

TO
SLEEP
IN A
SEA OF
STARS

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ALSO BY
CHRISTOPHER PAOLINI

THE INHERITANCE CYCLE

Eragon

Eldest

Brisingsr

Inheritance

The Fork, the Witch, and the Worm

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TO
SLEEP
IN A
SEA OF
STARS

C H R I S T O P H E R
P A O L I N I

A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK



NEW YORK

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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

TO SLEEP IN A SEA OF STARS

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AS ALWAYS, THIS IS FOR MY FAMILY.

*And also for the scientists, engineers, and dreamers working to
build our future among the stars.*

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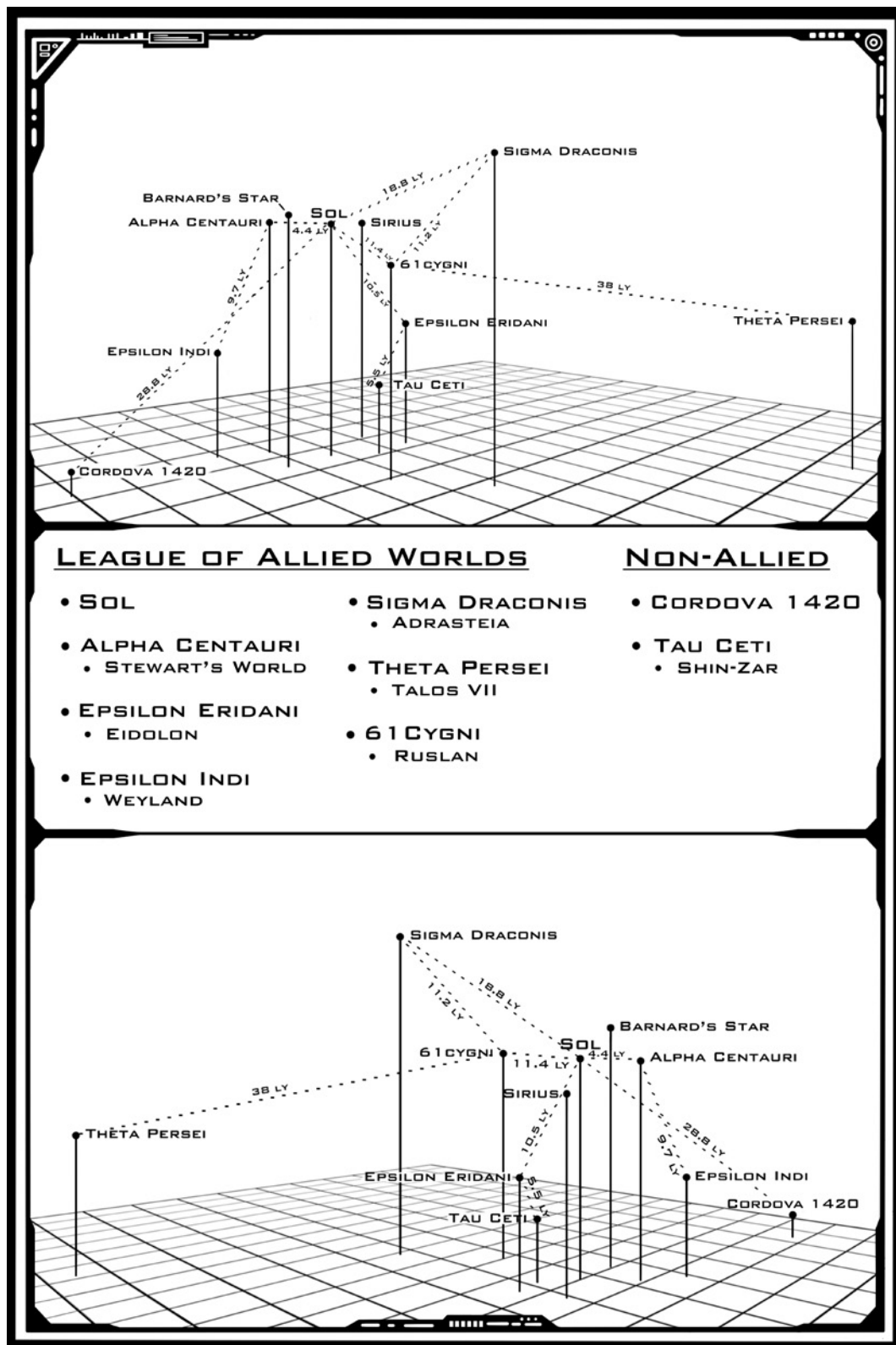
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PART ONE

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EXOGENESIS

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*O goddess-born of great Anchises' line,
The gates of hell are open night and day;
Smooth the descent, and easy is the way:
But to return, and view the cheerful skies,
In this the task and mighty labor lies.*

—*AENEID* 6.126-129
JOHN DRYDEN TRANSLATION

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CHAPTER I

* * * * *

DREAMS

1.

The orange gas giant, Zeus, hung low above the horizon, huge and heavy and glowing with a ruddy half-light. Around it glittered a field of stars, bright against the black of space, while beneath the giant's lidless glare stretched a grey wasteland streaked with stone.

A small huddle of buildings stood in the otherwise desolate expanse. Domes and tunnels and windowed enclosures, a lone place of warmth and life amid the alien environment.

Inside the compound's cramped lab, Kira struggled to extract the gene sequencer from its alcove in the wall. The machine wasn't that large, but it was heavy, and she couldn't get a good grip on it.

"Dammit," she muttered, and readjusted her stance.

Most of their equipment would stay on Adrasteia, the Earth-sized moon they had spent the past four months surveying. Most of their equipment, but not all. The gene sequencer was part of a xenobiologist's basic kit, and where she went, it went. Besides, the colonists who would soon be arriving on the *Shakti-Uma-Sati* would have newer, better models, not the budget, travel-sized one the company had stuck her with.

Kira pulled again. Her fingers slipped, and she sucked in her breath as one of the metal edges sliced her palm. She let go and, upon examining her hand, saw a thin line of blood oozing through the skin.

Her lips curled in a snarl, and she hit the gene sequencer, hard. That didn't help. Keeping her injured hand knotted in a fist, she paced the lab, breathing heavily while she waited for the pain to subside.

Most days the machine's resistance wouldn't bother her. Most days. But today, dread and sadness outran reason. They would be leaving in the morning,

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taking off to rejoin their transport, the *Fidanza*, which was already in orbit around Adra. A few days more, and she and everyone else in the ten-person survey team would get into cryo, and when they woke up at 61 Cygni, twenty-six days later, they would each go their separate ways, and that would be the last she would see of Alan for . . . for how long, she didn't know. Months, at least. If they were unlucky, over a year.

Kira closed her eyes, let her head fall back. She sighed, and the sigh turned into a groan. It didn't matter how many times she and Alan had done this dance; it wasn't getting any easier. The opposite in fact, and she hated it, really hated it.

