gave the girl a push. "Run!" he yelled. The girl ran around Danziger. The boy followed her example and tried to race past Danziger's other side.

"Woah there!" the tall man cried, suddenly finding his voice again. He made a grab for the boy. The child kicked and flailed his arms wildly while Danziger held him at arms' length, two feet up in the air.

oOo

"Dammit, Solace," Walman growled. "If you want to use my stuff, the least you could do is ask me!" Alonzo looked up from the Gear he was trying to repair. They were gathered in what the group now called the 'living room': the communal room amidst their quarters. The kids were in bed; Danziger was visiting the shuttle. In the corner, Julia was fixing herself something to eat. She had only just returned from making the last preparations for tomorrow's procedure.

"What are you talking about?" Alonzo asked. He put the Gear set down on the table. Danziger would have to look at it, he couldn't quite figure out what was wrong with the thing.

"Are you trying to tell me you didn't take the convector crystal that I want to use for my coffee roaster?" Walman's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "If you didn't, then who did? Baines? Did you take it? Cameron?" Both men shook their heads. "Julia?"

"Now wait a sec," Alonzo said, irritation creeping into his voice. "You can't go about accusing people without ground. You probably misplaced it."

Walman got to his feet and approached Alonzo slowly. "I bet it was you that took the crystal," he said.

Alonzo pushed back his chair and stood up too. "Are you calling me a thief?" he demanded. He clenched his fists and leaned forward. The huge, empty station was beginning to work on everyone's nerves and tempers were getting short.

Julia looked up from her food and hurried to stand between the two men. "Hey, stop it," she said. "I'm sure we—"

Angry shrieks interrupted her. The doors slid open and Danziger came in, holding a squealing child by the scruff of the neck. Alonzo blinked in shock. The kid looked about eight or nine, a little younger than Uly was. And he was very upset.

"Look what I found," Danziger announced. Following him and the boy was a little girl. She was clearly related to the boy, with the same green eyes. But whereas his gleamed defiantly, hers looked frightened and kept darting around the room. Alonzo put her at about six years old.

"Put me down! Put me down!" the child in Danziger's hands yelled, squirming and struggling.

Danziger planted him on the chair Alonzo just vacated. "Sit," he ordered.

The boy glared at him but did as he was told. The girl coughed and sidled over until she stood beside the chair. She grasped the boy's hand, holding it tightly.

Danziger pulled out a small, oblong object from his pocket and threw it at Walman. The crewman caught it deftly.

"Isn't that yours?"

"Uh, yeah," Walman said in a sheepish tone when he recognized the crystal. He cast a wary glance at Alonzo. The pilot smirked.

"Where did you find them?" Julia hastened toward the two children; her diaglove was already strapped on her arm. She crouched in front of them and they shrunk back.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "I won't hurt you. I'm a doctor."

The boy frowned. "There are no doctors anymore," he said. "That's what Old Ben says."

Julia smiled and activated the glove. "Honest, I am a doctor. And I'd like to see if you're okay. Okay?" Reluctantly he nodded and she placed her fingers against his neck. She was careful to use slow movements so she wouldn't startle the two children. The boy

stiffened at her touch but didn't move otherwise. "What's your name?" Julia asked.

"Timmy," he said. "And this is Lise, my sister." He still glowered whenever he caught sight of Danziger but warmed slightly to Julia's friendly approach.

"Nice to meet you, Tim," the doctor said. She pulled back her hand and glanced at the display. "You're as healthy as a horse."

"What's a horse?" he asked.

Alonzo chuckled. He pulled over another chair and sat back down. It would be interesting to hear where these kids came from. The station was supposed to be abandoned. He remembered the feeling of being watched that he experienced during their first days on the station.

The girl coughed again, weakly, and Julia frowned. "Is your sister ill?" She ran her hand across Lise. The child looked up, startled, and smiled shyly. She edged a little closer to her brother. Julia's frown deepened while she pushed herself back to her feet.

"She has the Syndrome," she told Danziger. "Although its form is not as progressed as it was with Uly. If it were, she couldn't stay alive without an immuno suit."

"It's *not* the Syndrome!" the boy interrupted vehemently. He jumped off his chair. "She'll get better, you'll see!" He had placed himself in front of his sister protectively and was now herding her backwards in the direction of the door. "You can't take us back, the others will make her go to sleep."

Alonzo frowned although he wasn't surprised to find there were other humans besides these kids. Walman whistled through his teeth, Cameron looked worried.

"Others? What others?" Baines asked.

"Make her go to sleep?" Julia repeated at the same moment, a horrified expression on her face.

Danziger placed himself between the two children and the exit. "You don't have to run, Tim," he said, his gravelly voice gentle. "We won't hurt your sister. We'll try to help you. Although I don't know what we can do about the Syndrome."

"The Terrians can help," a small voice piped up. All heads whipped around to see Uly standing in the doorway to his bedroom. Sleepily he rubbed his eyes. "I know they can."

"Uly," Cameron said gently, "the Terrians are eleven light-years away. They can't help."

"Yes, they can," the boy said stubbornly, ambling into the room "They healed me, didn't they?"

A thoughtful look crept across Julia's face. "Uly could be right," she said slowly. "There might be a way."

"How?" Danziger asked, raising an eyebrow. "Cameron's got a point; the Terrians are millions of miles away."

"Yes," Julia agreed. "But Uly carries a part of them. The changes that cured him are present in his DNA. If I can isolate them—"

"No," Danziger interrupted. "You're not going to experiment on Uly. I can't give you permission for that. Not without Devon's approval."

"I wasn't planning anything," Julia said, holding up her hands. "I'm just stating the possibilities."

"Why don't we ask Devon?" Alonzo suggested. "There's no real hurry, right? And Devon should be better in a few weeks." Julia cast him a grateful smile and Danziger nodded reluctantly.

"Fair enough," he muttered.

oOo

In the meantime Uly had walked over to the two children. "Hi," he said shyly. "I'm Ulysses Adair. I had the Syndrome too. But the Terrians cured me. They are my friends."

Tim and Lise merely stared at Uly. He was the epitome of a healthy kid. "You were sick too?" Lise asked incredulously. "Like me?" It was the first time she spoke and her voice was soft, melodic.

Uly nodded. "Yes. But my Mom took me to another planet. That's where the Terrians are. They made me better. Hey, are you hungry?" He pointed at the fruit piled up on the corner table.

Tim nodded and glanced longingly at the food.

"Yes," Lise said shyly.

"C'mon," Uly said, taking her hand and pulling her along. Tim followed closely, suspiciously eyeing the adults.

oOo

"I found them in the ship," Danziger explained. "I heard their voices and I first thought it were True and Uly. I think I scared them half to death."

"I wonder where they live," Julia said softly. "They're a little malnourished, and of course the girl has the Syndrome. But otherwise they seem well cared for. Someone has been looking after them."

"And what did that kid say about others?" Baines urged. "How can there still be people here? I thought they all left. How come we never found any sign of them?"

"Guess we stopped looking," Alonzo said dryly. "Come to think of it, we did find signs. Remember when I thought we were being watched?"

"Yeah," Walman replied. "I thought you were losing it."

"The Gardens!" Cameron suddenly realized. "I told you the Gardens were too neat! Someone has been tending them! That's where they find their food. Just like we do."

Alonzo nodded. "That makes sense," he said. "Shouldn't we go and find whoever is still here? They may need our help. I'm sure Tim can tell us where to look."

"Better watch out," Julia cautioned. "I didn't like the implications of that 'making her go to sleep' comment."

"Those kids will stay here for the night," Danziger decided. "It's too late to go off on a search now. Tomorrow they can take us to their parents, or anyone else that might be here."

Chapter 11

"Be careful," Julia told the search party as they were preparing to leave. "Anyone who survived here for all these decades will be wary of strangers. I don't want you to get hurt. Do you have your Gear?"

"Don't worry," Alonzo assured her. "We'll be careful. And Timmy will be with us."

Julia nodded though she still looked dubious.

Cameron and Danziger would stay behind and help her take the two women out of cold sleep while Alonzo, Walman and Baines took Tim and would look for the survivors. According to Tim and Lise, there were several small groups of people living deep in the bowels of the station. The kids didn't really know much about their history, so why these people were left behind when the government evacuated the Station still remained a mystery.

Tim didn't really want to help find the castaways. He explained that he and Lise had run off when she first got sick. "She's my sister," he said. "I'm all she has, I have to look after her. I didn't want them to take her away from me." A man he called 'Old Ben' helped, giving them food occasionally and hiding them from the other people.

"Nobody's going to take your sister away," Danziger promised Tim. "We'll make sure of that. But we have to find this Ben, and the others. Maybe we can help them." Reluctantly, the boy agreed to go with the search party.

When the three men and the boy disappeared around the corner, Julia turned back to Danziger and Cameron. "Let's go get Denner and Devon," she said, glad to know she'd be too busy to worry much.

"Just a sec," Danziger said and turned to True. "True-girl, you and Uly stay here with Lise, okay? I don't want you to go wandering around on the station."

"Okay," True said. Her expression said she was none too happy.

Danziger looked intently at her for a moment.

"I promise, Dad," she added with a sigh.

