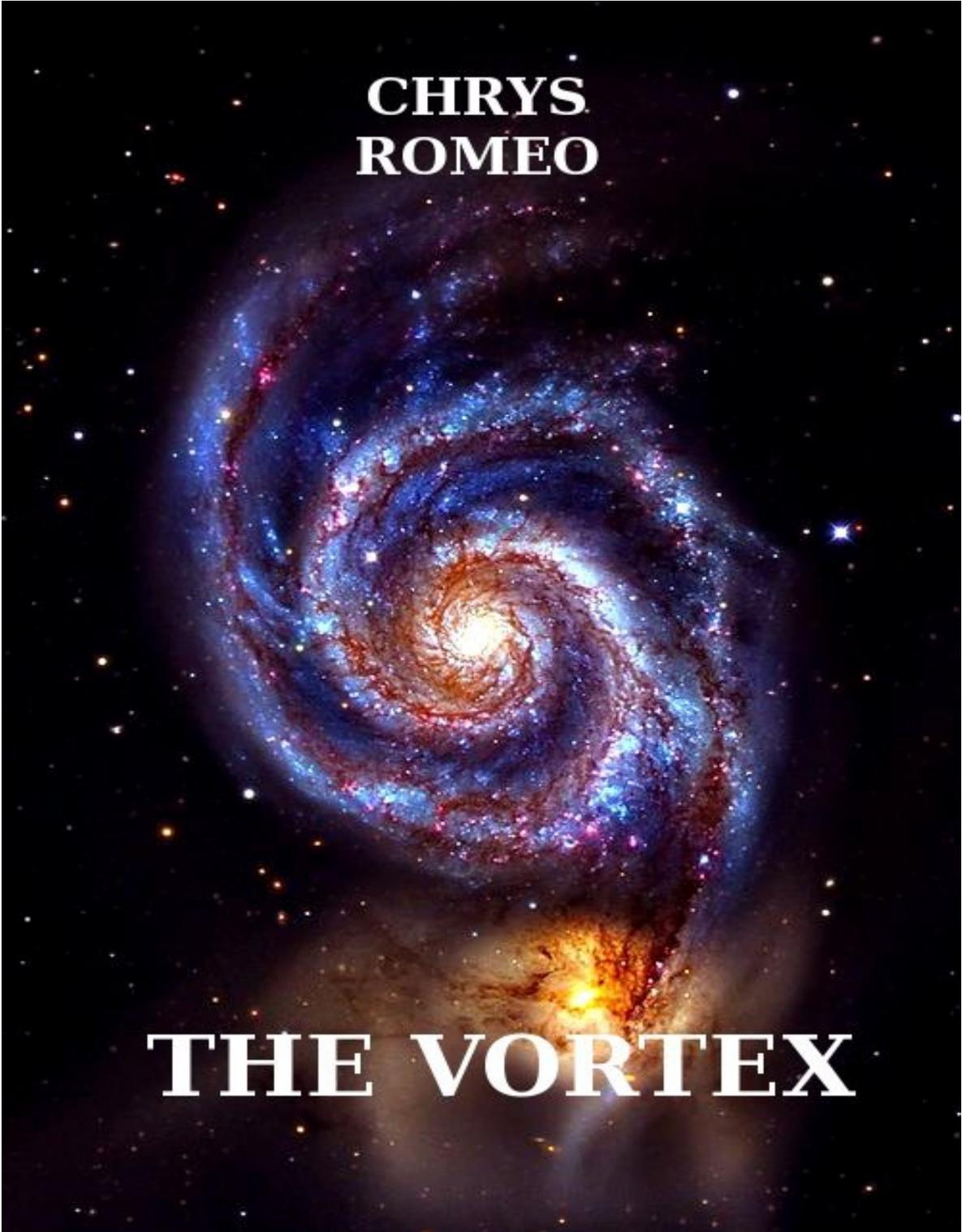


**CHRYS  
ROMEO**



**THE VORTEX**

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## Blue Moon, White Sun

Dreams of a white sun radiating over the ellipse of the blue moon in the pink stripes of dawn aligned on the misty horizon had become a frequent vision for the pilot who had never actually encountered the landscape before stepping on the white sands of the deserted planet.

When his heavy boots hit the white dust he scrutinized the view around him.

“You can take off your helmet, there is enough oxygen” he heard the voice from the control tower that had been guiding his landing.

He unlocked the safety pin under his chin and took off the silver helmet. Inhaling the sharp oxygen made him dizzy for a second. He staggered, squinting his eyes to the white glaring sun above. Beyond it, there was still the boomerang-shaped blue moon, silent and cold.

“What the hell are we doing here?” he mumbled to himself, turning around in doubt, to look at the metal staircase of the shuttle behind him.

“You know very well what you – we – are doing here. You were chosen for carrying the torch further in the universe: bringing life to a safe haven.”

The voice from the supervising tower was steady and objectively impersonal, but something in the tone reminded him of a careful baby-sitter. He blinked and scratched his head.

“I forgot you're listening to everything I say.”

The voice was relentlessly patient and unwavering in its motivation.

“It's very important to not forget the purpose of your presence on this border planet. You are the first to facilitate the beginning of the Alpha State. Others will follow. Life will advance to a higher consciousness, once we enter that cluster of light.”

“I know how important it is. I'm constantly aware of it.”

“Then what's the matter? Do you have doubts? Are you afraid something could

go wrong? I'll assist you every step of the way.”

He glanced at the blue moon again, above the pink horizon.

“I don't have doubts and I'm not afraid. It's just... I've dreamed of this place long before coming here. It's almost as if I envisioned it – anticipated – predicted this moment.”