They'd met the previous year on a large asteroid the Lapsang Trading Corp. was planning to mine. Alan had been there to conduct a geological survey. Four days—that was how long they'd spent together on the asteroid. It had been Alan's laugh and his mess of coppery hair that caught her attention, but it was his careful diligence that impressed Kira. He was good at what he did, and he didn't lose his calm in an emergency.

Kira had been alone for so long at that point, she'd been convinced she would never find someone. And yet seemingly by a miracle, Alan had entered her life, and just like that, there had been someone to care for. Someone who cared for her.

They'd continued to talk, sending long holo messages across the stars, and through a combination of luck and bureaucratic maneuvering, they'd managed to get posted together several more times.

It wasn't enough. For either of them.

Two weeks ago, they'd applied to corporate for permission to be assigned to the same missions as a couple, but there was no guarantee their request would be approved. The Lapsang Corp. was expanding in too many areas, with too many projects. Personnel were spread thin.

If their request was denied . . . the only way they'd be able to live together long term would be to change jobs, find ones that didn't require so much travel. Kira was willing—she'd even checked listings on the net the previous week—but she didn't feel as if she could ask Alan to give up his career with the company for her. Not yet.

In the meantime, all they could do was wait for the verdict from corporate. With how long it took for messages to get back to Alpha Centauri and the slowness of the HR Department, the soonest they could expect an answer was the end of next month. And by then, both she and Alan would have been shipped off in different directions.

It was frustrating. Kira's one consolation was Alan himself; he made it all worthwhile. She just wanted to *be* with him, without having to worry about the other nonsense.

She remembered the first time he'd wrapped his arms around her and how wonderful it felt, how warm and safe. And she thought of the letter he'd written her after their first meeting, of all the vulnerable, heartfelt things he'd said. No one had ever made such an effort with her before. . . . He'd always had time for her. Always shown her kindness in ways large and small, like the custom case he'd made for her chiplab before her trip up to the Arctic.

The memories would have made Kira smile. But her hand still hurt, and she couldn't forget what the morning would bring.

"Come on, you bastard," she said, and strode over to the gene sequencer and yanked on it with all her strength.

With a screech of protest, it moved.

2.

That night, the team gathered in the mess hall to celebrate the end of the mission. Kira was in no mood for festivities, but tradition was tradition. Whether or not it went well, finishing an expedition was an occasion worth marking.

She'd put on a dress—green, with gold trim—and spent an hour fixing her hair into a pile of curls high on her head. It wasn't much, but she knew Alan would appreciate the effort. He always did.

She was right. The moment he saw her in the corridor outside her cabin, his face lit up, and he swept her into his arms. She buried her forehead into the front of his shirt and said, "You know, we don't *have* to go."

"I know," he said, "but we should put in an appearance." And he kissed her on the forehead.

She forced a smile. "Fine, you win."

"That's my girl." He smiled back and tucked a stray curl behind her left ear.

Kira did the same with one of his locks. It never ceased to amaze her how bright his hair was against his pale skin. Unlike the rest of them, Alan never seemed to tan, no matter how long he spent outside or under a spaceship's full-spectrum lights.

"Alright," she said in a low voice. "Let's do this."

The mess hall was full when they arrived. The other eight members of the

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survey team were crammed in around the narrow tables, some of Yugo's beloved scamrock was blasting over the speakers, Marie-Élise was handing out cups filled with punch from the large plastic bowl on the counter, and Jenan was dancing as if he'd had a liter of rotgut. Maybe he had.

Kira tightened her arm around Alan's waist and did her best to put on a cheery expression. Now wasn't the time to dwell on depressing thoughts.

It wasn't . . . but she couldn't help it.

Seppo headed straight for them. The botanist had pulled back his hair into a topknot for the night's event, which only accentuated the angles of his thin-boned face. "Four hours," he said, coming close. The drink slopped out of his cup as he gestured. "Four hours! That's how long it took me to dig my crawler free."

"Sorry, Seppo," said Alan, sounding amused. "I told you, we couldn't get to you before then."

"Bah. I had *sand* in my skinsuit. Do you know how uncomfortable that was? I'm rubbed raw in half a dozen places. Look!" He pulled up the fringe of his ratty shirt to show a red line of skin across his belly where the lower seam of his skinsuit had chafed.

Kira said, "Tell you what, I'll buy you a drink on Vyyborg to make up for it. How about that?"

Seppo lifted a hand and pointed in her general direction. "That . . . would be acceptable compensation. But no more sand!"

"No more sand," she agreed.

"And you," said Seppo, swinging his finger toward Alan. "You . . . know."

As the botanist tottered off, Kira looked up at Alan. "What was that about?"

Alan chuckled. "No idea. But it's sure going to be strange not having him around."

"Yeah."

After a round of drinks and conversation, Kira retreated to the back of the room and leaned against a corner. As much as she didn't want to lose Alan—again—she also didn't want to say farewell to the rest of the team. The four months on Adra had forged them into a family. An odd, misshapen family, but one she cared for all the same. Leaving them would hurt, and the closer that moment came, the more Kira realized just how much it was going to hurt.

She took another long drink of the orange-flavored punch. She'd been through this before—Adra wasn't the first prospective colony the company had posted her to—and after seven years spent jetting around from one blasted

rock to another and spending nearly half her time in cryo, Kira had begun to feel a serious need for . . . friends. Family. Companionship.

And now she was about to leave all that behind. *Again*.

Alan felt the same. She could see it in his eyes as he moved around the room, chatting with members of the team. She thought perhaps some of the others were also sad, but they papered over it with drink and dance and laughs that were too shrill to be entirely genuine.

She made a face and downed the rest of the punch. Time for a refill.

The scramrock was pounding louder than before. Something by Todash and the Boys, and their lead singer was howling, “—to fleeee. And there’s nothing at the door. Hey, there’s nothing at the door. Babe, what’s that knocking at the door?” and her voice was climbing to a wavering, saw-blade crescendo that sounded as if her vocal cords were about to snap.

Kira pushed herself away from the wall and was about to start for the punch bowl when she saw Mendoza, the expedition boss, clearing a path toward her. Easy for him; he was built like a barrel. She’d often wondered if he’d grown up on a high-g colony like Shin-Zar, but Mendoza denied it when she asked, claimed he was from a hab-ring somewhere around Alpha Centauri. She wasn’t entirely sure she believed him.

“Kira, need to talk with you,” he said, coming near.

“What?”

“We have a problem.”

She snorted. “There’s *always* a problem.”

Mendoza shrugged and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief he pulled from the back pocket of his pants. His forehead reflected bright spots from the strings of colored lights draped across the ceiling, and there were blotches under his arms. “Can’t say you’re wrong, but this needs fixing. One of the drones down south went dead. Looks like a storm took it out.”

“So? Send another one.”

“They’re too far away, and we don’t have time to print a replacement. Last thing the drone detected was some organic material along the coastline. Needs to be checked before we leave.”

“Oh come on. You really want me to head out *tomorrow*? I’ve already cataloged every microbe on Adra.” A trip like that would cost her the morning with Alan, and Kira was damned if she was going to give up any of their remaining time together.

