

A NEW BEGINNING

Clumsily I tried to clamber from the bunk, pushing away his helping hand with an impatient gesture.

"Just -- leave me alone!" I snapped, immediately regretting my outburst when I saw confused hurt making a fleeting appearance on his face, before stung resignation replaced it. Alonzo shrugged and walked out of our quarters, without a word. A few moments later I heard the clanging of the double doors, indicating he'd gone outside. I knew I'd hurt him and I sighed, not really understanding why his concern suddenly irritated me so much.

We'd been here three months now, living in the old Bio-dome that we shared with True and Uly. Winter had set in several weeks ago, fast and furious, the way it did in these mountains. Several meters of snow covered the slopes around the Dome, creating a lifeless wasteland where only a month ago scores of flowers bloomed. Severe storms kept us imprisoned in the Dome most of our days.

Why had I lashed out at Alonzo when he simply tried to help me? I guess I just felt miserable. I'd grown so big these last few weeks that I often wondered if it was possible to literally burst from pregnancy. When we returned to the planet, late last summer, and found only True and Uly still alive, I had been six months pregnant, with a cute belly to show for it.

I didn't think it was cute anymore though. My stomach had swelled to an immense balloon, making it impossible for me to sit or find a comfortable position to sleep in. And no matter how often Alonzo -- or Uly and True for that matter -- assured me I looked absolutely wonderful, I simply felt repulsive in my deformity. I knew it wouldn't be long now, before the baby came. Although I admit, with the years spend in cold sleep and the shorter days here on the planet, I had lost track of the exact time I was due. Still, I couldn't wait for the baby to come out, even if the prospect of having to give birth *here*, with no medical help or equipment at hand, scared me half to death.

"Nice work, Heller," I berated myself when the doors stopped their clanging. Besides the cramps in my legs, that were hard-pressed to keep my unbalanced body upright, and the constant throbbing ache in my back, I could now add guilt to my misery. With a heavy sigh I pushed myself upward from the bunk, using the small table for support. I'd go after him, I decided, and apologize. It wasn't Alonzo's fault that I was so unhappy.

But when I came outside, I didn't see him anywhere. It was a bright, calm day, the first one since at least two weeks. A few fluffy clouds were scattered in the otherwise blue sky, the sun shining brightly, though not giving off much warmth. I squinted against the

glare of the light on the white snow.

Uly and True had left early that morning, saying they wanted to use the spell of good weather to further stock up on our food supplies. Winter had only just begun and I remembered from our last experience here in the mountains that spring might take a long time coming.

With no clear indication of where Alonzo could've gone I decided to go up the nearby hill. I hoped that, by overlooking the small valley around the Dome from a higher point, I might see his tracks. I waddled through the snow, struggling to remain on my feet, yet determined to keep going until I'd found him. Alonzo's understanding, his putting up with my moods and frustrated tantrums, was more than I could've hoped for and he didn't deserve my anger. He just happened to be the convenient target at hand.

About half way up the side of the hill I had to stop, as I was running out of breath. I leaned against a tree waiting for a mild cramp to pass. I put it down to my muscles protesting the lack of oxygen. I waited a few more moments, taking the time to regain my breath. When I straightened, I flinched in surprised shock. Right in front of me, three feet away, stood a huge Terrian.

He appraised me silently, in that eerie way they have, that makes you feel like they can see into the darkest recesses of your soul. I glanced around uncertainly. What did he want from me?

The Terrians never took much interest in me. Usually the aliens talked to Alonzo, although I don't think he'd dreamt with them since encountering the guardian at New Pacifica. Uly said the Terrians were still very upset about what the Council and the colonists had done to the planet, and that they were busy repairing the damage.

And now, here I ran into a specimen of the alien race. He cocked his head and trilled softly at me. I just stared at him, uncomprehending. Again he trilled and stretched out his hand. Startled by his unexpected movement I took a step back and nearly lost my balance on the snowy slope. Suddenly a violent spasm cramped through my abdomen and I bent over in pain. A surprised yell escaped me. It took about a minute before the spasm passed, and when I straightened, the Terrian was gone, leaving a puddle of half melted, muddy snow where he'd just stood.

Surprised I looked around but saw nothing. I decided I'd seen enough of the local wildlife for now and turned to go back to the Dome, when another spasm rippled through me, even stronger than the previous one. My knees buckled and I slouched forward, desperately trying to fight off the pain that ripped through me in hot waves. I felt something give inside me, followed by a sudden wetness between my legs. Mortified,

I realized that my water just broke and that I was in labor.

I fumbled in my pockets for my Gear, only to remember I'd left it inside the Dome. "That's just great," I muttered when the pain abated a little. Here I was, halfway up a snow-laden slope, not a human in sight, without a way to call for help and about to give birth to my first child.

I clung to the tree, moaning, as another contraction assaulted me. The analytic half of my brain informed me that this was going excessively fast, especially for a first child and I absently wondered if my enhanced chromosomes had something to do with it. But I didn't really care about the cause. All I cared about was getting back to the Dome and call for help, before my baby just popped out into the snow. Except there was no way I could get back to my feet and go down the slope.

Just when I began to think I could slide down on my buttocks, Alonzo appeared in the clearing in front of the Dome, from the opposite direction. I took a deep breath to call out to him, but it wasn't necessary; he came charging up the hill straight to me.

"Doc, are you okay?" he asked as he dropped down next to me in the snow. Concern shone from his brown eyes and again my heart filled with love and gratitude.

"How did you know?" I gasped.