Satisfied, Danziger turned back to Julia and Cameron. "Let's go."

oOo

"We can only wake one of them at the time," Julia reminded the two men on the way to the docks. Nervous butterflies fluttered in her stomach while she mentally went over the list of things to do. "As soon as they come out of the capsule, we must get them back to the hospital as fast as we can so I can start the procedure. I think we should begin with Devon."

Cameron looked mildly relieved and Danziger nodded grimly. "I suppose you're right," he said. "We need to get Devon back on her feet as soon as possible."

Julia patted his arm. "You've done a great job, keeping the group together," she said.

"We had to leave Yale. And Morgan and Mazatl," Danziger reminded her.

"Yes," Julia said. "But we didn't have another choice. And we expected them to be here. We couldn't predict what would happen here on the stations. No one could."

They reached the ship and the cold sleep crypts where both Devon and Denner remained standing quietly in their cold prisons. Julia inspected the control displays. "Ready?" she asked Danziger. "Remember, when the door opens, she'll be too weak to stand on her own feet. You've to catch her."

Cameron unfolded the gurney they brought to take Devon back to the hospital and rolled it next to Danziger. "We're ready."

Danziger positioned himself in front of the crypt's door, looking grim and apprehensive. His muscles stood taut, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. He nodded at Julia and, taking a deep breath, she punched in the code. Rapidly, the temperature in the crypt rose as the machine carried out its warm-up cycle. The air inside condensed briefly, and then the door opened.

Coughing, rasping for air, Devon fell forward where Danziger caught her. He quickly scooped her up, shook his head at Cameron indicating that he didn't need help, and gently laid her on the gurney. Julia ran a quick scan on her patient. She placed an oxygen mask over Devon's face, making it easier for her to breathe. "Okay, she's stable," the doctor said. "Let's go."

Walking as fast as they could they returned through the jetway and took the escalator belt back to the Red section of the station. Julia's gloved hand rested on Devon's chest while she walked beside the gurney, scanning continuously.

Just as they entered the main station area, the glove beeped. "Stop!" Julia cried. She bent over the stretcher and cursed below her breath.

"What?" Danziger asked.

"Devon's heart stopped," Julia said shortly. "Move back." Both men took a step away from the stretcher and Julia adjusted her glove to apply a cardio-shock. Devon's body jerked.

"C'mon, Adair," Danziger growled. "Don't give up!"

Julia shocked her again and a second later, Devon uttered a hoarse gasp. Julia exhaled with relief, Danziger and Cameron echoing her sigh. "Okay, let's move," she said. They pushed the gurney into the back of the waiting voice-controlled car. Julia climbed in next to it, while Danziger and Cameron jumped into the front seats. Curtly, Danziger ordered the car to go to the hospital labs on Red 10.

At the hospital, Julia had readied everything she needed for the procedure. As soon as they arrived, she hooked Devon up to the life support systems and prepared the derm injector with the reproduced DNA. She placed the tip of the instrument to Devon's neck and pushed the button. With a soft hiss, the fluid was injected. Julia stared intently at the monitors that displayed Devon's vital signs. For a while, the readings were erratic, then they settled into a steady rhythm. "Good," Julia muttered. "Her system is accepting the DNA. I have to give her another shot in an hour. If that goes well also, we can start with Denner."

oOo

Hours later, around mid-afternoon by the digiclock over the door, both Devon and Denner were sleeping peacefully in beds placed side by side. The procedures had gone well; both their bodies were accepting the DNA that Julia injected. Now all it took was time. Time to rest, time to heal.

A few moments ago, the children had left the small hospital room. They'd been allowed to come and visit once Julia was satisfied both patients were stabilized.

"Are they... real?" Lise asked hesitantly. She had been shocked to see the two women that she only knew as motionless statues inside the ship. Julia chuckled.

"Yes, they are," she said. "They are asleep now. They'll wake up in a few days."

"That's my Mom," Uly said matter-of-factly and pointed at Devon. "I miss her."

"I don't have a mom," Lise muttered.

"Me either," True said. "But I've got my Dad. And you've got your brother."

The children quickly grew bored watching the two women sleep. When they got restless and noisy, Julia banned them from the room. Cameron was currently fixing them something to eat.

"Are they really going to be okay, Julia?" Danziger asked, gazing down at Devon.

"There are no guarantees, but I think so, yes, John," Julia replied. She was keeping an eye on the monitors and what she saw so far was very satisfying. Heart rates, blood pressures, oxygen levels, everything was steady and normal.

Danziger pulled his stool closer to Devon's bed and observed her silently.

"You really care for Devon, don't you?" Julia asked him.

"Yes," he sighed. "I do. Even when she's a stubborn, mule-headed—" He looked up as Julia began to laugh.

"Look who's talking," she grinned.

Danziger grinned back wryly. "I guess you're right. I miss her though."

Julia sobered. "We all do," she said. "But it won't be much longer now before she wakes up."

Danziger's Gear beeped, interrupting any further conversation. He began patting his pockets in search for the set while another insistent beep sounded. When he finally found his Gear, Danziger put it on and toggled the switch.

"Danziger here." He cocked his head to listen and put his hand to his ear. "Solace? Is that you? I can't hear you!" He signaled to Julia but she was already putting her set on her head.

"Danziger!" Alonzo's voice was hard to hear over the static and the noise of voices shouting in the background that came through the earpiece. "We need some help here! We're on Green 46, near the elevator shaft. Get a MagPro. And you better bring Julia."

"Alonzo?" Julia called but the transmission appeared to have been cut off. "Alonzo!" Slowly, she pulled the set off her head and met Danziger's eyes. She saw her concerns mirrored in his face.

"Forty-six?" she asked. "Isn't that—"

"The Quadrant," Danziger finished for her, nodding grimly.

Chapter 12

Alonzo pulled the set from his head and stuffed it back into his pocket. He cautiously peered around the corner of the storage room where they found shelter but quickly withdrew his head when another object was hurtled his way. It bounced off the wall with a loud clang.

They had found the survivors. And they weren't very welcoming.

"Did you get through?" Baines asked. He crouched near the wall on the other side of the door. Walman lay behind him, unconscious. Blood trickled from a deep gash near his temple.

"I think so," Alonzo said. "I lost them before Danziger could confirm. Still, I think he got the message."

"I hope they hurry," Baines said. He glanced warily at the air vent high above their heads. It would merely be a matter of time before one of their besiegers remembered the air ducts and used it as a means to get into the storage room. "Or we'll end up sitting ducks. I can't believe Walman lost the MagPro."

"Hey," Alonzo said in defense of the unconscious man. "You were there. You saw what happened."

Baines shrugged. They had been caught unawares. Tim had led them deep into the bowels of the ship, to parts of the Quadrant that had not been safe even during the daytime when the Station was operational. They planned to track down the man he called Old Ben. Tim talked about him with fondness and Alonzo said he hoped he would be more accepting of their story. However, before they could find the man they were attacked by a group of people.

Walman had been walking in front of the small search party with Baines, Alonzo and the boy right behind, when suddenly two men jumped out from a side corridor. A single blow with a lead pipe to Walman's head took him out before anyone could react. One of his attackers grabbed the MagPro just as others appeared out of nowhere.

Two of them swung lead pipes like they were bats. Others swirled thick pieces of chain. Slowly they advanced on the men. Although the odds were in their favor, the gaggle seemed reluctant to attack straight out, looking more afraid than aggressive.

Baines ducked when an empty foodcan whizzed past his head.

"Over there," Alonzo yelled and pointed at a storage room. He picked up the boy while Baines grabbed the unconscious Walman under the arms and dragged him to safety.

They crawled inside the storage room, keeping their heads down. A few well-directed shots from Baines' handgun had struck enough fear in their attackers to keep them from staging a direct assault. For now.

"How many bullets do you have left?" Alonzo asked. Baines checked the handgun.

"Six," he said reluctantly.

"And no spare clips," Alonzo muttered.

"C'mon," Baines said defensively. "We brought a MagPro. And I didn't expect to end up in the middle of a small war!"

Outside voices rose, shouts full of anger and fear, in response to a deep, male voice that called out over the din, demanding quiet.

"Ben!" Timmy cried and jumped up. He scooted out of the storage room before they could stop him.

"Damn!" Alonzo swore.

"Bogged down by a bunch of savages with sticks and stones," Baines groused below his breath.

"And a MagPro," Alonzo reminded him.

"I wonder why they haven't used it yet," Baines asked out loud.

"Probably because they don't know how," a voice near the door answered. "Can I come in?"

Both men gave a start and Baines pointed the gun at the door. His hand was steady though his voice shook. "Yes. But slowly. We've got a gun."

However, the man that shuffled in didn't look very threatening and Baines lowered the weapon.

He was an old man, dressed in tattered coveralls. His skin was more leathery than that of a Terrian and a few strands of gray hair clung desperately to his otherwise bald skull. Hunched over, he was leaning heavily on a walking stick, while his other hand rested on Timmy's shoulder.

The boy's eyes shone proudly. "This is Ben," he said. Baines swallowed down a comment about 'Ol' Ben' being really ancient. He was smart enough to know that now was not the time for wisecracks.

"Who are those people?" Alonzo asked. "Why are they attacking us?"

Ben chuckled. "They are asking the same questions," he said.

"We didn't attack them!" Baines protested. "We were just looking for you when they suddenly jumped us."