Mendoza gave her a steady, *are you bullshitting me* look from under his

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brows. “Regs are regs, Kira. We can’t risk the colonists running into something nasty. Something like the Scourge. You don’t want that on your conscience. You really don’t.”

She went to take another drink and realized her cup was still empty. “Jesus. Send Ivanova. The drones are hers, and she can run a chip-lab as well as I can. There’s—”

“You’re going,” said Mendoza, steel in his voice. “Oh six hundred, and I don’t want to hear any more about it.” Then his expression softened somewhat. “I’m sorry, but you’re our xenobiologist, and regs—”

“And regs are regs,” said Kira. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll do it. But I’m telling you, it’s not worth it.”

Mendoza patted her on the shoulder. “Good. I hope it isn’t.”

As he left, a text popped up in the corner of Kira’s vision: *<Hey, babe, everything okay?—Alan>*

Subvocalizing her answer, she wrote: *<Yeah, all good. Just some extra work. Tell you about it later.—Kira>*

From across the room, he gave her a goofy thumbs-up, and her lips quirked despite herself. Then she fixed her gaze on the punch bowl and made a beeline for it. She really needed another drink.

Marie-Élise intercepted her at the bowl, moving with the studied grace of an ex-dancer. As always, her mouth was pulled off-center, as if she were about to break into a crooked smile . . . or deliver a scathing witticism (and Kira had heard more than a few from her). She was tall to begin with, and with the shiny black heels she’d printed for the party, she was a whole head taller than Kira.

“I’m going to miss you, *chérie*,” said Marie-Élise. She bent down and gave Kira a kiss on each cheek.

“Same here,” said Kira, feeling herself getting misty. Along with Alan, Marie-Élise had become her closest friend on the team. They’d spent long days together in the field—Kira studying the microbes of *Adrasteia* while Marie-Élise studied the lakes and rivers and the deposits of water hidden deep underground.

“Ah, cheer up now. You will message me, yes? I want to hear everything about you and Alan. And I will message you. Okay?”

“Yes. I promise.”

For the rest of the evening, Kira worked to forget the future. She danced with Marie-Élise. She swapped jokes with Jenan and barbs with Fizel. For the thousandth time, she complimented Yugo on his cooking. She arm-wrestled

Mendoza—and lost—and sang a horribly off-key duet with Ivanova. And whenever possible, she kept her arm around Alan. Even when they weren't talking or looking at each other, she could feel him, and his touch was a comfort.

Once she'd had enough punch, Kira allowed the others to talk her into pulling out her concertina. Then the canned music was put on hold, and everyone gathered round—Alan by her side, Marie-Élise by her knee—while Kira played a collection of spacer's reels. And they laughed and they danced and they drank, and for a time all was good.

3.

It was well past midnight and the party was still in full swing when Alan signaled to her with a motion of his chin. Kira understood, and without a word, they slipped out of the mess hall.

They leaned on each other as they made their way through the compound, careful to keep their cups of punch from spilling. Kira wasn't used to the bare look of the corridors. Normally overlays covered them, and stacks of samples, supplies, and spare equipment sat along the walls. But all that was gone now. Over the past week, she and the rest of the team had stripped the place in preparation for leaving. . . . If not for the music echoing behind them and the dim emergency lights along the floor, the base would have seemed abandoned.

Kira shivered and hugged Alan closer. Outside the wind was howling—an eerie rushing that made the roof and walls creak.

When they arrived at the door to the hydroponics bay, Alan didn't hit the release button but looked down at her, a smile dancing about his lips.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing. Just grateful to be with you." And he gave her a quick peck on the lips.

She went for a peck of her own—the punch had put her in a *mood*—but he laughed, pulled his head away, and hit the button.

The door slid open with a solid *thunk*.

Warm air wafted over them, along with the sound of dripping water and the gentle perfume of flowering plants. The hydroponics bay was Kira's favorite place in the compound. It reminded her of home, of the long rows of hothouse gardens she'd spent time in as a kid on the colony planet of Weyland. During

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long-haul expeditions like the one to Adra, it was standard procedure to grow some of their own food. Partly so they could test the viability of the native soil. Partly to reduce the amount of supplies they had to bring with them. But mostly to break the deadly monotony of the freeze-dried meal packs the company supplied them with.

Tomorrow, Seppo would rip out the plants and stuff them into the incinerator. None of them would survive until the colonists arrived, and it was bad practice to leave piles of biological material sitting around where they could—if the compound were breached—enter the environment in an uncontrolled manner. But for tonight, the hydroponics bay was still full of lettuce, radishes, parsley, tomatoes, clusters of zucchini stems, and the numerous other crops Seppo had been experimenting with on Adra.

But that wasn't all. Amid the dim racks, Kira saw seven pots laid out in an arc. In each pot stood a tall, thin stem topped with a delicate purple flower that drooped under its own weight. A cluster of pollen-tipped stamens extended from within each blossom—like bursts of fireworks—while white speckles adorned their velvety inner throats.

Midnight Constellations! Her favorite flower. Her father had raised them, and even with his horticultural talent, they had given him no end of trouble. They were temperamental, prone to scab and blight, and intolerant of the slightest imbalance of nutrients.

"Alan," she said, overcome.

"I remembered you mentioned how much you liked them," he said.

"But . . . how did you manage to—"

"To grow them?" He smiled at her, clearly pleased by her reaction. "Seppo helped. He had the seeds on file. We printed them out and then spent the last three weeks trying to keep the damned things from dying."

"They're wonderful," Kira said, not even trying to hide the emotion in her voice.

He hugged her close. "Good," he said, his voice half muffled in her hair. "I wanted to do something special for you before . . ."

Before. The word burned in her mind. "Thank you," she said. She separated from him just long enough to examine the flowers; their spicy, overly sweet scent struck her with the full, staggering force of childhood nostalgia. "Thank you," she repeated, coming back to Alan. "Thank you, thank you, thank you." She pressed her lips against his, and for a long while, they kissed.

"Here," said Alan when they broke for air. He pulled an insulated blanket

from under one of the racks of potato plants and spread it out within the arc of Midnight Constellations.

They settled there, cuddling and sipping their punch.

Outside, the baleful immensity of Zeus still hung overhead, visible through the clear pressure dome of the hydroponics bay. When they'd first arrived on Adra, the sight of the gas giant had filled Kira with apprehension. Every instinct in her screamed that Zeus was going to fall out of the sky and crush them. It seemed impossible anything so large could remain suspended overhead without support. In time, though, she'd grown accustomed to the sight, and now she admired the magnificence of the gas giant. It needed no overlays to catch the eye.

Before . . . Kira shivered and not from cold. Before they left. Before she and Alan had to part. They'd already used up their vacation days, and the company wouldn't give them more than a few days of downtime back at 61 Cygni.

"Hey, what's wrong?" said Alan, his voice soft with sympathy.

"You know."

". . . Yeah."

"This isn't getting any easier. I thought it would, but—" She sniffed and shook her head. Adra was their fourth time shipping together, and it was by far their longest shared posting. "I don't know when I'm going to see you next, and . . . I love you, Alan, and having to say good-bye every few months really sucks."