"The Terrians," he replied curtly. That surprised me and I began to ask him what he meant when another contraction almost tore my insides to shreds. My question turned into a loud groan and without a further word Alonzo scooped me up in his arms to carry me towards the Dome.

He lowered me on the bunk and I shrugged out of my heavy jacket. Alonzo grabbed for his Gear set, his fingers shaking slightly and I put my hand on his arm.

"There's no time for that," I told him, struggling to get my breathing under control before the next wave of pain hit me. "They won't make it back in time. *You're* going to have to help me." He stared at me for a moment, horrified understanding washing over his handsome features. Then, with what clearly was an immense effort of will, he pushed his fear aside and nodded.

"Just tell me what to do."

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As it turned out, the Terrians weren't the only surprise of that day. Shortly after Alonzo

had brought me back to the Dome, our baby was born, a wonderfully complete baby-boy. Alonzo was beaming, a grin that stretched from ear to ear on his face. He cleaned the child's mouth and nose and slapped him lightly on the buttocks, forcing the baby to breath on his own. Exhausted, I lay back, waiting for the afterbirth, when I realized I still felt something move inside me.

"Lonzo," I called him breathlessly, "could you please hand me my Diaglove?" I wanted to make sure I wasn't imagining things, although the glove was only capable of offering a most basic ultrasound scan. Alonzo passed me the glove, suddenly concerned for me.

"Is everything okay?" he asked, worry edging into his voice as he continued to wrap the little boy (our son, my stunned brain muttered) in a blanket.

"Eh, yeah," I said, incredulously examining the results displayed on the glove. "Except... Alonzo, how would you feel about twins?"

"What?!" he exclaimed, spinning around so fast he nearly dropped the baby.

"Twins," I repeated and giggled. I couldn't help it, the utterly shocked look on his face was just too much for my nerves to handle. "There's another one on its way."

And indeed, some ten minutes later we were also blessed with a tiny baby-girl. Slightly smaller than our son, I was relieved to find our daughter was as complete and healthy as our first-born. After Alonzo handed me the babies he flopped on a chair next to my bed. He stared at the three of us with a dumbstruck expression that I found quite endearing.

"Wow," was all he said. "Wow."

"You're a daddy now, Fly-boy," I teased him, and smiled gratefully. "Thank you, Alonzo, this is a wonderful gift." And I put small kisses on both babies' heads, careful not to touch the gently pulsing fontanel.

"I should thank you, Julia," he smiled back warmly, a catch in his voice. He stuck out his hand and delicately wriggled his finger in the boy's small fist. The baby clenched his tiny fingers around it.

"Delian Apollo," Alonzo said, so quietly I could hardly hear him. "After the Greek sun-god."

"And Diane Artemis, after his sister, the moon-goddess," I added, with a smile at him. He nodded, clearly pleased that I picked up on his intentions so quickly.

"Delian and Diane," he repeated, savoring the sound on his tongue. "Those are good names." He leaned forward, kissing me tenderly, a long lingering kiss, then rested his head against my cheek. And that's how True found us when she and Uly came hurrying into the Dome some twenty minutes later.

"Julia, they're beautiful!" True exclaimed when seeing our twin babies. Then she clasped my hand between her two still cold ones and, her face suddenly serious, apologized for not being here.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Uly wanted to go back early but I didn't believe him at first." I was busy assuring True that it didn't matter, that everything went fine, so I mostly missed the quick look of understanding exchanged between Uly and Alonzo.

"It's okay, True," I told her, "everything went fine, and very quickly. Alonzo was here and he helped." With another squeeze of my hand she nodded and let go of me.

oOo

Having unexpectedly *two* babies to care for confronted us with several practical problems that we hadn't anticipated, like needing two cradles and many more nappies than we had prepared for. We soon found out though that Delian and Diane were happiest when they were together, sleeping peacefully next to each other in the same crib. As twins are wont to do, they did a lot of things together. Like waking up in the middle of the night, hungry or needing a cleaning. But in general they were good babies -- the best, only crying when they needed something. They were also glowingly healthy and growing fast.

Alonzo made the best father any child could wish. He usually woke up to the twins' little whimpers before they turned into full-blown tantrums. He bathed them, cleaned their little messes and seemed even more in tune with their needs than I was, anticipating their every wish or whim. I swear he'd have fed them if he could. But since I was breastfeeding them, that remained my sole privilege -- and secretly I relished having something unique that only I could share with the twins. I especially enjoyed the early morning feedings, when we'd all just woken up and everything was still quiet. Alonzo usually brought the babies to me, crawling back under the blankets, his strong arms encircling me while I fed them.

True and Uly acted like doting grandparents to the twins, something that always made me a little dizzy when I stopped to think about it. I remembered them the way they used to be. I could still picture Uly learning how to run after the Terrians healed him. And spunky True, dancing around happily in the downpour that first time it rained after we landed. And now, they were a middle-aged couple grandparenting *my* children.

Especially Uly was crazy about the kids, and they about him. They always smiled their innocent baby-smiles when they saw him. And once, when they were upset with belly-cramps, he calmed them with a single lullaby, where all our soothing words hadn't helped a bit.

I was so busy being happy and taking care of my little family, that I didn't pay too much attention when Alonzo became withdrawn at times. And if he seemed to have the occasional Terrian dream, I didn't push when he said it was nothing. Those times I caught him staring at the children with an unreadable look on his face, or hugging them a little too tightly so they protested with indignant gurgles, I simply put it down to the newness of fatherhood.