"They are afraid of you. We don't get... visitors often," he said, his tone light and ironic. His wrinkled face sobered. "None of them has seen—"

More tumult outside the small storage room interrupted the old man. Women were screaming, men shouting and there was the telltale boom of a MagPro being fired. "Oh shit!" Baines yelled, and ducked back against the wall. "They're shooting the damn 'Pro!'"

"Baines? Walman!" a well-known voice roared outside. "Solace! Where the hell are you?"

"Danziger!" both Alonzo and Baines said at the same time, relief washing over their faces. The cavalry had shown up.

"In here," Alonzo yelled back.

Danziger walked in, Julia with her little red medbag slung over her shoulder right behind. She immediately crouched near Walman and zipped her bag open.

"What the—" Danziger said and halted when he noticed the old man. Ben had paled so much that Baines thought the old geezer might drop dead right there.

He took a few slow, cautious steps toward Danziger, eyeing him uncertainly. He squinted up at the tall mechanic, and an incredulous grin broke on his face. "John Danziger?" he asked. "Is that really you? They said you were dead! Haha!" He slapped his knees in glee. "I always said there's no bomb powerful enough to kill John Danziger."

Danziger stared back, clearly confounded. "Who are you?" he asked.

"Don't you recognize me? No, of course not," Ben said. "It's been... what? Sixty years? Seventy? I guess I've changed a bit. It's me, Benjamin Caldwell, your apprentice."

"Yeah, right," Danziger huffed. He frowned, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Then you'll remember Alex and Les, don't ya?"

"Sure do," Ben smiled. "How're they doing? Did they come back with you? That woman wasn't afraid of anything. I remember Alex always teasing you with that freighter crash, that she had to hold your hand."

Danziger sat down hard on an empty crate. "I'll be damned," he muttered. "I'm sorry I doubted you. Alex and Les are dead."

"Oh," Ben said, the smile fading from his face, "I'm sorry to hear that."

Outside the storage room, the people that had been frightened away when Danziger shot off the MagPro were gathering again, the murmur of their voices rising slowly.

"Can someone please tell those nice folks out there that we're harmless?" Alonzo suggested. "You two can bring up the memories later."

"You have a point, young man," Ben agreed. "I'll go talk to them, tell them that you are good people." He hobbled from the storage room and Baines heard him chuckle below his breath. "John Danziger..."

oOo

A few minutes later Ben shuffled back in, followed by a young man who looked around suspiciously. He was tall and well muscled, with coffee colored skin and dark eyes that flickered wearily from one person to another. "I'm Owen Taylor," he said, addressing Danziger. "Ben here tells me he knows you from... before. That you went to that planet."

"I'm the only one that's still alive, of the ones they left behind when they deserted the stations," Ben explained. "Everyone else passed away over the years. These people," he indicated Taylor and with a sweep of his hand included the hallway outside, "have all been born after. Some, like Tim, are even second generation."

"How can you be so young?" Taylor demanded. "You should be as old as Ben, if not older."

"We spent most of our time in cryosleep," Danziger replied. Taylor merely looked confused.

"Suspended animation," Alonzo said. "Cold sleep."

"Frozen up," Baines added. "Like Popsicles."

Taylor eyed them distrustfully; he seemed to be wondering if these strangers were playing a trick on him. He glanced at Ben. "Is that possible?" he asked.

Ben nodded. "Yes. It's how people survived during long trips through space."

Taylor looked back at Danziger, Alonzo and Baines. "What do you want? Why did you come back?"

"We had no choice," Danziger said. "We couldn't live on the planet. The women were dying. We didn't know everyone was gone until we returned."

In the corner, Walman groaned as he regained consciousness. Julia's soft voice drifted over as she hushed him, explaining that he probably had a concussion and ordering him to remain still. Taylor regarded her pensively for a moment.

"Okay," he said reluctantly. "I guess I believe you. Because Ben says it's true." His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You didn't bring the sickness back with you, did you? The Syndrome?"

"No, we didn't," Julia said, standing up from her crouched position. "But we did find a little girl here that has it."

"There's a boy with them that says he's gotten better from it!" Tim piped up. "They say they can help Lise."

Taylor stared down at the boy for a moment, then whirled on Ben. "Dammit, Ben! Is that little girl still around? I told you to put her to sleep!"

Ben shrugged. "She's just a little girl. What harm can she do?"

"You know the rules. We can't risk another outbreak. Where is she?"

"Lise is my sister!" Timmy cried, eyes flashing. "I won't let you take her."

"Nobody's going to take your sister, Tim," Alonzo assured the boy. "We'll make sure of that." Danziger glared at Taylor, daring him to defy them.

"The Syndrome isn't contagious," Julia said soothingly. "And Lise has only a mild form. I think we can cure her."

"You can't cure the Syndrome," Taylor snapped. "And how can you be sure it's not contagious? We have no ships, nowhere to run if there's another outbreak." He looked more frightened than angry.

"Julia's a doctor," Danziger said grimly.

"And a damn fine one, too," Alonzo added. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder. "She knows what she's talking about."

Taylor hesitated. "I don't know," he said with a sigh. "For years, we've been safe from the sickness."

"Yeah," Ben snorted. "Because we kill everyone who gets the Syndrome."

Julia's eyes widened. Alonzo knew that ever since Timmy first mentioned making his sister 'go to sleep', she had feared this was what he meant. These people were so afraid of the disease that had driven the entire population to flee to a distant planet, that they killed anyone displaying the symptoms.

"You wouldn't," she gasped.

"Yes, we would. And we did, I'm afraid," Ben said. "After the last ship left, there were about a thousand people still on this station. We were the undesirables. Folks that were already sick. People that didn't officially exist. Illegal immigrants from Earth, criminals, or those that had fallen between the cracks of the system, like me. Now, forty years later, we number about four hundred."

"But... but the Syndrome isn't contagious!" Julia stammered. "You murdered those people for no reason!"

Ben shifted uncomfortably and Taylor looked abashed. He appeared content to leave the explanations to the old man. "I began to suspect that," Ben said softly. "That's why I helped Tim with Lise. She's such a sweet little girl. I couldn't bear to take her life."

"How many cases have you had, over the years?" Julia wanted to know.

Ben shrugged. "I'm not really sure. In the beginning, a dozen or so each year. Nowadays, one or two cases. Most people believe it's because of the...um... preventive measures."

Julia shook her head. "I doubt that has much to do with it," she said. "The Syndrome isn't a disease. It's the body's reaction to the absence of something. Something that's natural to a planetary environment, like germs and bacteria. Living conditions here probably

worsened over the years. I suspect that you've seen a recurrence of simple ailments like the common cold, right?"

Ben nodded. "I'm afraid that some of the folks we... put to sleep had the flu," he said very softly, eyes cast downward.

"Oh man," Alonzo sighed, barely audible.

Chapter 13

Gradually, Devon Adair became aware of her body. She felt her heart beat, the blood rush through her veins, her lungs expand when she drew a breath. It was a good feeling, comforting after she had been so certain she would die. With awareness, however, also came a bone deep weariness of aches and pains long forgotten.

She tried to move her hand and managed only a feeble twitch of her fingers. Still, it was enough to alert the young doctor that was keeping watch.

"Devon?" Julia's voice reached through the thick mist still clotting Devon's brains. "Can you hear me?"

Slowly, Devon opened her eyes and attempted to bring the pale blur into focus. When at last she did, she noticed the deep worry in the doctor's blue eyes.

"Yes," she tried but it came out as a croak.

Relief washed over Julia's features. "You're going to be all right, Devon."

Devon moved her head, taking in her surroundings. Smooth, off-white walls, electric lights overhead and machinery beeping quietly somewhere to her left. Her mind told her this was a hospital.

"Did we do it?" she whispered. "Did we reach New Pacifica?"

A shadow seemed to cloud Julia's face for an instant before she smiled. "There's someone here to see you, Devon." She turned away and Devon heard a door swish open.

A moment later, quick footsteps approached. "Mom?"

"Uly!" Devon replied and attempted to sit up. Too weak, she fell back into the pillows.

"Don't move, Mom," Uly said. He appeared in range of her vision, his face framed with light brown curls. He needed a haircut, Devon thought with motherly concern. To her

surprise he didn't look much older than when she'd fallen ill.

"You've been very sick. Sicker than I ever was." Somehow, he made it sound like it was an achievement and Devon smiled inwardly. "But Julia made you better."

Julia chuckled modestly while she told Uly that his mother needed her rest. "You can come back later," she said. Reluctantly he allowed her lead him from the room again. Julia turned back to Devon to pass a scanner over her.

"Julia? What happened?" Devon clutched at the doctor's hand. "Did the colony ship get here yet? How are the children? Are they well?"

Julia gently folded back Devon's fingers and extricated her hand. "You have to rest Devon," she said. "There will be plenty of time to talk later. Get some sleep now."

Devon dimly realized that Julia was evading her questions and she tried to resist, tried to demand answers. Her body and mind betrayed her though and she drifted off into a deep, normal, healing sleep.

oOo

"Eight... nine... ten! Coming!" True's voice reverberated around the hallways. Uly looked around in a near panic. How could he ever find a place to hide in ten seconds? And True counted so fast too! He should have insisted they count to twenty.