He stared at her, serious. His hazel eyes gleamed in the light from Zeus. "So then let's not."

Her heart lurched, and for a moment, time seemed to stop. She'd been dreading that exact response for months now. When her voice started working again, she said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, let's not do this bouncing around anymore. I can't take it either." His expression was so open, so earnest, she couldn't help but feel a flicker of hope. Surely he wasn't . . . ?

"What would—"

"Let's apply for berths on the *Shakti-Uma-Sati*."

She blinked. "As colonists."

He nodded, eager. "As colonists. Company employees are pretty much guaranteed slots, and Adra is going to need all the xenobiologists and geologists they can get."

Kira laughed and then caught his expression. "You're serious."

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“Serious as a pressure breach.”

“That’s just the drink talking.”

He put a hand on her cheek. “No, Kira. It’s not. I know this would be a huge change, for both of us, but I also know you’re sick of jetting around from one rock to another, and I don’t want to wait another six months to see you. I *really* don’t.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “I don’t want that either.”

He cocked his head. “So then let’s not.”

Kira half laughed and looked up at Zeus while she tried to process her emotions. What he was suggesting was everything she’d hoped for, everything she’d dreamed of. She just hadn’t expected it to happen so fast. But she loved Alan, and if this meant they could be together, then she wanted it. She wanted *him*.

The meteor-bright spark that was the *Fidanza* sailed past overhead, in low orbit between Adra and the gas giant.

She wiped her eyes. “I don’t think the odds are as good as you say. Colonies only really want pair-bonded couples. You know that.”

“Yes, I do,” said Alan.

A sense of unreality caused Kira to grip the floor as he knelt in front of her and, from his front pocket, produced a small wooden box. He opened it. Nestled inside was a ring of grey metal set with a bluish-purple gem, startling in its brilliancy.

The lump in Alan’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Kira Navárez . . . you asked me once what I saw among the stars. I told you I saw questions. Now, I see you. I see *us*.” He took a breath. “Kira, will you do me the honor of joining your life with mine? Will you be my wife, as I will be your husband? Will—”

“Yes,” she said, all worries lost in the flush of warmth that suffused her. She put her hands around the back of his neck and kissed him, tenderly at first and then with increasing passion. “Yes, Alan J. Barnes. Yes, I’ll marry you. Yes. A thousand times yes.”

She watched as he took her hand and slid the ring onto her finger. The band was cold and heavy, but the heaviness was a comforting one.

“The ring is iron,” he said softly. “I had Jenan smelt it from ore I brought him. Iron because it represents the bones of Adrasteia. The stone is tesserite. Wasn’t easy to find, but I know how much you like it.”

Kira nodded without meaning to. Tesserite was unique to Adrasteia; it was similar to benitoite, with a greater tendency toward purple. It was by far

her favorite rock on the planet. But it was exceedingly rare; Alan must have searched long and hard to locate such a large, high-quality piece.

She brushed one of his coppery locks away from his forehead, and she stared into his beautiful soft eyes, wondering how she had gotten so lucky. How either of them had managed to find the other in the whole damn galaxy.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too,” he said.

Then Kira laughed, feeling almost hysterical, and wiped her eyes. The ring scraped her eyebrow; it was going to take time to get used to its presence. “Shit. Are we really going to do this?”

“Yeah,” said Alan, with his comforting self-confidence. “We sure are.”

“Good.”

He pulled her closer then, his body hot against hers. Kira responded with equal need, equal desire, clinging to him as if she were trying to press herself through his skin and into his flesh until the two of them became one.

Together, they moved with frantic urgency within the arc of potted flowers, matching the rhythms of their bodies, oblivious to the orange gas giant that hung high overhead, huge and glaring.

CHAPTER II

* * * * *

RELIQUARY

1.

Kira tightened her grip on the arms of her seat as the suborbital shuttle pitched downward, descending toward island #302-01-0010, just off the western coast of Legba, the main continent in the southern hemisphere. The island lay on the fifty-second parallel, in a large bay guarded by several granite reefs, and was the last known location of the disabled drone.

A sheet of fire engulfed the front of the cockpit as the shuttle burned through Adrasteia's thin atmosphere at almost seven and a half thousand clicks per hour. The flames looked as if they were only a few inches from Kira's face, yet she felt no heat.

Around them, the hull rattled and groaned. She closed her eyes, but the flames remained jumping and writhing in front of her, bright as ever.

"Hell yeah!" shouted Neghar next to her, and Kira knew she was grinning like a fiend.

Kira gritted her teeth. The shuttle was perfectly safe, wrapped in the mag-shield that protected it from the white-hot inferno outside. Four months on the planet, hundreds of flights, and there hadn't been a single accident. Geiger, the pseudo-intelligence that piloted the shuttle, had a nearly flawless record; the only time it had malfunctioned was when some hotshot asteroid captain had tried to optimize a copy and ended up killing his crew as a result. Safety record notwithstanding, Kira still hated reentry. The noise and the shaking made her feel as if the shuttle were about to break up, and nothing could convince her otherwise.

Plus, the display wasn't doing anything to help her hangover. She'd popped a pill before leaving Alan in his cabin, but it had yet to cut the pain. It was her own fault. She should have known better. She *did* know better, but emotion had trumped judgment last night.

She turned off the feed from the shuttle's cameras and concentrated on breathing.

We're getting married! It still didn't feel real to Kira. She'd spent the whole morning with a silly smile plastered on her face. No doubt she'd looked like an idiot. She touched her sternum, fingering Alan's ring under her flight suit. They hadn't told the others yet, so she'd chosen to wear the ring on a chain for the time being, but they were planning to that evening. Kira was looking forward to seeing everyone's reactions, even if the announcement didn't come as much of a surprise.

Once they were on the *Fidanza*, they would get Captain Ravenna to make it official. And then Alan would be hers. And she his. And they could begin to build their future together.

Marriage. A change of jobs. Settling down on just one planet. Family of her own. Helping to build a new colony. As Alan had said, it would be a huge change, but Kira felt ready for the shift. More than ready. It was the life she'd always hoped for but that, as the years had crept by, had seemed increasingly unlikely.

After they finished making love, they had stayed up for hours, talking and talking. They'd discussed the best places to settle on Adrasteia, the timeline of the terraforming effort, and all the activities possible on and off the moon. Alan went into great detail about the type of dome house he wanted to build: "—and it has to have a hot tub big enough to stretch out without touching the other side, so we can have a proper bath, not like these dinky little showers we've been stuck with," and Kira had listened, touched by his passion. In turn, she talked about how she wanted greenhouses like the ones on Weyland, and they both agreed that whatever they did, it was going to be better done together.

Kira's only regret was that she'd drunk so much; everything after Alan's proposal had become something of a blur.

Delving into her overlays, she pulled up her records from the previous night. She saw Alan kneeling in front of her again, and she heard him say, "I love you too," before wrapping her in his embrace a minute later. When she'd had her implants installed as a kid, her parents hadn't paid for a system that allowed for full sense-recording—no touch, taste, or smell—as they'd considered it an unnecessary extravagance. For the first time, Kira wished they hadn't been so practically minded. She wanted to feel what she'd felt that night; she wanted to feel it for the rest of her life.