Outside, winter continued to rage, sending us one snowstorm after the other, keeping us cooped up in the small Dome for weeks on end. Our food stocks dwindled rapidly, and so did our fuel supply. Yet inside we were happy in our small circle, blissfully ignorant of things yet to come. And when disaster struck, fast and hard, it caught us completely unaware.

oOo

Late winter, we were pleased to find the day clear, bright and relatively warm for a change. Another severe storm had kept us locked inside for four days without reprieve and we all could do with some fresh air.

I was sitting outside enjoying the brief respite of the harsh winter. The twins cooed at each other happily in their baby-language. They lay in their cradle beside me, carefully wrapped in a warm blanket. The sun stood out bright in a cloudless sky and I relished its warmth on my face, meager as it was.

Earlier that morning, True, Uly and Alonzo had decided to go out to search for more roots and tubers, as we were running quite low on edibles. True remembered a particular hill, where she had found tasty roots last winter, that she said she wanted to check out. I stayed at the Dome with the babies.

I sat quietly knitting another baby vest (True had taught me the ancient lore of knitting during the long winter days, getting hold of yarn by pilfering one of Uly's sweaters) when I heard a loud roar in the distance. A few startled birds took to the sky, cawing loudly in protest of the disturbance.

Another avalanche, I thought absently, not really paying attention. We heard the occasional rumble in the distant mountains every time winter let up a little. Since the Dome was situated among hills heavily forested we figured we'd be safe from any

loosened snow masses ourselves.

It turned out we were wrong. My Gear began to beep urgently and I recognized Alonzo's voice, tinnily calling for me to come in. I put the set on my head and switched it on.

"Julia, it's True," he told me when I announced myself. "She was caught in the avalanche and she's seriously hurt. You gotta come, now!" He nearly shouted the last word and I was taken aback by the urgency in his voice.

"Alonzo, I can't leave here," I protested. "The twins --"

"Bring them along," he interrupted me harshly. That scared me. He would never want me to risk our children by taking them out if it wasn't really, *really* serious. So instead of protesting any further I quickly grabbed some medical equipment, bundled the babies on the sled and, pulling it after me, went off in search for the others.

I found them shortly, at the base of a hill. Two forlorn men standing over the crumpled body of the woman, amidst a ravage of large chunks of snow that was mixed with the debris of boulders and broken tree limbs.

When I knelt near her and saw the translucent quality of her face, my breath caught in my throat. "Please," I pleaded silently with whatever divine authority guarded over G889, "don't let me be too late." But what I feared from the moment I saw her body and the odd way her head lay, turned out to be right.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly, choking down a sob and turning to Uly. "There's nothing I can do for her --" He grabbed my shoulders and shook me so hard my teeth clattered in my head.

"Julia, don't say that! Do something!" he urged me, his face contorted with fear. His fingers dug painfully in my flesh and I tried to shake loose.

Alonzo gently pried his hands away from my arms and Uly sank to his knees, sobbing. He threw his head back and let out a loud scream. His cry echoed back and forth through the mountains, creating the illusion that the earth itself shared in his grief.

Disturbed by his scream, Delian and Diane woke and began to cry themselves. With a quick glance at Alonzo I went to comfort the babies while he took care of Uly. It took a long time to quiet the twins, prone as they were to pick up on our emotions.

It was a sad threesome of people that huddled near the fire that night. We'd taken True's body back with us on the sled, planning to bury her the next day. I quietly nursed the

twins when Uly suddenly spoke. His voice was devoid of emotion, toneless and low.

"She meant everything to me," he said. "She was the only one left," and he began to cry quietly, large tears rolling slowly down his cheeks and into his gray beard. Awkwardly Alonzo made to console the other man but I shook my head. Let him cry, my eyes told my mate. Let him pour out his grief.

oOo

In the end crying wasn't enough to heal Uly. True had not only been his friend and his lover, they'd been soul mates. And when she died, a part of him, the vibrant part, died with her. Aside from Alonzo and me, they were the only ones left alive of the original group. And we hadn't been around for most of their history. After all the hurt Uly and True survived together -- the betrayal of her father, the death of his mother as a result, the horrific deeds done by the Council against the Terrians and the planet -- True's passing left him adrift, anchorless. And Uly just couldn't take it.

He withdrew deeper into his grief every day. He became reticent and unresponsive to anything we tried. Not even the happy chatter of the twins could bring a smile to his face anymore. And as though they sensed his grief, they no longer responded to him either.

Then, one morning we woke to find Uly was gone. All night a snowstorm had been raging around the Dome -- the last of that winter, it turned out -- and snow had piled up high again. I told Alonzo he should go search for Uly. But he shook his head.

"This is his choice," he said to me. "It's what he wants." I frowned in puzzlement, not understanding. "Uly has gone to the Terrians, to join them. They will take him into the earth." And I understood.

oOo

Winter changed into spring. Once more, gaily-colored flowers decorated the hills surrounding the Dome. Flocks of birds chirped and twittered their merry songs among the fresh buds on the green trees. And as the days slowly warmed, melting away the last of the snow, so faded the sharpness of our sorrow, our pain of losing True and Uly, who were our last link to the past. What was left was a dull ache deep inside, a sense of missing.

The babies kept us occupied, demanding our attention almost continuously. The many broken nights left me exhausted and irritable, so I was merely annoyed when Terrian dreams plagued Alonzo. The aliens left him alone for weeks on end; then one night he'd

start moaning and tossing around in his sleep again, keeping me awake during those precious moments the twins were quiet. When I asked what they wanted he said he didn't understand, that they weren't very clear in their imagery. And I believed him. Maybe, if I had pushed a little harder, dug a little deeper, it might have made a difference. Then again, probably not.