Suddenly his eyes fell upon the grate covering the air duct. It was located only a foot from the floor. If he could open it... He pulled at the grating and to his surprise it came off easily. He squinted into the dark, gloomy hole that was revealed and wrinkled his nose at the musty smell that wafted out. It reminded him of the dank Grendler caves on G889.

With satisfaction he measured the width of the pipe. Yes, he would fit in there.

Resting his hands on the floor Uly lifted his legs one by one and put his feet into the shaft. He began to wriggle backwards, thanking his lucky stars that this particular ventilation shaft was so close to the floor. If it had been high up in the wall, or even in the ceiling like most air ducts were, he would never have been able to hide inside.

The floor and walls of the pipe felt slippery beneath his touch and he easily slid in. Something tickled his nose as he breathed and he had to pinch it to keep from sneezing. When the urge passed, he lifted the grating from the floor and pulled it into the opening. Ha! Now let True come and find him.

Ten minutes later, True was still searching for him. She had found Tim five minutes ago, behind a stalled voice-taxi. "Uly?" she called. "Uly! Where are you?" Her voice was coming closer and Uly held his breath, grinning inwardly.

She passed the duct, never giving it a second glance and Uly could no longer keep quiet. "You lose!" he snickered, letting go of the grate. It fell to the floor with a clatter and True and Tim whirled around at the sound. Uly pulled himself forward and out of the shaft and dropped to his knees. "I win."

True and Tim stared at him with wide eyes. "What?" Uly asked, puzzled by the looks they gave him. "Can't stand losing?"

"No," True began to giggle. "You... you're... Ugh!" She screwed up her face in disgust.

Uly glanced down his body. Oh ugh... True was right. "Where does that come from?" he asked no one in particular. The front of his clothes were smeared with – something. He had no clue what it was but it sure looked icky. He put his head back into the ventilation duct and slid one finger across the smooth surface of the pipe. His hand came back with more of the offensive stuff and he wiped his fingers on his pants.

A good thing his mother was still in the hospital, if she caught him like this... Suddenly his eyes widened. True's father was just as bad as his mom.

"I've to go find some other clothes," he gasped, racing away and leaving True and Tim to look after him in wonder.

oOo

"Now," Devon said a few days after she had woken up the first time, "will someone please tell me what has happened while I was... suspended?" She sat up a little straighter and Julia adjusted the pillows behind her back.

The doctor exchanged a look with Danziger and Julia nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"Devon," Danziger began. He took her hand and patted it. "You're not going to like this..."

Devon raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"We are no longer on G889," Danziger said. Devon's eyebrows climbed even higher and she opened her mouth. "We had no choice," he continued hastily, forestalling her

questions. "You were dying. We had lost Bess, and Magus." Not yet aware that Bess and Magus were dead, Devon paled and gasped audibly. Julia frowned and kept a close eye on her patient. "Denner was sick too when Julia discovered that it was the planet's doing."

"The planet will reject you," Devon whispered, repeating Elizabeth Anson's dying words. "She was right."

"Yes," Julia confirmed. "The planet changed the DNA of the women of our group. Your bodies couldn't handle these changes. Bess and Magus died before I could figure out what was wrong with them. If we had stayed, you and Denner would be dead too. And most likely, so would True and I."

Devon slouched back heavily into the pillows. Suddenly, she was very glad she was lying in her bed. Julia's voice seemed to come from far away while she tried to process the information they just gave her.

"So, where are we now?" she asked hoarsely.

Julia and Danziger exchanged another glance. "We're back on New Mars Station," Danziger said. "Devon, I'm sorry."

"It's not all," Julia added. "The station is deserted. Years ago, the Syndrome mutated and adults suffered from it too. The government decided to abandon the stations. They took everybody to G889."

Devon barked an incredulous laugh, devoid of humor. "Are you saying that we... simply traded places with the people here?" Her heart thudded in a chest that felt suddenly too tight for breathing. It had all been for nothing. All her hopes, her dreams to provide humanity with a second chance. Now, humanity was doomed.

"What about Colony?" she whispered. "Did they return in time?"

A third look passed between the two people at her bedside and Devon feared the worst.

"Three people stayed behind on the planet to warn them," Julia said at last. "Mazatl, Morgan, and Yale." She paused. "We don't know what happened to them."

"Yale..." Devon repeated. Her lifelong friend, her tutor, her confidante. Gone from her life. "I... need to be alone for a minute," she said, her voice choked with tears.

"Devon..." Danziger tried, softly, his voice full of concern.

"Please."

oOo

With a last, sad look, Danziger and Julia left the hospital room, leaving Devon alone to mourn the loss of her friends and of her dreams.

"Maybe we shouldn't have told her everything at once," Julia remarked dubiously while she closed the hospital room door behind her.

"She'll be okay," Danziger assured her, and himself. "Devon's a strong woman. You'll see, she'll be up and ordering us about in no time." He grinned self-consciously.

"I suppose so," Julia agreed. "Well, I've patients waiting." She strode off toward the room that she used as an office where a young couple sat already waiting.

Chapter 14

"You're in perfect health," Julia told the young woman sometime later, after switching off her glove. She helped her raise her growing bulk from the examination table. "And your baby is doing fine." Julia's smile included the young man that sat on a chair along the wall, his eyes following the proceedings warily. Despite the doctor's attempt at friendliness, the sullen expression didn't leave his face.

"Thank you," the woman said with a shy smile.

"I like to give you a vitamin supplement," Julia said. "It'll help your baby grow strong." She turned away to prepare a capsule.

"No!" the young man said. He jumped up from his seat. It was the first time he opened his mouth since the young couple had entered Julia's office. "No injections. I don't trust you people."

"Jim," the woman said in an urgent whisper, glancing sideways at the doctor. "Don't say that. She means well."

"No," Jim repeated. "Anna, how do we know this injection is what she says it is? Maybe the government has sent them back to experiment on us. Or to kill us all." He eyed Julia with suspicion and appeared ready to drag his girlfriend out of the room.

"It's okay," Julia told the young woman. "Your baby will be fine without the shot just as well. It's only an extra aid. And if you change your mind, you can always come back and

see me."

Anna, with a last uncertain glance at Julia, allowed Jim to lead her from the room.

Julia had seen scenes like this often in the past weeks, ever since they discovered the community of survivors deep below in the Quadrant. Once the initial shock and fear had worn off, some people saw them like a godsend. Others however, remained suspicious, despite Ben Caldwell's assurances and apparent acceptance of the Eden group.

Julia sighed. She would have to talk to Devon about this. As soon as the woman was up on her feet again.

oOo

Danziger frowned at the life support systems status board in front of him. Orange warning lights were blinking. Several of the air filters were operating below standard; the systems were failing rapidly.

"Green 8 is at 50 percent, Green 11 only runs at 30 percent. Green 15 is not doing anything," he mumbled, glaring at the red light that reported the status of the filter on the fifteenth level in the Green sector. This was not good. This was not good at all.

"I'm sorry, Danziger," Ben said. "I've taught them about maintenance but..." He shrugged. He didn't need to explain to his former mentor that there were too many electronic devices and not enough hands to keep them all up and running.

"Not your fault," Danziger said. "Besides, if you had managed to keep things sterile, you'd all be dead by now." Still, despite the benefits regarding the Syndrome they couldn't afford to let so many systems break down. They still needed their air and water recycled and purified. "Let's go see what the problem is." He grabbed his toolkit and preceded Ben out of the room. They took the elevator down to the fifteenth level and walked along the corridor until they reached the control room that held the electronic equipment for the air filters on Green 15.

Danziger studied the wall panel that covered the device before taking out a powered screwdriver from his box. He quickly loosened the screws and carefully pulled away the panel. He set it down against the wall, switched on a luma light and leaned forward to shine it into the dark hole. He whistled between his teeth. Thick fuzzy green goo covered the wires, control chips and filters of the air purifier.

"Would you look at that!" he told Ben. The old man raised himself to his toes to peer into the wall socket.

"What the hell is that?" he said.

"I have no idea," Danziger replied. "It looks a little like lichen, the kind that grows on rocks." On G889 he had seen his share of moss and lichens. Danziger frowned and drew his finger across the wires of the device. He grimaced at the smear the green stuff left on his hand. It definitely looked like lichen.

Stepping away from the wall he patted his pockets searching for his Gear. While putting it on his head he switched it on. "Julia? This is Danziger. Can you hear me?"

Two seconds later Julia's reply came through on the head set. "I hear you, Danziger. What can I do for you?"

"Julia, Ben and I are on level 15 in the Green sector. There is some strange stuff here that covers the wires and interferes with the recycling systems. Could you bring your glove and check it out?"

"Okay, I'll be right there. Just let me finish up here."

Danziger and Ben sat down against the wall to wait for Julia. It wasn't long before the young doctor showed up, wearing her diaglove on her left arm.

"What you got?" she asked.

Danziger pointed at the open wall panel. "Can you scan that, Julia?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied. She leaned into the socket. "Wow," she said. "That looks like something I would grow in a lab." She raised her gloved fingers, hovering her hand over the green stuff, and stared intently at the little display on her arm. "It *is* something I might grow in a lab," she concluded. Shocked surprise rang clearly in her voice.

"What is it?" Danziger asked.

"This," Julia said, "is penicillium. It is a kind of fungus that grows on Earth."