Once they returned to Vvyborg Station, she decided, she would use her bonus to have the necessary upgrades installed. Memories like the ones from yesterday

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were too precious to lose, and she was determined not to let any more slip away.

As for her family back on Weyland . . . Kira's smile faded somewhat. They wouldn't be happy about her living so far from home, but she knew they would understand. Her parents had done something similar themselves, after all: emigrating from Stewart's World, around Alpha Centauri, before she was born. And her father was always talking about how it was humanity's grand goal to spread out among the stars. They'd supported her decision to become a xenobiologist in the first place, and Kira knew they would support her current decision.

Returning to her overlays, she opened the most recent video from Weyland. She'd already watched it twice since it had arrived a month ago, but right then, she felt a sudden urge to see her home and family again.

Her parents appeared, as she knew they would, sitting at her dad's workstation. It was early morning, and the light slid in sideways through the west-facing windows. In the distance, the mountains were a jagged silhouette draped along the horizon, nearly lost in a bank of clouds.

"Kira!" said her dad. He looked the same as always. Her mom had a new haircut; she offered a small smile. "Congratulations on making it to the end of the survey. How are you enjoying your last few days on Adra? Did you find anything interesting in the lake region you told us about?"

"It's been cold here," said her mom. "There was frost on the ground this morning."

Her dad grimaced. "Fortunately the geothermal is working."

"For now," said her mom.

"For now. Other than that, no real news. The Hensens came by for dinner the other night, and they said—"

Then the study door slammed open and Isthah bounced into view, dressed in her usual nightshirt, a cup of tea in one hand. "Morning, sis!"

Kira smiled as she watched them natter on about the doings in the settlement and about their day-to-day activities: the problems with the ag-bots tending the crops, the shows they'd been watching, details about the latest batch of plants being released into the planet's ecosystem. And so forth.

Then they wished her safe travels, and the video ended. The last frame hung before her, her dad frozen mid-wave, her mom's face at an odd angle as she finished saying, "—love you."

"Love you," Kira murmured. She sighed. When had she last managed to

visit them? Two years ago? Three? At least that. Too long by far. The distances and the travel times didn't make it easy.

She missed home. Which didn't mean she would have been content to just stay on Weyland. She'd needed to push herself, to reach beyond the normal and the mundane. And she had. For seven years she had traveled the far reaches of space. But she was sick of being alone and sick of being cooped up on one spaceship after another. She was ready for a new challenge, one that balanced the familiar with the alien, the safe with the outlandish.

There on Adra, with Alan, she thought perhaps she would find just such a balance.

2.

Halfway through reentry, the turbulence began to subside and the EM interference vanished along with the sheets of plasma. Lines of yellow text appeared in the top corner of Kira's vision as the comm link to HQ went live again.

She scrolled through the messages, catching up with the rest of the survey team. Fizel, their doctor, was being his usual annoying self, but other than that, nothing interesting.

A new window popped up:

<How's the flight, babe?—Alan>

Kira was unprepared for the sudden tenderness his concern evoked in her. She smiled again as she subvocalized her response:

<No problems here. You?—Kira>

<Just doing a last bit of pickup. Thrilling stuff. Want me to clear out your cabin for you?—Alan>

She smiled. *<Thanks, but I'll take care of it when I'm back.—Kira>*

<'K . . . Listen, we didn't really get a chance to talk this morning, and I wanted to check: You still okay with everything from last night?—Alan>

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<You mean, do I still want to marry you and settle here on Adra?—Kira> She followed up before he could reply: *<Yes. My answer is still yes.—Kira>*

<Good.—Alan>

*<What about you? Are **you** still okay?—Kira>* Her breath caught a little as she sent the text.

His answer was swift: *<Absolutely. I just wanted to make sure you were doing alright.—Alan>*

She felt herself soften. *<More than alright. And I appreciate that you bothered to check.—Kira>*

<Always, babe. Or should I say . . . fiancée?—Alan>

Kira made a delighted sound. It came out more choked than intended.

“All good?” Neghar asked, and Kira could feel the pilot’s eyes on her.

“More than good.”

She and Alan continued to talk until the retrorockets kicked in, jolting her back to full awareness of her surroundings.

<Gotta go. We’re about to land. Touch base later.—Kira>

<K. Have fun. ;-) — Alan>

<Riiight.—Kira>

Then Geiger spoke in her ear: “Touchdown in ten . . . nine . . . eight . . . seven . . .”

His voice was calm and emotionless, with a hint of a cultured Magellan accent. She thought of him as a Heinlein. He sounded as if he would be named Heinlein, if he were a person. Flesh and blood, that is. With a body.

They landed with a short drop that caused her stomach to lurch and her heart to race. The shuttle listed a few degrees to the left as it sank into the dirt.

“Don’t take too long, you hear?” said Neghar, unclipping her harness. Everything about her was neat and compact, from her finely carved features to the folds in her jumpsuit to the thin lines of braids that formed a wide strip across her head. On her lapel she wore an ever-present gold pin: a memorial to co-workers

lost on the job. “Yugo said he’s cooking a fresh batch of cinnamon rolls as a special treat before blastoff. ‘Less we hurry, they’ll all be gone by the time we get back.”

Kira pulled off her own harness. “I won’t be a minute.”

“Better not, honey. I’d *kill* for those rolls.”

The stale smell of reprocessed air hit Kira’s nose as she slipped on her helmet. Adrasteia’s atmosphere was thick enough to breathe, but it would kill you if you tried. Not enough oxygen. Not yet, and changing that would take decades. The lack of oxygen also meant that Adra didn’t have an ozone layer. Everyone who ventured outside had to be fully shielded against UV and other forms of radiation. Otherwise, you were liable to get the worst sunburn of your life.

At least the temperature’s bearable, thought Kira. She wouldn’t even have to turn on the heater in her skinsuit.

She climbed into the narrow airlock and pulled the inner hatch shut behind her. It closed with a metallic boom.

“Atmosphere exchange initialized; please stand by,” said Geiger in her ear.

The indicator turned green. Kira spun the wheel in the center of the outer hatch and then pushed. The seal broke with a sticky, tearing sound, and the reddish light of Adrasteia’s sky flooded the airlock.

The island was an unlovely heap of rocks and rust-colored soil, large enough that she couldn’t see the far side, only the near coast. Beyond the edge of land spread an expanse of grey water, like a sheet of hammered lead, the tips of the waves highlighted with the ruddy light from the cloudless sky. A poison ocean, heavy with cadmium, mercury, and copper.

Kira jumped down from the airlock and closed it behind her. She frowned as she studied the telemetry from the downed drone. The organic material it had detected wasn’t by the water, as she’d expected, but rather at the top of a wide hill a few hundred meters to the south.

Okay then. She made her way across the fractured ground, picking her steps with care. As she walked, blocks of text popped up in front of her, providing info on the chemical composition, local temperature, density, likely age, and radioactivity of different parts of the landscape. The scanner on her belt fed the readings into her overlays while simultaneously transmitting them back to the shuttle.