Whenever he went through those dream sequences, he withdrew from me. He became reclusive, quiet, going off into the woods for hours on end. During those spells he often reminded me of the first time we came to the planet, those first weeks when he'd been injured and helpless, dependent on the rest of us because of his broken leg. Yet I didn't know how to talk to him about it, and frankly, I didn't have the energy to spare.

One night, he woke me, jumping out of bed in a hurry as though something had bitten him. By the time I was fully awake he was standing over the kids' crib, his face a mask of hurt and unfocused anger. I quietly walked to him and gently placed a hand on his back.

"Lonzo, are you okay?"

He nearly jumped out of his skin when I touched him.

"Sheesh, Julia," he cried as he spun around. "You scare the living daylights outta me, sneaking up like that."

"Sorry," I smiled a bit guiltily. "Is everything okay? Did you have a nightmare?" Perspiration glistened on his body and, drying off in the cold night air, he shivered slightly. But it was the look on his face that worried me. He was staring off over my shoulder, as if he saw things that weren't there, with an anxious, haunted look in his dark eyes. With an effort he directed his gaze at me.

"Yeah -- yeah, everything's fine," he said, a little hesitant. "I just... never mind." And he shrugged.

"Come back to bed," I took his hand and led him back to our bunk to catch a few more hours of sleep before the twins woke up. He threw his arms around me, hugging me tight while I cuddled up against him, trying to warm his body with mine.

Yet these spells of depression always passed, leaving him with that indestructible optimistic view on life that I mostly found so charming, and sometimes exhausting. Those days, that I secretly called the good days, he often spent tinkering with the spacecraft. Despite the windbreaks we'd built around it, the ship took quite a beating during the winter storms and it needed a lot of work to get it back in good order.

I wasn't really sure that it was so important to have the shuttle working, but it made him happy. And Alonzo said we should have it ready.

"Ready for what?" I asked him once. And he replied that the time would come when we had to go off looking for other survivors, elsewhere on the planet.

"Search for our own kind," he called it. To me, that sounded like a direct quote from the Terrians, but I never challenged him on it.

oOo

"Hey Doc!" Alonzo called down from the shuttle. I had stepped outside briefly, after tending to the kids. It was a cloudy day, sometime mid-summer. The sky was overcast and it was cool. The air smelled like rain, but I didn't mind. The small patch of vegetables I'd cultivated could use some water and if it rained today, I wouldn't have to water the plants myself. Alonzo was, once again, bustling about the ship. I was just about to turn and go back in when he called me.

I watched him as he came rushing from the craft, jumping through the hatch and running to me. He grabbed my hand, his eyes sparkling with excited anticipation.

"Come Julia, quickly," he told me and pulled me after him, back inside the Dome, before I could protest. The twins were lying contentedly on a blanket in the main room, not paying attention to us, having just been fed and changed.

"Shh," Alonzo whispered, stopping just inside the door.

"What?" I asked, involuntarily whispering back.

"Look," he pointed at the children. And while we watched, Diane turned around on her belly. With little grunts of effort, she pulled up her stubby legs and pushed herself to her hands and knees. Tottering, she crawled a few paces, crooning with glee at her own achievements. My mouth fell open in awed admiration as I watched my daughter during her first independent exploration of the world.

"How did you know she was going to do that?" I demanded from Alonzo, still whispering so as not to disturb Diane's concentration.

"Eh, she told me," he said, grinning sheepishly.

"Yeah, right," I chuckled and jabbed him lightly in the ribs with my elbow, "go pull the other leg!"

"No, I'm serious," he replied. His dark eyes sparkled with laughter, but his tone told me he wasn't joking. "Not in so many words but -- it's like I understand the Terrians, in emotions. She's a stubborn one, that daughter of ours. She was very determined to get it right this time."

"Lonzo, that's amazing!" I gasped when I realized he was telling the truth. "How long have you been able to do that?"

"Since before they were born," he admitted, casting me a quick glance to see if I was angry. "That's how I knew when you were in labor. The Terrians told me where to find you, but the twins called me. Back then I still thought they were one voice. Now, the kids' emotions are clearer, more defined to me than the Terrians'."

"Because they're human?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, "and because they're a part of me. We're connected somehow. They pick up on your feelings too. And they're a little afraid for you."

"Afraid? Why?" I asked, a little hurt.

"Because they know you may not understand, when they --" Before he could finish, a loud wail interrupted our whispered conversation. Diane had lost her balance and was now lying flat on her face, screaming in frustrated protest. We both rushed forward to pick her up, laughing and shushing her at the same time. And Alonzo never finished his sentence until it was too late.

oOo

By late summer we had settled in a leisurely, albeit somewhat old-fashioned, routine. Alonzo went out almost daily, collecting firewood for the coming winter, digging up roots, tubers and whatever other edibles he could find. We only ate vegetative foods; ever since our unfortunate experience with the Grendler, all those years ago, we were both reluctant to eat any meat at all.

Sometimes the twins and I went with him, but mostly I stayed near the Dome, taking care of the children, tending to my little vegetable garden and doing a lot of domestic chores. You'd be amazed at how much work two little babies generate between them.

Sometimes, thinking about it, I chuckled at my own expense. If you had told me, back when I was in med-school, that someday I'd be content living a domestic life on a distant planet, taking care of my kids while my lover made sure we were warm and fed in the

winter, I'd have laughed at you in derision. In those days, I was very ambitious. I believed in the Council and the goals they'd set for me. I wanted to become a good doctor, the *best*, find cures for incurable diseases and make a name for myself.