"Then how the hell did it get here?" Danziger asked.

"It probably has been here all along, since the station was built," Julia said. "It must have been dormant all that time. Now that the recycling systems are degenerating, they fail to keep the station clean. Microbes like penicillium grab at the chance to flourish again." She turned to look at the two men, her blue eyes serious. "John, this is bad. This stuff eats

away at everything. Rubber, plastics, metal. If it has spread, it could be a threat to our very existence."

Danziger frowned and swore beneath his breath. It never stopped. Every time they solved a problem, a new hurdle was thrown in their way.

"Okay. Ben and I will check how widespread this stuff is. Don't tell anyone yet, okay? I don't want to start a panic."

oOo

"Devon? Are you coming? We're all waiting for you," Danziger said. He had called a meeting of the main players aboard the station, both from the survivors that came back from G889 as well as the people they found on New Mars.

Devon didn't respond. She continued to stare out of the window at Earth, which was setting behind the curve of the station.

Danziger grimaced. Weeks had passed since Julia healed Devon, but she had been morose and withdrawn ever since they had told her the truth. He couldn't help but feel sorry for her. Her dreams of a new world had collapsed. Yale was missing and probably dead. And the rest of humanity had traveled to its doom.

"The meeting is about to start, Devon," he added. "We need you to be there."

"Why bother," she muttered, pressing her forehead against the cool, transparent Lexan. "It's all over."

"No, it's not," he said. "There are over four-hundred people on this station. They need you."

"No, they don't," Devon said stubbornly, still not moving from her perch near the window.

"Yes, they do! We've been over this before." Danziger sighed in exasperation and rolled his eyes. Some things never changed. "Devon, *you* designed this station. That makes these people *your* responsibility." He knew there was little logic in that statement but he hoped that an appeal to her sense of responsibility would shake Devon from her depression.

No such luck. She merely snorted in response. Okay, Danziger sighed, he had one more trick up his sleeve.

"Devon, the people here are killing the Syndrome patients. Apart from Lise, Julia found a few more. We have to stop those practices." He held his breath.

Syndrome patients were still close to her heart. Uly was healed, but Danziger knew that Devon felt she had failed the others, the 248 families aboard the colony ship. She had promised them a new start, a chance at life, and G889 let her down.

"They're murdering them?" Devon whirled around to stare at him and she gasped in horror. "Are they nuts? And why wasn't I told? We can't let them do that! Let's go talk to them."

She marched ahead of Danziger, who chuckled below his breath, quite pleased with himself. Give Devon a dragon to slay and she'd go in guns blazing.

Chapter 15

Devon pushed through the double doors and glared at the people gathered in the small room. "What's this about murdering sick people?" she demanded. Julia looked up, startled. Owen Taylor and a red-haired woman whose name was Myra O'Brien exchanged a wary look. Ben Caldwell met Devon's eyes.

"It was a mistake," he said. "We did it out of fear. We have since learned that it was unnecessary and wrong."

Realizing she had been duped into attending the meeting, Devon turned and directed her glare at John Danziger.

He merely shrugged, having survived dozens of those 'how-dare-you' looks during their trek across the planet. "So," he said instead. "Now that we're all here, we can start. We have 396 survivors aboard. Plus the ten of us, that makes 406."

"Out of these, we have 228 women and 178 men," Julia added. "Ranging in the ages of four months to ninety-one years."

Ben Caldwell grinned. "I'm the old geezer," he chortled.

"I've examined most of these people," Julia continued. "Yet not everyone trusts me enough to let me test them." She looked at Owen Taylor and Ben Caldwell, an unspoken question written on her face.

Taylor shrugged. "Hey, I'm not the boss," he said. "I can't tell these folks what to do."

"But they listen to you," Julia said. "Can you at least talk to them? Most of the survivors are remarkably healthy, considering. I ascribe their good health to the gardens that provide nutritious food full of vitamins. However, I have detected traces of a mild form of the Syndrome in several people. Most of them are unaware they're developing the affliction."

Taylor, Myra and Ben exchanged an anxious glance. The fear was rooted deep. "You promised us it wasn't contagious!" Myra said, leaning forward across the table.

"It isn't," Julia said, shaking her head. "Like I said, it's a milder form of what we know as the Syndrome. Little Lise is the worst case. And Devon can attest she's doing much better than Uly did at her age."

Devon nodded her agreement and suppressed a shiver at the memory of how close Uly had come to dying. Reluctantly, Myra sat back in her chair.

"Is there anything you can do, Julia?" Devon asked.

"Maybe," the doctor replied cautiously. "I have been running some tests on Uly's DNA samples – both the samples taken before we left here and the ones after the Terrians healed him. As you know, Dr. Vasquez always believed that the Syndrome is caused by a genetic mutation due to lack of microbes. Germs, viruses. As the Station becomes less sterile, the mutations are less severe. Hence the Syndrome is milder than it used to be." She leaned over and rested her hand on her friend's arm. "You did make the right choice, Devon. The cure for the Syndrome lies on a planet. It's not your fault we chose the wrong planet to go to."

"So, what can you do about these cases?" Ben asked. "I mean, going to G889 is not an option, is it."

"I can try to revert the mutations," Julia said. "Just like I did with Devon and Denner."

"Wouldn't you need a sample of the person's original DNA?" Danziger asked.

"In an ideal situation, yes," Julia said. "But using the samples from Uly I figured out what genes are affected. And I think I can deduct the original make up from the changes, then revert them."

"That's why you want me to talk to them," Taylor understood.

Julia nodded. "Please."

Taylor hesitated a moment longer, studying the young doctor intently. "Okay," he agreed. "I'll talk to them. I can't promise they listen though."

Julia smiled her gratitude. "Talking to them is all I can ask. Then it's up to them."

"Well, okay, Julia," Devon said. "Get on to it. Anything else?"

"Um, yeah," Danziger said. "We have another problem." All eyes turned to him. "Even if Julia can heal the Syndrome, we still can't stay here. This station is slowly falling to pieces."

"What?" three voices exclaimed in unison. Ben Caldwell sat nodding pensively while Julia raised a questioning eyebrow. Danziger shrugged.

"Nobody has done any significant maintenance to the life support systems," he explained. "We found some sort of fungus eating away at the electronics of the air recyclers."

"Penicillium," Julia added in a murmur.

"Ben, Walman and I have done some spot checks in various areas and sectors of the Station. The stuff is all over the place."

Julia grew pale. "You mean, it's gone beyond the Green sector already? It's going to be nearly impossible to stop it from spreading further!"

Danziger agreed. "The fungus is eating away at the electronics and the life support devices. Air, water, climate control, oxygen. It's even growing on the windows in Yellow. This thing is going to be a threat to the structural integrity of the station. And if that fungus stuff isn't bad enough by itself, our radiation shields are slowly falling to pieces."

"So, what are you saying?" Devon asked slowly. "That we don't have a chance here?"

"Yes, Devon, that's exactly what I'm saying. It will take a while, decades even. But in the end the station will fall apart," Danziger said. "I'm sorry." The silence in the room was deafening. Finally Devon opened her mouth. "If we can't stay here, then we have to leave," she stated calmly.

"What?"

"How?"

"Where would we go?"

Devon held up her hands. "I don't know," she said. "We'll find a way. We always do, don't we?" she asked Danziger.

He grinned. "Yes, we do."

oOo

Walman opened the door to the conference room. It was packed with people but nobody seemed to notice his entrance; they were all deeply immersed in the discussion of their options. An hour had passed since John Danziger had dropped his little bombshell about the station falling apart and Devon had decided to call in Alonzo, Baines and Walman to ask for their advice as well.

"We can't use cryosleep," Julia repeated. She looked around at the circle of faces surrounding the conference room table. "We have only a dozen rickety crypts and over four hundred people."

"What does that mean?" Owen asked. "That there's no way to leave?"

"No," Devon said. "That's not what Julia means. Wherever we decide to go, the journey will be long and take decades. Decades that we can't spend sleeping. So we will need a ship that is fully equipped with life support systems and that will last several generations."

"Devon, you got to be kidding!" Baines protested. "You don't want a ship, you want a miracle! It's impossible."

"I know it's much to ask for, Baines," Devon agreed. "But if we stay here and do nothing, we, our children, and our children's children will be dead and gone in a century from now. We will *build* ourselves a ship. One way or the other. Walman?"

He handed her the large folder that he had been clutching since he came in. "I hope this is what you wanted, Devon," he said. "It has all the blueprints I could find."

She nodded her thanks and opened the folder. A few moments later large schematics and blueprints covered the table. They were too large to ever fit properly on a computer screen, which was why she had asked Walman to bring the paper copies from the Adair Industries offices.

"These are the blueprints of this particular station," she said. "As you know, I was involved in building it. The station is designed to have four self-supporting sectors. Every system is present in fourfold and each can be operated independently. Climate, air, water, everything. I had wanted to create even smaller units but that turned out to be too expensive," Devon explained. "We did this to make certain that if something compromised station integrity, like a meteor strike puncturing the outer hull, the damaged sector could be shut off from the other areas by simply sealing the airlock doors. See? Here, here and here." She jabbed her fingers at several places on the schematics.

Danziger frowned and leaned over. From the other side of the table Ben Caldwell also stood up and shuffled forward to peer at the blueprints.