Kira dutifully reviewed the text but saw nothing new. The few times she felt compelled to take a soil sample, the results were as boring as ever: minerals, traces of organic and pre-organic compounds, and a scattering of anaerobic bacteria.

At the top of the hill, she found a flat spread of rock scored with deep grooves from the last planetary glaciation. A patch of orange, lichen-like bacteria covered

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much of the rock. Kira recognized the species at first glance—*B. loomisii*—but she took a scraping just to confirm.

Biologically, there wasn't much of interest on Adrasteia. Her most notable find had been a species of methane-eating bacteria beneath the arctic ice sheet—bacteria that had a somewhat unusual lipid structure in their cellular walls. But that was it. She'd write up an overview of Adrasteia's biome, of course, and if she was lucky, she might get it published in a couple of the more obscure journals, but it wasn't much to crow about.

Still, the absence of more developed forms of life was a plus when it came to terraforming: it left the moon a lump of raw clay, suitable for remolding however the company, and the settlers, saw fit. Unlike on Eidolon—beautiful, deadly Eidolon—they wouldn't have to be constantly fighting the native flora and fauna.

While Kira waited for her chip-lab to finish its analysis, she walked to the crest of the hill, took in the view of the rough-scraped rocks and the metallic ocean.

She frowned as she remembered how long it would be before they could stock the oceans with anything more than gene-spliced algae and plankton.

This is going to be our home. It was a sobering thought. But not depressing. Weyland wasn't much friendlier, and Kira remembered the massive improvements she had seen on the planet over the course of her childhood: once-barren dirt converted to fertile soil, the spread of green growing things across the landscape, the ability to walk around outside for a limited time without supplemental oxygen. She had optimism. Adrasteia was more habitable than 99-some percent of the planets in the galaxy. By astronomical standards, it was an almost perfect analogue for Earth, more similar than a high-g planet like Shin-Zar, and even more similar than Venus, with its floating cloud cities.

Whatever the difficulties Adrasteia presented, she was willing to face them if it meant she and Alan could be together.

We're getting married! Kira grinned and lifted her arms overhead, fingers splayed, and stared straight up, feeling as if she were about to burst. Nothing had felt so right before.

A high-pitched *beep* sounded in her ear.

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The chip-lab had finished. She checked the readout. The bacteria was *B. loomisii*, as she'd thought.

Kira sighed and turned off the chip-lab. Mendoza had been right—it was their responsibility to check out the growth—but it was still a huge waste of time.

Whatever. Back to HQ and Alan, and then they could blast off for the *Fidanza*.

Kira started to leave the hill, and then, out of curiosity, she looked toward where the drone had crashed. Neghar had IDed and tagged the location during the shuttle's descent.

There. A klick and a half from the coast, near the center of the island, she saw a yellow box outlining a patch of ground next to . . .

"Huh."

A formation of jagged, pillar-shaped rocks stabbed out of the ground at a steep, sideways angle. In all the places Kira had visited on Adra—and they were many—she hadn't seen anything quite like it.

"Petra: select visual target. Analyze."

Her system responded. An outline flashed around the formation, and then a long list of elements scrolled next to it. Kira's eyebrows rose. She wasn't a geologist like Alan, but she knew enough to realize how unusual it was to have so many elements clustered together.

"Thermals up," she muttered. Her visor darkened, and the world around her became an impressionistic painting of blues, blacks, and—where the ground had absorbed the warmth of the sun—muted reds. As expected, the formation perfectly matched the ambient temperature.

<Hey, check this out.—Kira>And she forwarded the readings to Alan.

Less than a minute later: <The hell! You sure your equipment is working?—Alan>

<Pretty sure. What do you think it is?—Kira>

<Dunno. Might be a lava extrusion . . . Can you get a scan of it? Maybe pick up a few samples? Dirt, rock, whatever is convenient.—Alan>

<If you really want. It's a bit of a hike, though.—Kira>

<I'll make it worth your while.—Alan>

<Mmm. I like the sound of that, babe.—Kira>

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<Hey now.—Alan>

She smirked and swapped out of the infrared as she started down the hill.
“Neghar, do you read?”

A crackle of static and then: **What’s up?**

“I’m going to be another half hour or so. Sorry.”

Dammit! Those rolls aren’t going to last more than—

“I know. There’s something I have to investigate for Alan.”

What?

“Some rocks, farther inland.”

You’re gonna give up Yugo’s cinnamon rolls for THAT?

“Sorry, you know how it is. Besides, haven’t seen anything quite like this before.”

A moment of silence. **Fine. But you better haul ass, you hear me?**

“Roger that, hauling ass,” said Kira. She chuckled and quickened her pace.

Where the uneven ground allowed, she jogged, and ten minutes later, she arrived at the tilted outcropping. It was bigger than she’d realized.

The highest point was a full seven meters overhead, and the base of the formation was over twenty meters across: wider even than the shuttle was long. The broken cluster of columns, black and faceted, reminded her of basalt, but their surface had an oily sheen similar to that of coal or graphite.

There was something about the appearance of the rocks that Kira found off-putting. They were too dark, too stark and sharp-edged, too different from the rest of the landscape—a ruined spire alone amid the granite wasteland. And though she knew it was her imagination, an uneasy air seemed to surround the outcropping, like a low vibration just strong enough to annoy. Were she a cat, Kira felt sure her hair would be standing on end.

She frowned and scratched her forearms.

It sure didn’t look like there’d been a volcanic eruption in the area. Okay then, a meteor strike instead? But that didn’t make sense either. No blast wall or crater.

She walked around the base, scanning. Near the back, she spotted the remnants of the drone: a long strip of broken and melted components dashed against the ground.

Hell of a lightning strike, Kira thought. The drone must have been going pretty fast to spread it out like that.

She shifted in her suit, still feeling uneasy. Whatever the formation was, she

decided she'd leave the mystery for Alan to figure out. It would give him something to do on the flight out of the system.

She took a soil sample and then searched until she found a small piece of the black rock that had flaked off. She held it up to the sun. It had a distinct crystalline structure: a fish-scale-like pattern that reminded her of woven carbon fiber. *Impact crystals?* Whatever it was, it was unusual.

She tucked the rock into a sample pouch and gave the formation one last look-over.

A silvery flash, several meters off the ground, caught her eye.

Kira paused, studying it.

A crack had split open one of the columns to reveal a jagged white seam within. She checked her overlays: the seam was too deep within the crack to get a good reading. The only thing the scanner could tell her for sure was that it wasn't radioactive.

The comm crackled, and Neghar said, **How ya doing, Kira?**

"Almost done."

'K. Hurry up, would you?

"Yeah, yeah," Kira muttered to herself.

She eyed the crack, trying to decide if it was worth the effort to climb up and examine. She nearly contacted Alan to ask but then decided not to bother him. If she didn't find out what the seam was, she knew the question would annoy him until they, hopefully, returned to Adra and he got a chance to examine it himself.