Yet, in the evenings, after we ate and I watched Alonzo play peek-a-boo with Diane and Delian, I couldn't remember why those things had been so important to me. I was happy now, as happy as could be. And if I sometimes worried about Alonzo's dreams or how vulnerable we were, with no other humans around -- and maybe not even alive anywhere on this planet -- I quickly pushed those thoughts away. *This* was my family, my life. And though it had come quite unplanned, it was no less welcome.

The day that my happiness shattered, started like any other day -- although Alonzo had woken me up several times during the night, clearly in the grip of another Terrian nightmare. In the morning he apologized for disturbing me. The aftermath of the dream left him morose though, and he withdrew outside right after breakfast. I decided it was best to leave him to his own thoughts for a while.

The twins were a little grumpy too. I believed that maybe they reacted to Alonzo's surliness, picking up on his mood. Or perhaps they were teething. I made a mental note to check them in the evening. I didn't use my glove very often these days, relying more on instinct and experience.

After I cleared away our breakfast I took the kids outside. The sun shone brightly and the day promised to become a hot one, quite exceptional so high up in the mountains. I decided to take the twins berry picking. Breathing the clean mountain air, enjoying the sunshine and picking fruits would entertain them, and hopefully distract them from whatever misery caused their grouchiness.

On the hill behind the Dome grew a large patch of bushes that were now teeming with berries. They resembled blackberries the most and I'd found the fruit edible. The brush didn't carry the nasty thorns that bramblebushes on Earth used to do, and it made picking the berries a safe endeavor, even for small toddlers.

In no time both Diane and Delian were cheerfully crawling through the brush, eating what they picked, their little mouths covered in red juices. Their unintelligible chatter kept me informed of their whereabouts and I concentrated on seriously scavenging the brush for the fruits that, once dried, would be a welcome addition to our winter diet.

Suddenly I realized the twins had been awfully quiet for several minutes and I whirled around, concerned what they were up to. What I saw froze me in mid-movement, anchoring me to the ground motionless, while cold fear settled in my stomach.

Two Terrians were with them. One was clearly standing guard, his staff in hand. The other crouched near the babies. They sat back on their napped buttocks, staring at him in rapt wonder as he tilted his head and twittered softly at them. To me, they never looked tinier or more vulnerable as they did now, in the presence of the tall, leathery-skinned earth creatures.

Delian's blond curls and Diane's darker locks bobbed as they copied the Terrian's movement, cocking their heads and replying in a contented gurgle. I wanted to shout at the twins to get away, to come back to me *right now*, but my mouth had gone dry as dust, my tongue was a strip of leather lying useless on my slack jaw.

Blood pounded in my ears while my mind screamed at me to grab the kids and run inside; yet my muscles refused to obey and I remained rooted where I stood, half-turned, berries forgotten in my hand. I couldn't think straight, my enhanced chromosomes and genetic skewing were suddenly useless. All I felt was one overwhelming, primitive emotion -- the fear of a mother whose offspring was in danger.

Finally, after what seemed forever but can't have been more than mere seconds, I found my voice back and screamed at the Terrians to leave us alone. The Terrian with the staff pushed it forward slightly and suddenly it was crackling with energy. I froze again. I'd seen what the Terrian blasts could do and didn't want to endanger the twins any further. Before I could think of what to do now, the earth churned and the Terrians sank back. And they took the twins with them.

"Noooo!" I shrieked. The world blurred as I fell to my knees, digging my nails into the hard ground. Through the roar of blood in my ears I heard a loud, piercing wail, an inhuman sound that made my blood go cold. It wasn't until Alonzo came running from the Dome, naked fear on his face, that I realized it was me that uttered that scream.

He dropped to his knees in front of me, grabbing me by the shoulders and I sagged against him. "Julia, what is it?" he nearly shouted. "Where're the twins?"

I couldn't get a word out, heavy sobs racking my body and I pointed to the small puddle of loose sand where our children sat only moments ago.

"They -- they took them," I moaned. I hugged myself, swaying back and forth as tears streamed down my face. "Alonzo, they took our babies!"

oOo

For a few minutes he stared at the small mound of overturned earth while I sobbed disconsolately. I was beginning to think he hadn't understood when he turned to me and

wrapped his arms tightly around me, smoothing my hair and rocking me gently.

"I know," he whispered in my ear. "It's okay. They'll be fine."

I pulled back and looked at him incredulously. "Alonzo, what are you talking about, 'they'll be fine'?" I cried. "These are human *babies*. They're not even a year old yet. I was still nursing them, for God's sake." I nearly shouted the last words, paying no attention to the hysterical tone that had edged into my voice.

"They'll be fine," he repeated. "The earth will take care of them."

I glared at him, absently noting the way he sat there, remarkably resigned for a father whose children had just been kidnapped by aliens. And while I looked at him, horrified understanding dawned slowly, dropping over me like a cold, wet blanket, until I felt I was going to suffocate.

"You knew," I gasped, unable to breathe. "You knew, didn't you? Didn't you?!" I realized I was shouting again but I didn't care. Fear, anger, disbelief, betrayed hurt, all kinds of confusing emotions tumbled through my mind and I couldn't seem to settle on any single one.

Alonzo tried to pull me back into his embrace but I recoiled from his touch, pushing him away hard enough that he lost his balance. "You knew, and you didn't stop them. You didn't even tell me."

"I'm sorry," he replied, his voice low. "I guess I hoped I'd misunderstood. And I didn't know it'd be so soon..."

I stared him, wide-eyed. My heart thudded in my chest so hard I thought it'd jump right out. My mind echoed with these words, telling me over and over again. 'They took your babies. And he let them.'