"We can use that design to our advantage," Devon continued. "We can sever a sector and use that as a ship. Danziger?"

He grumbled something below his breath. Walman watched as the tall mechanic trailed a finger along the lines on the paper, squinting, measuring, calculating. The others around the table remained quiet. The silence hung heavily, almost as if they were all waiting for the final word to come down. Would they be doomed to die here? Or would they have another chance?

"I think it can be done," Danziger announced after several long minutes. "Ben?"

The old man nodded his head slowly. "Yes, I think it's possible. However, we would need to keep the docking bay node for a counter weight." He pointed at the nub in the middle of the ring. "Or we'd be off balance."

Baines interrupted, shaking his head. "Nonono, wait a minute! You guys seriously want to *break off* a part of this station and use that as a *ship*? You gotta be nuts!"

"We'd basically create a smaller station out of this one," Ben explained patiently.

"I don't understand," Myra said. "You said earlier that this penni-something stuff is all over the place. Then how can we get rid of it by taking away a sector of the station? Wouldn't we just take that fungus with us?"

"Yes, we would," Julia said. "Microbes are everywhere, always."

"But it'll be easier to keep them in check, when we deal with 'em on a smaller scale," Danziger added.

"Such a small station will make it easier to keep up hygienic standards. We can keep humidity under control and the filters can do their work properly," Julia continued.

"Okaaaay," Owen said slowly, shaking his head like a man just waking from a bad dream. "Suppose that it all works like you say it will. How would this smaller station-slash-ship go where it's supposed to go? We don't have any propulsion systems."

"Light sails," Alonzo suggested. "Maybe we can build a solar sail." He chuckled and leaned over to whisper in Julia's ear. "I always wanted to be a sailor."

Owen and Myra blinked in confusion. "What the hell is a light sail?"

"It's a very big square of extremely thin, reflective material," Alonzo said. "Photons from the sun, or any other light source, bounce against the sail and push it forward. It's incredibly slow, at least at first, but it's cheap and we don't need any fuel."

"I remember that the Council picked up the old NASA experiments for a while, before the Syndrome struck," Ben said, warming to the idea. "They used a laser light. We can probably find some of their stuff to build the sail."

Walman cleared his throat. "But where would we go? Back to G889?" Alonzo and Danziger stared at him as if he had lost his mind. Walman blinked.

"I don't know yet," Devon admitted.

"Are you nuts?" Danziger exclaimed. That planet almost killed you! We are *not* going back there!"

Alonzo nodded in agreement.

Devon studied them for a few moments. "Okay. We'll go somewhere else," she concluded. "If there are no more questions, let's get to work."

Chapter 16

"I know there was another planet we briefly considered for the Eden project," Devon said, running a hand through her hair. "It had a lower habitability rating. Seventy-nine percent, I think. But I can't remember where it was."

She was sitting beside Baines in front of a monitor at the Main Public Library. Alonzo and Myra perched on stools behind them, peering over their shoulders at the monitor. The lights were low, casting the hall in a gloomy dusk. It was eerily quiet, the soft hum

of the monitor loud in the silence.

"That's okay, Devon," Baines chuckled. His fingers rested lightly on the keys, ready to start typing and accessing the Library's databases. "It has been quite a few years. Don't worry, if it's in here, we'll find it."

"Try 107.5-53.1 and sweep an arch of three lightyears' distance along the equator," Alonzo suggested. "I know that's a sector that the Pontel project explored."

Baines entered the coordinates that Alonzo mentioned and lightly touched the 'start search' icon. A few seconds later a long list of stars located in the grid scrolled across the screen.

"Look for planets," Devon said. She leaned forward to have a better look. This was important. If they couldn't find the right planet, where else could they go? They'd agreed they couldn't go back to G889. And although Earth was slowly healing from mankind's devastation, it would be centuries before the planet could offer a healthy habitat again.

Baines typed in the appropriate search command and the star system list expanded, showing the celestial bodies associated with each star.

"Anything look familiar?" Alonzo asked.

Devon squinted at the screen. "I don't know," she said slowly. "What's that one?" She pointed at a name on the screen. "KY4?"

"I'm not sure," Alonzo said. "I've never been that far. But you could be on to something..." He fell silent as he tried to remember something someone told him long decades ago. "I think that's where one of the Pontel ships disappeared. Or at least, where they said it had disappeared. Can you get more intel on that sector?" he asked Baines.

"Sure," the other man said. His fingers tapped more keystrokes.

Alonzo whistled between his teeth as the screen once again filled with data.

"The KY4 system consists of several stars," Baines read off the screen. "K45, which is about the same magnitude of our Sun, has seven planets orbiting it. Two of them, designated K453 and K454, also known as Uri and Lucius, were once considered for human relocation. They have a habitability rating of 75.4 and 79.2 percent respectively."

"That's the one!" Devon exclaimed. Her eyes gleamed with excitement, reflecting the light of the monitor. "Lucius. That's the one we considered before. I recognize its

common name."

Myra sat looking at them. "And you think we should go there?" she asked dubiously, peering at the screen. Baines had called up a three-dimensional animation of the K45 sun and its orbiting planets. "But where is it? And when are we going to get there?"

"That," Devon said, "is going to be the hard part."

oOo

"Devon, you designed this station. What do you think?" Danziger asked. He ducked to prevent hitting his head against a low-slung support beam. The maintenance passage was narrow and they could barely walk side by side while they examined the condition of the life support systems, the air purifiers, and the hydro filters in every sector. They were trying to decide which sector the fungus had least polluted and which would best be suited for their needs. "Adair? Hello! Are you with me?" He waved a large hand in front of her face when she didn't reply. Devon blinked, her eyes slowly focusing on him.

"I'm sorry... You were saying?"

"I was asking for your opinion," Danziger said with a wry grin. "What were you thinking about?"

Devon gave a light shrug. "This. Us. That after all we've been through, we find ourselves back at square one, looking for a way to travel to a distant planet without knowing what we'll find." She raised her face to meet his eyes. "I don't know if I can do it again, John," she said softly.

Danziger blinked in surprise. It wasn't often he saw Devon give in to doubts. "C'mon Adair. Where's your sense of adventure?"

Devon gave a soft snort. "G889 gave me enough adventure to last a life time," she murmured. "I don't want to lose any more people."

Danziger's expression grew serious. He knew she still blamed herself for the loss of Yale and the others who stayed behind on G889. He gazed down at her for a moment. Her auburn hair framing her face, the eyes so dark in her pale skin. The tan produced by G889's sun had faded a long time ago. And before he knew what he was doing, he'd taken her into his arms, caressing her lips in a gentle kiss.

Taken by surprise, Devon stiffened, resisting for a moment. But just as he was about to let go, shocked at what he was doing, she relaxed into his embrace and answered his kiss

with one of her own. It was Danziger's turn to be surprised.

Suddenly she pulled away, avoiding meeting his eyes. "I'm sorry, John," she mumbled. "I'm—"

He gently placed a finger against her lips, silencing her. "No, Devon, I'm the one that's sorry. I was—" He had been about to say that had he been way out of line. But when she looked up at him and their eyes met, the words stuck in his throat. Instead of apologizing, he bent his head to capture her mouth again.

This time she responded right away, her lips parting, her arms rising to wrap around his neck. She sighed softly and the sound sent flutters through his body. This was something he had wanted to do since... Well, since a very long time.

At last Devon pulled back, looking up at him. With one finger she tapped his lips, which were feeling a bit bruised. "That was nice," she whispered somewhat breathlessly. "But I suppose we better get back to the job at hand."

"Yes... yes... Of course," Danziger stammered, still quite confused by her reaction. Sharp words, maybe even a slap to his face, that wouldn't have surprised him. But this...

He stepped back and took a deep breath. Tearing his eyes away from Devon's face, he looked around as if for the first time realizing where they were. Unpainted, gray metallic walls surrounded them, the support beams starkly visible against the low ceiling instead of neatly integrated within the walls as they were in the upper sections of the station. They were deep inside its belly, in the Green quadrant where Alonzo and Baines had first encountered the survivors. "I think we should stick with the Red sector," Devon continued as if nothing had happened. Her face belied her though; her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkled feverishly. "Ben Caldwell has done a good job with trying to maintain the systems there. Plus it has the hospital and two of the gardens."

Danziger nodded. "Sounds good to me. And Alonzo suggested we bring the Venus ship along. We could leave it right where it is," he said.

"That's a good idea," Devon said, nodding pensively. "We'll need a shuttle."

"So, are we going to head back?" Danziger asked. "Tell the others what we have decided?"

"Yes, we should do that," Devon murmured. She opened a door half-hidden in the wall to find herself in a small maintenance room. Shelves with equipment and tools lined the walls. At the far end stood a couple of low bunks with thin mattresses, once used by the maintenance crews between their shifts. "We don't have to go right away though..." She

sat down on the edge of one of the bunks and looked back up at Danziger. Her expression was both shy and challenging.

He gulped. The invitation in her eyes was clear. And how could he refuse, after having wanted her for so long? He followed her into the room, kicked the door shut with his foot and reached down to cup her face between his large palms. "Devon..." His voice shook. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am," came the whispered reply.