Kira couldn't do that to him. She'd seen him stay up late far too many times, poring over blurred footage from a drone.

Besides, the crack wasn't *that* hard to reach. If she started *there* and went over to *that*, then maybe . . . Kira smiled. The challenge appealed to her. The skinsuit didn't have gecko pads installed, but it shouldn't matter, not for an easy climb like this.

She walked to a slanted column that ended only a meter above her head. Sucking in a quick breath, she dipped her knees and jumped.

The rough edge of the stone dug into her fingers as she caught hold of it. She swung a leg over the top of the column and then, with a grunt, pulled herself up.

Kira stayed on all fours, clutching the uneven stone while she waited for her heart to slow. Then she carefully got to her feet atop the column.

From there it was relatively easy. She jumped across to another angled column, which allowed her to scramble up several more, like climbing a giant staircase, aged and crumbling.

The last meter was a bit tricky; Kira had to wedge her fingers between two pillars in order to support herself as she swung from one foothold to another. Fortunately, there was a broad ledge beneath the crack she was trying to reach—broad enough that she had room to stand and move about.

She shook her hands to get the blood back into her fingers and walked over to the fissure, curious what she would find.

Up close, the gleaming white seam looked metallic and ductile, as if it were a vein of pure silver. Only it couldn't be; it wasn't tarnished.

She targeted the seam with her overlays.

Terbium?

Kira barely recognized the name. One of the elements in the platinum group, she thought. She didn't bother looking it up, but she knew it was odd for a metal like that to appear in such a pure form.

She leaned forward, peering deeper into the crack as she tried to get a better angle for the scanner. . . .

Bang! The sound was as loud as a gunshot. Kira jerked with surprise, and then her foot slipped, and she felt the stone shift underneath her as the whole ledge gave way.

She was falling—

An image flashed through her mind of her body lying broken on the ground.

Kira yelled and flailed, trying to grab the column in front of her, but she missed and—

Darkness swallowed her. Thunder filled her ears and lightning shot across her vision as her head bounced against the rocks. Pain shot through her arms and legs as she was pummeled from every direction.

The ordeal seemed to last for minutes.

Then she felt a sudden sense of weightlessness—

—and a second later, she slammed into a hard, jagged mound.

4.

Kira lay where she was, stunned.

The impact had knocked the breath out of her. She tried to fill her lungs, but her muscles wouldn't respond. For a moment she felt as if she were choking, and then her diaphragm relaxed and air rushed in.

She gasped, desperate for oxygen.

After the first few breaths, she forced herself to stop panting. No point in hyperventilating. It would only make it harder to function.

In front of her, all she saw was rock and shadow.

She checked her overlays: skinsuit still intact, no breaches detected. Elevated pulse and blood pressure, O₂ levels high normal, cortisol through the roof (as expected). To her relief, she didn't see any broken bones, although her right elbow felt as if it had been smashed by a hammer, and she knew she was going to be sore and bruised for days.

She wiggled her fingers and toes, just to test that they worked.

With her tongue, Kira tabbed two doses of liquid Norodon. She sucked the painkiller from her feeding tube and gulped it down, ignoring its sickly sweet taste. The Norodon would take a few minutes to reach full strength, but she could already feel the pain retreating to a dull ache.

She was lying on a pile of stone rubble. The corners and edges dug into her back with unpleasant insistence. Grimacing, she rolled off the mound and onto all fours.

The ground was surprisingly flat. Flat and covered with a thick layer of dust.

It hurt, but Kira pushed herself onto her feet and stood. The movement made her light-headed. She leaned on her thighs until the feeling passed and then turned and looked at her surroundings.

A ragged shaft of light filtered down from the hole she had fallen through, providing the only source of illumination. By it she saw that she was inside a circular cave, perhaps ten meters across—

No, not a cave.

For a moment she couldn't make sense of what she was seeing, the incongruity was so great. The ground was flat. The walls were smooth. The ceiling was curved and domelike. And in the center of the space stood a . . . stalagmite? A waist-high stalagmite that widened as it rose.

Kira's mind raced as she tried to imagine how the space could have formed. A whirlpool? A vortex of air? But then there would be ridges everywhere, grooves . . . Could it be a lava bubble? But the stone wasn't volcanic.

Then she realized. The truth was so unlikely, she hadn't allowed herself to consider the possibility, even though it was obvious.

The cave wasn't a cave. It was a room.

"Thule," she whispered. She wasn't religious, but right then, prayer seemed like the only appropriate response.

Aliens. *Intelligent* aliens. A rush of fear and excitement swept through Kira.

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Her skin went hot, pinpricks of sweat sprang up across her body, and her pulse started to hammer.

Only one other alien artifact had ever been found: the Great Beacon on Talos VII. Kira had been four at the time, but she still remembered the moment the news had become public. The streets of Highstone had gone deathly quiet as everyone stared at their overlays, trying to digest the revelation that, no, humans weren't the only sentient race to have evolved in the galaxy. The story of Dr. Crichton, xenobiologist and sole survivor of the first expedition to the lip of the Beacon, had been one of Kira's earliest and greatest inspirations for wanting to become a xenobiologist herself. In her more fanciful moments, she had sometimes daydreamed of making a discovery that was equally momentous, but the odds of that actually happening had seemed so remote as to be impossible.

Kira forced herself to breathe again. She needed to keep a clear head.

No one knew what had happened to the makers of the Beacon; they were long dead or vanished, and nothing had been found to explain their nature, origin, or intentions. *Did they make this as well?*

Whatever the truth, the room was a find of historic significance. Falling into it was probably the most important thing she would ever do in her life. The discovery would be news through the whole of settled space. There would be interviews, appearance requests; *everyone* would be talking about it. Hell, the papers she could publish . . . Entire careers had been built on far, far less.

Her parents would be so proud. Especially her dad; further proof of intelligent aliens would delight him like nothing else.

Priorities. First she had to make sure she lived through the experience. For all she knew, the room could be an automated slaughterhouse. Kira double-checked her suit readouts, paranoid. Still no breaches. Good. She didn't have to worry about contamination from alien organisms.

She activated her radio. "Neghar, do you read?"

Silence.

Kira tried again, but her system couldn't connect to the shuttle. Too much stone overhead, she guessed. She wasn't worried; Geiger would have alerted Neghar something was wrong as soon as the feed from her skinsuit cut out. It shouldn't be long before help arrived.

She'd need help, too. There was no way she could climb out by herself, not without gecko pads. The walls were over four meters high and devoid of handholds. Through the hole, she could see a blotch of sky, pale and distant. She

couldn't tell exactly how far she'd fallen, but it looked like enough to place her well below ground level.

At least it hadn't been a straight drop. Otherwise she would probably be dead.

Kira continued to study the room, not moving from where she stood. The chamber had no obvious entrances or exits. The pedestal that she had originally believed to be a stalagmite had a shallow, bowl-like depression in the top. A pool of dust had gathered within the depression, obscuring the color of the stone.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, Kira saw long blue-black lines cut into the walls and ceiling. The lines jagged at oblique angles, forming patterns similar to those of a primitive circuit board, although farther apart.