Finally, consciously, I drew back on the only mental defense I had left, the familiar, professional detachment that served me so well before. Its soothing balm enwrapped me like an old, well-worn cloak while I took the tangle of emotions and locked them away in that dark place deep in my mind. They'd been hidden there safely during the first twenty odd years of my life, until we came here and Alonzo released them. Now, they'd be secure there again.

I took a deep, calming breath and pushed myself to my feet, appraising Alonzo coolly. He must've realized what I was doing, cause a sudden fear showed in his eyes.

"Julia, don't go there," he pleaded. "Please don't do that to yourself. We can work this out."

"There's nothing left to work out," I replied coldly. Even to my own ears my voice sounded as if it came from someone else. And I turned to walk back to the Dome.

oOo

In the days that followed I immersed myself in my work, that I'd neglected for so long. My waking hours were occupied with running and rerunning tests, while I recorded my findings meticulously. Part of me asked why I bothered. With the kids gone there was nobody left that would ever review them. I clamped down on that part in me whenever it spoke up. I told myself this was the way I'd always done it, and the way I would until my dying day.

During the day, while I was working, I was quite successful at keeping the horror at bay. Yet at night, alone in the dark, my mental barriers turned out not to be as strong as they once were. I cried till I fell asleep, salty tears wetting my pillow. And demons of the past haunted my dreams. Mostly I dreamed about the first few weeks on the planet, reliving memories that I thought I had safely buried. I remembered the internal battle I fought, my growing sense of loyalty to the group and love for Alonzo, against my ingrained allegiance to the Council. That time it had been Alonzo that rescued me from insanity. This time it was he who had betrayed me and I didn't think I'd ever feel safe again.

As I did most of those nights, I was again dreaming of Reilly. He was telling me to operate on Uly. Explaining to me that the boy was the link between humanity and the Terrians, and how he was the key to controlling the planet. I knew I was caught up in another nightmare but I was powerless to stop dreaming and wake up.

I found myself being pulled by an invisible force towards a table. Beneath a white sheet lay a shapeless form, Uly I presumed. I was stunned to find a scalpel poised in my hands.

"Well?" Reilly's voice echoed in my brain. "Can I count on you, Citizen Heller?" I nodded wordlessly, a lump stuck in my throat and I didn't trust my voice. An detached hand threw back the sheet. And instead of young Uly, on the table before me I saw two delicate bodies. The twins, Delian and Diane.

I screamed when I recognized them and shot up from my bed. I was covered in cold sweat and I gulped to get my breath back. In my ears the sound of my own scream still reverberated. Shakily I got up, realizing I would not be able to sleep another minute that night.

I walked to the Dome's main room on legs that seemed made of rubber, my bare feet pattering on the cold surface. Occasional shivers were running down my spine while the last vestiges of the dream faded. I turned on all the lights I could find, setting the Dome ablaze in the darkness. I was chasing away the shadows of the black night and the horrors it had brought. Finally, I sat down at the table and poured myself a glass of water. The table's surface was cluttered with slides and half-finished experiments and I had to push them aside to make room for the glass.

With a soft knock, the outside doors were pushed open and Alonzo walked in, hesitating near the opening. I glanced at him briefly before I turned back to stare at the liquid in my glass.

"Julia? Are you okay?" he asked quietly. "I heard you scream."

I looked up at that, a little surprised. If he'd heard my scream all the way in the shuttle, where he stayed these days... He shrugged as he caught my eye.

"Couldn't sleep," he explained. "I was outside."

I nodded curtly, acknowledging him. "I had a nightmare."

"Pretty bad one, huh?" he asked, his voice gentle. The tenderness brought tears to my eyes and my heart cringed when I realized how much I missed him. I'd never known how much my life was intertwined with his, how we depended upon one another for strength, until he ripped us apart. Or until I did, I wasn't sure anymore.

"Yes," I admitted, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him that I'd dreamt about operating on the twins. A long silence followed, with Alonzo standing awkwardly near the door, fidgeting with his hands and finally putting them in his pockets.

"I better go now, if everything is okay," he said at last, breaking the silence.

"No, don't go," I replied, looking up. I hadn't known I was going to say that until the words actually left my mouth. "Please." I saw a cautious smile begin to play around his lips, a hopeful spark in his eyes. I motioned to the other chair, for him to sit down.

"Lonzo, talk to me," I said. "Why did they take them?"

He remained quiet for several minutes, gathering his thoughts. "Ours are the first children to be born here in more than twenty years," he began. "Since the Terrians shut

down the earth. And they're special."

"Because they're twins," I said. "Conceived off-planet."

"Yes," he confirmed, his eyes widening slightly. As always, my quick understanding of things surprised him a little. "And -- because they're mine." He glanced at me uncertainly, not sure how I would take this tidbit of information.

"Your connection to the Terrians," I realized. And he smiled a relieved grin, grateful that I understood.

"The Terrians want to give humanity, those that survived the atrocities, a second chance. They say the planet needs us as much as we need the planet. But they must have another link."

"And Diane and Delian are that link," I filled in. I suddenly wondered if my nightmare had been just that, a horror movie conjured up by my own brain. Or had somebody tried to tell me something?

"Alonzo, do you talk to them?" I asked him softly. My voice was very low and I wasn't sure what I wanted him to answer.

"Sometimes," he admitted. "Not very often though. Their minds are still so young, untrained. They can only focus on one thing at the time. And right now they're filled with thoughts of you, they're worried about you. Because--"

"Because I don't understand," I interrupted him. Memories of the unfinished conversation we had on the day Diane learned to crawl flooded back. I swallowed down on something hard that suddenly caught in my throat. Why hadn't I asked him what he was about to say afterwards?