Chapter 17

What had happened during Devon and Danziger's survey in the belly of the station didn't remain a secret for long, no matter how hard they tried to keep it silent. Ever since their return Devon seemed to glow with joy. Cameron commented he hadn't seen Devon this happy since the Terrians returned a healed Uly to her. And Danziger's eyes softened whenever they fell upon her. It didn't take a genius to figure it out. Alonzo and Walman teased Danziger relentlessly but good-naturedly he let it all slide down from him.

The novelty soon wore off though and over the next couple of months the people aboard New Mars Station worked hard to build the ship that would take them to Lucius. None of them would ever set foot on the planet; the four hundred-something people aboard the station realized they would breathe their last breath in space. Yet, when their grandchildren's children arrived in orbit around the planet, it would offer them a sanctuary, a chance at the prolongation of the human race. They knew they were making an effort to preserve future generations.

Alonzo kept a close eye on the indicator lights that were glowing on the control board of the shuttle. A red light went off. "Danziger, Walman, you're clear to go," he called over Gear. He pressed a button. "Airlock is depressurized. Hatch seals are released."

"Thanks, Solace. Opening hatch now," the big mechanic's gravelly voice replied. A few seconds later he announced, "We're clear."

"I'll be back to pick you up in about eighty minutes," Alonzo said. "So you'll have ten minutes of oxygen to spare. Just in case."

"Acknowledged. One hour twenty. Danziger out."

With small bursts from the thrusters Alonzo moved the shuttle out of the way. He was careful to give the two men that floated outside a wide berth. They looked like bulky little snowmen as they drifted in space, unwieldy pressure suits their only protection

from the cold vacuum.

They had reached the final stage of severing the sectors. Although the different areas of the station were made to be self-sufficient, they were never meant to be separated altogether. Danziger and his crew had had to cut through the inner walls of the connecting corridors manually. The outer shell, however, could not be cut from inside. "Adair, everyone ready?" Danziger's voice came over the Gear again.

"Yes. Everything and everyone is secured. Airlock doors are sealed and pressurized on all tiers," Devon said from aboard the station. "We're as ready as can be."

"Firing up laser cutter now," Danziger said. "Walman, how are you doing?" He was going to slice the hull where it connected with the Blue sector while Walman would handle the Green end.

"Wait for me," Walman panted. "I'm almost there." Over the open Gear channel Alonzo heard the hiss of jettisoned nitrogen when he fired the small thrusters on his back and propelled himself toward the Green sector. "Okay, I'm in position. Ready to fire up."

Careful coordination between the two cutters was necessary to make sure that both incisions were completed at the same time. If they didn't manage to synchronize their work, the rotating movement of the station might tear itself and the Red sector apart violently. If structural integrity were compromised all their work would have been for naught.

"Good. Let's do it."

Alonzo and Baines watched from a distance, looking out through the cockpit windows of the old ship. Against the bright glare of the sun they were barely able to discern the tiny pinpoints of light that the lasers emitted.

For the next hour silence reigned. Occasionally Walman or Danziger would break it to make a comment while they slowly made their way down the station's outer casing. Basically cutting a thin incision perpendicular to the ring's orientation took all their concentration.

"One hour mark's coming up, guys," Alonzo announced. "I'm coming back in to pick you up. How you doing?"

"Just a couple more feet," Danziger said, "then I'm done. Lonz, I think we can finish this in one space walk."

"I'll prepare to launch the cables," Baines told Alonzo before making his way out of the cockpit. The shuttle was going to tow the detached sector to a higher orbit, where they would attach the light sail and make the final preparations before setting off on their long journey.

"I'm about finished," Walman announced. "Only another four inches. Danziger?"

"Go ahead," Danziger replied.

"Make sure you're ready to push off from the surface as soon as you finish," Alonzo warned. The computer calculations predicted that the disjointed Red sector would drift neatly along with the rest of the station until they towed it but computers had been known to be wrong before.

"And... Done!" Walman announced triumphantly.

Looking out from the cockpit Alonzo could see a tiny fleck among the stars as Walman floated away from the huge wheel of the station.

"Same here," Danziger said. "I can see no movement..." He paused while they all waited to see if the computer was right. "So far so good. Let's get those towlines clipped on. How much time do we have left?"

"You've been out seventy-six minutes," Alonzo said after a quick glance on the chronometer above his head. "Fourteen minutes until you run out of oxygen. I'm moving into position to launch the cables."

The two small specks quickly grew into bigger blobs when the ship closed in on the station. Baines returned to the cockpit. "Cables are away," he said.

Out of Alonzo's sight the two men grabbed the lines and fastened them to the handholds on the Red sector's hull. Though in reality as thick as a man's wrist, from the cockpit the cables looked like thin, silvery wires that snaked from the belly of the shuttle toward the station.

"Cables attached." Danziger announced. "We're coming back in. Solace, remember you shouldn't need much force to pull her up. Be careful with that shuttle, we're going to need it."

Alonzo rolled his eyes at Baines. "Hey, remember who you're talking to!" he clucked over the Gear.

Danziger didn't comment. "We're inside. Hatch closed and secured," he said a few moments later.

"Devon, we're going to pull you up now," Alonzo warned the people aboard the station.

"We're ready," her voice came back.

Gently Alonzo set the shuttle in motion, away from the station. The cables went taut and he heard Danziger's voice coming from aft. "Slowly... slowly... That's it..."

oOo

True held on tightly to the edges of her bed. She, like almost everyone else, was strapped down onto her mattress. According to the computer's calculations, as well as both Ben's and her father's estimates, the station would enter into a new spin with the docking bay after the separation. Gravitation would be restored almost automatically. Neither Julia nor Devon had wanted to chance any injuries during the process though. Thus everyone and everything was tied down as well as could be. Only a few people were up and about. They monitored the sensors that they had placed on each tier where the Red sector had been joined with its Green and Blue counterparts. If they had miscalculated the strength of the station, if Devon had been wrong about the design, this was where the cracks would show first. Although why they wanted to know, True didn't have clue. Nobody knew what to do if the hull cracked. Not even her father. She had heard him and Devon discuss it one night, a couple of days ago.

"We don't have much of a choice, Devon," her father had said. "This station is the only chance we have to build ourselves a ship. You know we have to leave here. I want our children, and their children, to have a chance at life. And so do you."

"You're right, of course," Devon had sighed. "Still, I can't help but worry about it. What if I got it wrong?"

"Don't take all responsibility upon yourself," he had chided her gently. "Ben and I went over the calculations countless times. The computer says the same thing. It is possible. And we all made the choice together."

A slight lurch cast True from her thoughts and back into the present. She felt herself grow light, weightless, pressing against the straps when her body wanted to drift up from the bed.

"You feel that?" Uly asked in an urgent whisper from the next bed.

True giggled. "Yeah. It feels funny, doesn't it."

"Too bad Mom wouldn't let us stay up. We could have flown all around the station, like those birds on the planet!"

"Yeah," True said again, letting the odd sensation fill her. To her dismay she saw her Gear set drift past her. Obviously she had forgotten to put it safely in her pocket. She reached out a hand and made a grab for it, clutching it close to her chest. She wouldn't want anyone else to catch it and read her diary module.

Then, with another soft lurch, she fell back heavily against the mattress. True grunted. Even after mere minutes of weightlessness her body weight felt oppressive. Sounds of things crashing back to the floor drifted in from other areas. Apparently her Gear set wasn't the only thing that had been overlooked when securing all loose items.

"Mom, can we get up yet?" Uly called.

"Not yet, Champ," Devon called back. "Give it a few more minutes. I want to make sure we're stable."

Nothing happened though and True quickly grew bored. Lying atop her bed in the middle of the day when she wasn't sick wasn't exactly her idea of fun. To her relief she saw Devon appear in the doorway.

"You kids can get up now," Devon said with a smile. "Then come and you can see the station beneath us."

oOo

They were still pressing their noses against the porthole to gape at the deformed station when the four men returned from the docking bay.

"Alonzo, look!" Uly pointed. In the distance, the station hung gleaming in the endless sunlight. However, it no longer possessed the perfect symmetry they had admired upon their return from G889. About a quarter of the station was missing, leaving a wide gap, like some giant had taken a bite out of the ring. Three of the four spokes – until recently passageways to the docking area – now led nowhere but to the emptiness of space. The fourth spoke was missing altogether, and so were the central bulb and the docking bay. With the node no longer balancing its rotational spin, the station moved in a wobbly, shaky circle.

"How long before it will shake apart?" True asked her father.

He shrugged. "It could take years," he said. "But the gravitational pull of the moon and Earth will slowly tear it to pieces."

"We won't be around to see the show though," Alonzo grinned at True. Turning to Devon he added, "All went well. We're rotating according to our predictions, and gravity's not much different from what we were used to. I've docked the shuttle in the bay. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to go see how Julia managed during the separation process."

"Sure," Devon nodded. "She's in the hospital."

Alonzo rolled his eyes. "Where else would she be?"

He strode away, passed the deactivated guard robot in its niche and went in search of his lover. As he had expected he found her in her lab. She was on her knees, gathering up pieces of broken glass.

"Hey," he said softly in greeting. Julia looked up, her hands full of shards. "Better be careful with that, Doc" Alonzo added.

She dropped the fragments into a wastebasket. "It did go well, didn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, it did," he replied. "How did things go here?"