Art? Language? Technology? Sometimes it was difficult to tell the difference. Was the place a tomb? Of course, the aliens might not bury their dead. There was no way of knowing.

"Thermals up," Kira murmured.

Her vision flipped, showing a muddy impression of the room, highlighted by the warmer patch of ground where the sunlight struck. No lasers, no artificial heat signatures of any sort.

"Thermals down."

The room could be studded with passive sensors, but if so, her presence hadn't triggered a noticeable response. Still, she had to assume she was being watched.

A thought occurred to Kira, and she switched off the scanner on her belt. For all she knew, the signals from the device might seem threatening to an alien.

She scrolled through the last set of readings from the scanner: background radiation was higher than normal due to an accumulation of radon gas, while the walls, ceiling, and floor contained the same mixture of minerals and elements she'd recorded on the surface.

Kira glanced at the blotch of sky again. Neghar wouldn't take long to reach the formation. Just a few minutes in the shuttle—a few minutes for Kira to examine the most important find of her life. Because once she was pulled out of the hole, Kira knew she wouldn't be allowed back in. By law, any evidence of alien intelligence had to be reported to the proper authorities in the League of Allied Worlds. They would quarantine the island (and probably a good portion of the continent) and send in their own team of experts to deal with the site.

That didn't mean she was about to break protocol. As much as she wanted

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to walk around, look at things closer, Kira knew she had a moral obligation not to disturb the chamber any further. Preserving its current condition was more important than any personal ambition.

So she held her ground, despite her almost unbearable frustration. If she could just *touch* the walls . . .

Looking back at the pedestal, Kira noticed the structure was level with her waist. Did that mean the aliens were about the same size as humans?

She shifted her stance, uncomfortable. The bruises on her legs were throbbing, despite the Norodon. A shiver ran through her, and she turned on the heater in her suit. It wasn't that cold in the room, but her hands and feet were freezing now that the adrenaline rush from the fall was subsiding.

Across the room, a knot of lines, no bigger than her palm, caught her attention. Unlike elsewhere on the curving walls, the lines—

Crack!

Kira glanced toward the sound just in time to see a melon-sized rock dropping toward her from the opening in the ceiling.

She yelped and stumbled forward awkwardly. Her legs tangled, and she fell onto her chest, hard.

The rock slammed into the floor behind her, sending up a hazy billow of dust.

It took Kira a second to catch her breath. Her pulse was hammering again, and at any moment, she expected alarms to sound and some hideously effective countermeasure to dispose of her.

But nothing else happened. No alarms blared. No lights flashed. No trapdoors opened up beneath her. No lasers poked her full of tiny holes.

She pushed herself back onto her feet, ignoring the pain. The dust was soft beneath her boots, and it dampened the noise so the only sound she heard was her feathered breathing.

The pedestal was right in front of her.

Dammit, Kira thought. She should have been more careful. Her instructors back in school would have ripped her a new one for falling, even if it was a mistake.

She returned her attention to the pedestal. The depression in the top reminded her of a water basin. Beneath the pooled dust were more lines, scribed across the inner curve of the hollow. And . . . as she looked closer, there seemed to be a faint blue glow emanating from them, soft and diffuse beneath the pollen-like particles.

Her curiosity surged. *Bioluminescence*? Or was it powered by an artificial source?

From outside the structure, she heard the rising roar of the shuttle's engines. She didn't have long. No more than a minute or two.

Kira sucked on her lip. If only she could see more of the basin. She knew what she was about to do was wrong, but she couldn't help it. She had to learn *something* about this amazing artifact.

She wasn't so stupid as to touch the dust. That was the sort of rookie mistake that got people eaten or infected or dissolved by acid. Instead, she took the small canister of compressed air off her belt and used it to gently blow the dust away from the edge of the basin.

The dust flew up in swirled plumes, exposing the lines beneath. They *were* glowing, with an eerie hue that reminded her of an electrical discharge.

Kira shivered again, but not from cold. It felt as if she were intruding on forbidden ground.

Enough. She'd tempted fate far more than was wise. Time to make a strategic retreat.

She turned to leave the pedestal.

A jolt ran up her leg as her right foot remained stuck to the floor. She yelped, surprised, and fell to one knee. As she did, the Achilles tendon in her frozen ankle wrenched and tore, and she uttered a howl.

Blinking back tears, Kira looked down at her foot.

Dust.

A pile of black dust covered her foot. Moving, seething *dust*. It was pouring out of the basin, down the pedestal, and onto her foot. Even as she watched, it started to creep up her leg, following the contours of her muscles.

Kira yelled and tried to yank her leg free, but the dust held her in place as securely as a maglock. She tore off her belt, doubled it over, and used it to slap at the featureless mass. The blows failed to knock any of the dust loose.

"Neghar!" she shouted. "Help!"

Her heart pounding so loudly she could hear nothing else, Kira stretched the belt flat between her hands and tried to use it like a scraper on her thigh. The edge of the belt left a shallow impression in the dust but otherwise had no effect.

The swarm of particles had already reached the crease of her hip. She could feel them pressing in around her leg, like a series of tight, ever-shifting bands.

Kira didn't want to, but she had no other choice; with her right hand, she tried to grab the dust and pull it away.

Her fingers sank into the swarm of particles as easily as foam. There was

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nothing to grab hold of, and when she drew her hand back, the dust came with it, wrapping around her fingers with ropy tendrils.

“Agh!” She scrubbed her hand against the floor, but to no avail.

Fear spiked through her as she felt something tickle her wrist, and she knew that the dust had found its way through the seams of her gloves.

“Emergency override! Seal all cuffs.” Kira had difficulty saying the words. Her mouth was dry, and her tongue seemed twice its normal size.

Her suit responded instantly, tightening around each of her joints, including her neck, and forming airtight seals with her skin. It wasn’t enough to stop the dust. Kira felt the cold tickle progress up her arm to her elbow, and then past.

“Mayday! Mayday!” she shouted. “Mayday! Neghar! Geiger! Mayday! Can anyone hear me?! Help!”

Outside the suit, the dust flowed over her visor, plunging her into darkness. Inside the suit, the tendrils wormed their way over her shoulder and across her neck and chest.

Unreasoning terror gripped Kira. Terror and abhorrence. She jerked on her leg with all her strength. Something snapped in her ankle, but her foot remained anchored to the floor.

She screamed and clawed at her visor, trying to clear it off.

The dust oozed across her cheek and toward the front of her face. She screamed again and then clamped her mouth shut, closed off her throat, and held her breath.

Her heart felt as if it were going to explode.

Neghar!

The dust crept over her eyes, like the feet of a thousand tiny insects. A moment later, it covered her mouth. And when it came, the dry, squirming touch within her nostrils was no less horrible than she had imagined.

... stupid ... shouldn't have ... Alan!

Kira saw his face in front of her, and along with her fear, she felt an overwhelming sense of unfairness. This wasn’t supposed to be how things ended! Then the weight in her throat became too great and she opened her mouth to scream as the torrent of dust rushed inside of her.

And all went blank.