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," the words suddenly tumbled from his lips in his rush to get them out. "I wanted to, really, I did. I tried so many times. But I was afraid of your reaction, that you wouldn't let them go." His voice faltered, fading.

"You got that right," I said wryly. But I wasn't angry. I sensed my anger had passed, had lived out its usefulness. That anger had kept me from going out of my mind, those first days after the twins were gone.

"I hoped I misunderstood, or maybe that I could change it," Alonzo continued, a catch in his voice now. "I didn't think they'd just *take* them. And do it so soon." He sighed, a deep, quivering sigh.

I stared at him, gazing deep into his dark eyes where tears stood. Eyes that were so open, pleading with me. And I realized he was telling the truth.

"Julia," he said urgently, taking my hand that lay limply on the table between us. "They are okay. You gotta believe that."

"I don't have much choice, do I?" I said huskily. Yet I smiled as I said it. And I squeezed his hand gently. Whether it was in search for, or in giving support, I didn't know. All I knew at that moment was that I loved this man. And that I needed him as much as he seemed to need me, if we wanted to have half a chance of making it here, among these strange creatures that called themselves Terrians.

"Julia, will you ever forgive me?" His soft voice broke through my thoughts and I looked up to face him. He seemed so lost, so nakedly anxious for my answer, trust and fear both written on his face. I stood up and hugged him.

"Yes," I whispered. "I couldn't *not* forgive you."

"You know, sometimes I really hate them," he cried, burying his face between my breasts, his hands grabbing my waist almost painfully. For the first time I realized I'd been so caught up in my own hurt I never had eyes for his. He may have known about the Terrians' intentions for our children, but he missed the twins as much as I did.

"Shh, I know," I whispered. And as I held him close he sobbed out his pain against my chest, while my own tears fell on his dark hair.

oOo

For quite a while we stood like that, clinging to each other like a drowning man would hang on to driftwood.

"Julia, it's time we leave here," Alonzo muttered at last, his voice muffled by my shirt as he still hugged me close.

"What?" I exclaimed while I pulled away from him. "Alonzo, we can't! What about the twins?" I took a step back, startled. He couldn't be serious about leaving without the children, could he?

He grabbed my arms, pulling me close again, and held my hands in his, while he looked me straight in the eye. "Doc, relax. They'll bring us the kids back when they're ready. It won't matter where we are. We should go find the others."

"What others?" I asked, still not sure I wanted us to leave the Dome, the place where Delian and Diane were taken, and embark on another dangerous journey.

"The other survivors," he explained. "They are out there somewhere. We must find them. The twins will be returned to us when we do. Together, we must start a new settlement."

Alonzo continued to tell me what the Terrians had told him, in bits and pieces in his dreams, over these last weeks. He suspected they'd taken the twins at such a young age because there wasn't much time left. Without a link, mankind was doomed, as no human procreation was possible. The planet wouldn't allow it if there was not connection. Uly had been the link for a long time, but when the earth began to die, he became -- tainted, was the word Alonzo used. The Terrians needed to re-establish the link *now* before the remaining women were too old to bear children.

"But Alonzo, how can we find them?" I wondered. "Do you have an idea? This planet is so large, where do we start?"

"I think I know where to begin," he said. His eyes suddenly gleamed and he grinned mischievously. "Remember the other beach, the one we once thought was New Pacifica?"

"Yes, I remember. The spider tunnels," I breathed, with a grin of my own when I remembered how a spider bite had caused Alonzo to be suddenly infatuated with Devon. At the time I hadn't been amused, but afterwards it made great teasing material. My smile disappeared quickly though, when I remembered it had been John Danziger that punched some sense into him again. Alonzo obviously followed my line of thought and his grin faded too.

"That's where they are?" I asked, shaking off the memories and returning to the subject at hand.

"Yes, I think so," he said. "We can't use the tunnel though. The Terrians lost it when they shut off access to the earth. They haven't been able to get the current back up and running. We have to use the shuttle."

oOo

Now our mind was made up, we acted with a determined swiftness. We had to hurry as another winter was approaching fast. Once the first of the snows came, we'd again be stuck here for months. The next days we prepared for our journey, packing most of our supplies and loading it in the shuttle. Alonzo made a quick test run and declared the ship

in tiptop condition. We secured the Dome, locking the doors against scavenging Grendlers, so it'd be a safe place whenever someone had need for it. Finally, early on the third day, we were ready.

Alonzo sat in front of the control panel, looking very comfortable in the pilot's seat. As I looked at him, tears suddenly welled in my eyes. I remembered how much he had given up to be here, to come back with me. And I wondered if we, the twins and I, would ever be enough to make up for it. I quickly blinked the tears away, before he would notice them. In the back of my mind a tiny voice wondered about the sudden tears. I wasn't normally given to emotional displays like this. Yet for now I silenced the voice, deciding the stress of the previous week was finally catching up with me.

I looked at the Dome, its rounded roof reflecting the rays of the early morning sun. This was the second time we'd leave its secure walls behind to begin an uncertain journey. I had put fresh flowers on True's grave that morning and they made a bright patch of color against the grassy clearing. I swallowed back the tears that threatened again when I cast a last glance at the brambles where the twins disappeared. And suddenly I remembered something.

"Lonzo, wait," I called over my shoulder as I jumped out of the shuttle and ran back to the Dome.

"What? What is it?" he asked, a puzzled frown on his face as he climbed from his seat.