"Okay, I guess," she shrugged, motioning around vaguely. "Not exactly perfect, as you can see."

"Uh huh," he murmured, taking her into his arms. He wasn't very interested in the broken items in the lab. "I wish I could have been with you during the weightlessness." A gleam appeared in his eye. "They say making weightless love is quite the experience. It would have been nice to test that theory..."

Chapter 18

"Julia! Julia!" Cameron's voice accompanied the loud pounding on the door. Groggily Julia lifted her head from Alonzo's chest.

"Tell'imgo'way," Alonzo mumbled without fully waking up.

"I can't," Julia whispered, disentangling herself from his embrace. She quickly donned a shirt and opened the door a little. Cameron dropped his fist, raised for another series of knocks on the door.

"Julia, you have to come," he said. "It's Denner. She's sick."

"I'll be right there," Julia said. She closed the door again and put on the rest of her clothes before slipping out of the door. "Let me get my glove."

"Hurry, please," Cameron urged her, his voice tight with worry. Obviously he was very concerned about Denner's condition.

"What's wrong with her?" Julia asked while she unlocked her small office and grabbed her glove.

"I don't know," Cameron said. "She wasn't feeling well for a few days and I told her to go see you but she refused, saying you were too busy. Now, I woke up to find her in the bathroom, vomiting her insides out."

Julia frowned. That did sound serious. And her first thought – that the slightly changed angle of rotation had affected Denner – could not be right if she had been feeling unwell for a while.

Following Cameron, Julia hurried through the darkened hallways to the living quarters he shared with Denner. They found her hunched over the toilet bowl. Her face was pale and a few strands of hair were plastered to her skin.

"Julia," she gasped. "I don't feel so well."

"Don't worry," Julia said, her tone more assuring than she actually felt. "I'm sure it's nothing." She placed her fingertips against Denner's neck and looked intently at the small green display that glowed on her arm. Then she relaxed and actually began to laugh.

"Julia? What is it?" Cameron asked, confused and a bit miffed about the doctor's laughter.

"It's not exactly nothing," Julia smiled. "I was wrong about that. But it's not something bad either. Denner, you're expecting a baby."

"What?" she exclaimed, sitting back from the bowl, nausea forgotten for the moment. "You mean... I'm pregnant? But how—?" A confused half-smile formed on the woman's face.

"I guess I forgot..." Cameron had paled and dropped to his knees, legs failing to support him any longer. "A baby..." he repeated. "A baby..." Slowly, his face broke out in a broad grin. "That's... that's... wonderful!" He pulled Denner to him and wrapped his large arms

around the woman's small frame. "That's absolutely fantastic!"

Julia smiled while she sat back and unstrapped her glove. For Julia, Denner's pregnancy was the best proof that she had done her job well and restored the changes that G889 had made to her friend's DNA. And it was also a hopeful sign for the future of humanity.

oOo

Several more months passed while the human occupants of the new ship – which they had christened Avallonis, after the paradisiacal island from the King Arthur legends – prepared for their flight. Denner's belly was slowly protruding although the swelling was still barely visible to the untrained eye. Two other women were expecting a baby too and Anna had given birth to a healthy baby boy, making her boyfriend Jim a proud father. Old Ben had died of old age, peacefully in his sleep. Julia had discovered no new cases of the new Syndrome variant and the few patients onboard the station had been healed. All in all, things were looking good for the four hundred something survivors of the human race.

Then one morning Baines came racing into the communal breakfast room. Devon was meeting with Danziger, Walman and Alonzo to discuss when and how to attach the light sail they were building.

"Dev... Devon," Baines panted as he slid to a halt near the table. He was gasping for air, obviously having run hard.

"What's wrong with you?" Alonzo asked, grinning. "You look as if you're being chased by a Grendler!"

Baines grimaced. "Very funny, Solace. Wait until you see what's headed our way, that'll wipe that grin right off your face!"

He handed a print-out to Devon, who studied it briefly, frowned and passed it to Alonzo. Baines had been right. What the pilot observed on the print-out it did indeed wipe the grin from his face. "When?" was all he asked.

"The computer's estimate is five days," Baines replied. "If we're not gone in five days—"

"Then what?" Danziger grabbed the slip of paper from Alonzo's hands. "What does it mean?" he asked after a quick glance. "This is not my field."

"That's the predicted trajectory of a rogue dust cloud," Alonzo explained. "Such a cloud is full of meteorites. And we're right in the middle of its path."

"Isn't the Avallonis build to withstand such a thingsuch such?" Danziger asked Devon.

She shook her head. "Not something as dense as that," she said, nodding at the paper. "The continuous hammering of particles will wear down the outer hull quickly."

"Then we can't put off the construction of the sail any longer," Danziger concluded. "We don't have any more time for debate." He pushed his chair back from the table. "Solace, prepare the shuttle. We're going out in an hour."

They all stared at him. "The sail's ready," he added. "We know where we have to fasten it and how to get the segments there. If we do it now, we can be out of the way when that meteor storm gets here."

An hour later the shuttle slowly lifted from the bay. They had restored the APEX system and Alonzo was having no difficulties navigating through the tunnel. In the back of the ship, Walman and Danziger were preparing themselves for another space walk. They barely had room to move; the cargo holds were filled to capacity with the folded pieces of the light sail. Once they were put together and the sail unfurled and stretched, it would cover one square mile.

"We're approaching the drop-off location," Alonzo announced over the ship's intercom system. "Are you guys ready?"

"As ready as can be," Danziger's voice replied through Alonzo's Gear set. "Let's do it."

He and Walman opened the small airlock. "We're out and clear," he said. "Unload the sail."

"Roger," Alonzo said. He pressed a few buttons and behind him the large cargo hold doors slowly slid open, revealing their contents to the two men outside. The pilot pushed another button and the automatic no-grav unloading system began to slowly push at the pallets holding the segments. They tumbled from the hold and hung in space behind the shuttle, slowly turning around.

"Okay, that's enough for now," Danziger said after a few moments. "Hold the rest while we handle these things here."

Alonzo pressed another button. There was nothing left for him to do now but wait until the two men were ready for another load. Building and fastening the sail would have gone faster with more people but they didn't have many space suits. Besides, none of the men that grew up on the station had any experience with space walks. Danziger said he'd

rather be safe than sorry and decided that he and Walman could handle it.

It took them eight and a half hours, plus half a dozen different trips back inside the ship to replenish their oxygen bottles. But finally Danziger and Walman returned to the shuttle and Alonzo closed the holds.

"You look tired," he commented when Danziger entered the cockpit and plopped onto the navigator's seat.

"I *am* tired," the big man growled, rubbing his face.

"Hell! Would you look at this?" Walman's voice drifted in from behind, followed by the man himself when he marched into the cockpit, dragging the top part of a space suit along. Without a word he pointed at a long, black scorch mark on the back. The suit's surface had been neatly sliced, the cut going almost through the inner shell.

"That yours or mine?" Danziger asked.

"Mine."

"Then you got damned lucky," Danziger commented dryly.

"You could say that again," Walman muttered before leaving the cockpit again.

"Must've been the first harbingers of that rogue storm," Alonzo said to Danziger while he eased the ship back into the tunnel and docked it neatly. With a clang the metal clamps fell into their sockets. "Guess the five day estimate was a bit on the liberal side."

"What are our chances of getting away in time?" Danziger asked.

"They should be good. If we go and finish the rest now, instead of holding off until tomorrow," Alonzo opined, "we can be on our way in a few hours."

Baines was cooling his heels in the jetway, impatiently waiting until they opened the hatch. He confirmed Alonzo's estimate. "We've got to unfurl the sail now," he said. "The main body of the cloud is three days off but the first particles are bombarding our shields already."

"Yeah, we know," Danziger said and told him about Walman's near brush with death.

"Woah," Baines said, looking at the other man with new eyes. "Devon wants to give a speech," he told Danziger.

The men chuckled. "What else is new," Danziger murmured. "Let's go."

oOo

"It will be a long journey, and none of us will see the end of it." Devon concluded her speech. "But even so, I know we made the right choice. Once this ship reaches Lucius, mankind will have found another home. Thank you, and Godspeed."

With a nod in Danziger's direction, Devon stepped down from the steps.

"Walman, let's do it."

In the end, for all the hard work and long hours they put in, it wasn't very spectacular. Walman flipped a couple of switches and lazily the segments unfolded from their casing, stretching and tightening the gossamer solar sail until it stood taut, glaringly white in the light of the sun. Slowly, so slow that it was imperceptible to the humans inside, the Avallonis began to move. They were on their way out of the Solar system, going to Lucius, where they hoped to find a new home.

Behind the Avallonis, hidden by the huge sail, hung Earth. Once such a pretty orb with beautiful blue and green colors and white clouds swirling across its surface, it was now a dirty brown hue as it circled the Sun. For thousands of years that sun had been the only sun man knew. And surely it would shine upon Earth for thousands of years to come until it would run out of hydrogen and morph into a red giant, annihilating the nearest planets including Earth. Yet, nobody would be there to see it. Mankind was gone.

Author's note: Fungi and other yucky microbes aboard space ships and stations are a real problem. Of course I took liberties with the subject to fit the story. If you like to read some more about this, check out this article from Space.com:

http://www.space.com/news/spacestation/space_fungus_000727.html

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