"Forgot something," I said and fumbled with the lock on the Dome's doors. Inside I rummaged around in the gloom, not wanting to take the time to search for a light. Once I found what I was looking for, I walked back out, locking the doors securely.

"What was suddenly so important?" Alonzo queried when I climbed back in the shuttle. I smiled and showed him the object, earning me a wide, dimpled grin as I did so. It was the Terrian doll that Uly had made, the one the twins loved to play with so much. Chuckling to himself, Alonzo turned back to the console.

Without a further glance, I closed the hatch behind me, motioning to him I was ready.

Epilogue

Julia Heller sat at her workbench in the dank chamber deep below the surface which served as her lab these days. She was bent over a battered-looking microscope, peering through the glass at a slide underneath. Her assistant, Devonah Jones (named after the visionary that first came to G889, she always proudly explained), a young woman in her mid-twenties, was chattering away happily about the matrimonial ceremony she and her

boyfriend, Morris Martin, the youngest son of Bess and Morgan, were planning.

As Devonah was telling her that she planned on being the first woman in twenty years to bear a child again, Julia smiled briefly at her assistant's eagerness. Yet the smile never reached her eyes. Those blue eyes betrayed a deep, infinite sadness that had led to much speculation among the 33 surviving colonists, the only humans left alive on G889.

She and Alonzo found them --refugees from the Council's atrocities-- where the pilot had expected them: on the eastern coastline. Smoke drifting through cracks in the rocks had betrayed the small settlement. The refugees lived underground, driven by fear for the Council's scouts, and the scorching summer weather. At first they'd been suspicious of the new arrivals, thinking it was another Council trick. Until Baines, still a vigorous man at seventy years of age, had confirmed their identity.

And now they were living among the last of the humans on the planet. The settlement had been in place for nearly twenty years and in all that time no children had been born. Only five of the women were still of the childbearing age and the fear that mankind would become extinct was very real. Still, Alonzo remained hopeful, remembering the Terrians' promise. Julia wished she had his faith in the aliens.

As she adjusted the settings on the microscope to a higher magnification, Alonzo stepped into the makeshift laboratory. "Doc, you better come with me," he said without preamble. Julia glanced up from the 'scope, before turning her attention back to her work.

"Lonzo, I can't walk away now. I'm right in the middle of something."

"Julia --" He halted and something in the tone of his voice made her look up again. Their eyes met; his were dark with an indefinable emotion. Her heart skipped a beat as she noticed the barely suppressed excitement playing on his features.

"Is it... the twins?" she whispered. And he nodded vigorously, clearly not trusting himself to speak. He grabbed her hand, squeezed it gently, and then pulled her after him, out of the room. In her haste, she nearly tripped over the stool she'd been sitting on and barely managed to tell Devonah that she'd be back soon.

oOo

Alonzo led her outside, away from the dwellings and through the woods. After a short walk they came to a small clearing. She scrutinized her surroundings, but didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Just a clearing in the woods, surrounded by tall trees. Sunlight filtered through the foliage, sprinkling bright patches among the darker

shadows.

"Where are they?" Julia asked, concern beginning to crease her brow.

"We have to wait," Alonzo replied and sat down, pulling her with him. They sat in silence, both of them occupied with their own thoughts and neither really sure what, if anything, to say to the other. Julia fidgeted, not being able to sit still for long. It betrayed her nervousness, she was usually so calm and collected.

Finally, after what felt like endless hours of nervous waiting, without warning two Terrians swam up. Startled, the humans got to their feet. Julia peered past Alonzo and when she detected two small, squirming, gurgling forms in the arms of one of the aliens, she made to hurry forward. Alonzo stopped her.

"Not yet," he said, lowering his head, beginning his communication with the aliens.

"They say they are reluctant to return the twins to us," he translated, holding up his hand to forestall an immediate response from her. "They are unsure that this time it will be different."

"Lonzo, tell them it will be different!" she urged him, a panicked edge creeping into her voice. "Tell them the Council is gone, that we will not hurt the earth again." He nodded and lowered his head again.

After a few more moments of silent communication the two Terrians disappeared without further ado, leaving two very dirty, mud-caked toddlers behind. The two children looked about them a little dazed, and when they discovered their parents their filthy faces broke into happy grins. Julia ran forward and scooped them up in her arms, hugging them tightly. The babies were so dirty that it would've been hard to tell which was Delian and which was Diane, if not for the fact that they were as naked as on the day they were born.

Over their heads, her eyes brimming with tears, Julia caught Alonzo's eye. He looked as exalted as on the day she gave birth to the twins, his dark eyes teeming with affection. He smiled at her, pouring all his love for his family into that smile and put his arms around her and the children.

"Now," he said, "now we can really begin anew. The earth has given mankind a second chance at a new life here on the planet."

"Will the earth allow the women to bear children now?" Julia queried. Delian twisted in her arms, chittering, and she sank to her knees, afraid she might drop him. Alonzo didn't

answer her question for several moments, just stared incredulously at his son. Then he chuckled.

"Oh," he said, almost offhandedly, "she already has." And he smiled at her, a knowing smile, that confirmed what she'd suspected for a while but had been afraid to test. She glanced from his beaming face to the two children in her arms and back at him.

"Did they tell you that I'm --" She didn't finish because he nodded, his face now breaking into a wide grin showing off his dimples. For a moment she just stared at him, then threw her head back. A peal of happy laughter suddenly ringing across the clearing disturbed the birds in the trees and cawing in protest they flew up. Alonzo's deeper voice joined Julia's in her merriment; the sound intermingled with chirps and gurgles from the twins as the Solace/Heller family rejoiced in their reunion. And in their future full of promise.

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