“It could be a *deja vu*. Your brain is high on the oxygen and change of pressure.”

“No, it's more than that. I'm sure I had dreams of this landscape before”.

The voice went silent in the chip behind his ear. He knew she was still there, yet she chose not to comment. Sometimes he wondered if the voice came from a computer program, a robot or a real person. He was inclined to believe it was a person, but the tone seemed very well instructed not to appear too personal. It was more like an army officer combined with a psychologist and a diplomatic spy. More like a watchdog, relentless and purposeful, ready to assist in any way needed to get the best results that were expected from a higher rank.

“Hey Rony! Are you done contemplating? We have work to do!”

The pilot hadn't come alone to the border planet. There was an entire crew with him, trained to install equipment for a functional greenhouse and wireless communication with distant solar systems. He had brought four people on the ship.

The pilot went to help the other two men: one was a bio-engineer and the other was a computer expert. The computer expert was a silent reserved and yet optimistic guy, just out of training and eager to discover real life beyond theoretical studies. The bio-engineer had a practical attitude and seemed to enjoy comfort, not being bothered by any possible dangerous situation. The nurse was a vivacious volunteer while the psychologist was observant, diplomatic and refined in manners. What they had in common was enthusiasm for the prospect of new life, exploring the unknown vastness of the universe and contributing to the benefits of starting something positive with infinite possibilities. It was the main purpose that brought them together and kept them out of conflicts: having the same goal of achieving something improbable, innovative and daring – defying odds, making a new beginning that would develop into something amazing.

After they took out the metal bars and the plastic foil they set up the skeleton of the greenhouse and covered it with transparent square meters of isolating shield. Under the white glowing sun its neon light was not as much burning as it was exhausting in intensity. The air was humid despite the dusty surface. After a while the three men felt their shirts get wet and stuck to the skin, so they took off the fabric and continued to work in overalls and heavy boots. It was risky to expose too much skin to an environment not entirely known. The two females in the crew, the medical assistant and the psychologist decided to remain in the shade of the newly built tents, sorting out the electronic files of the camp and the rations.

In a few hours everything was set according to plan.

The men sat down on a group of rocks, passing around small bottles of water that the nurse had brought them.

The tower of control was still silent.

“Why is the air so humid?” the pilot wondered, staring at the distant pink horizon.

“It's because of the vapors from the ocean. The beach is not far from here,” the bio-engineer answered.

“Much like Earth?”

“Not really. Earth is too distant a memory to remember now and I've never known it to be able to compare – but the atmosphere was different there, before we destroyed the eco-system. Hopefully, we're going to build a sustainable life-supporting system here.”

The bio-engineer was a gray haired man who had seen many solar systems where he had attempted to set up colonies, before arriving on the border planet of the white sun and the blue moon.

“The conditions are right to make it happen here”, Rony said with confidence.

“It's possible. Why are you so sure though?”

“I don't know. Maybe it's because the control tower told me. And I believe it.”

He didn't want to reveal having had dreams about the place long before arrival. He thought it would make him appear weak and unstable to the crew and they would not trust his clear mind as a pilot.

“Is the tower giving you information about the future?” the bio-engineer asked a bit amused.

“Yes, maybe so. Why?”

“That must be Vera. I bet she's the one on the microphone with you, talking you through everything.”

“Who's Vera?”

“The tower agent who monitors our missions. I had a chip with her voice instructing me when I used to fly shuttles across the solar systems, looking for a place to set up new stuff. Boy, she gave me a hard time back then. Do this, do that, don't do this, why didn't you do that, you must do better...”

“Really?”

The pilot had a different impression of the assisting voice.

“Is it a person then?”

“Yes, it's a person. Did you think it was a robot?”

“It often sounds like a programmed robot.”

“It's a person and a very well instructed one. She's got highest authority over these missions.”

“She can't be a person. She's too smart, too well informed... too impersonal.”

“Too demanding?”

The bio-engineer grinned. Rony looked at him in disbelief. He kind of liked the voice in the chip that gave him instructions. It didn't feel demanding, but precise. He admired the accuracy of information and the relentless motivation of the transmission. It never failed to answer, it always proved to be one step ahead of him in any situation, to the minimal details. Somehow, the expertise was intimidating, but it provided confidence too and Rony relied on it for advice. If it was indeed a person... it must have been a top agent. The attention he had received implied a lot of work in the control tower. Rony imagined the training must have been drastic to make her perform like that. It was impressive. However, it seemed the other man had a different experience and opinion. Evgheni, the talkative bio-engineer didn't add anything else, noticing the pilot didn't agree with him.

He concluded disinterested:

"I'm better off working as a biologist. I've got more time to do other things."

"So now you don't hear from the tower anymore?" Rony asked casually.

"No, I quit being a pilot. It was too much strain and pressure, too much responsibility. I'm getting tired of long hours of staring into space. I'd rather assemble greenhouses and watch plants grow."

Rony looked up at the blue moon. Its ellipse sparkled as it descended towards the horizon, in undetected, delayed motion.

"Where are they? The people from the control station."

Evgheni glanced up, squinting his eyes to see the ellipse past the glaring neon light.

"On that moon, probably."

"Do you think they can hear us now?"

Evgheni stretched his arms, relaxed and unaffected.

"No, I think they have better things to do. As you know, the connection with Vera appears when they've got something important to communicate to you, and they instruct her to reach out. Also when she's checking progress or when you call for her assistance by beeping that chip."

"But what if she's listening and not revealing her presence? Can she do that?"

Evgheni laughed.

"Are you afraid she might?"

Rony shrugged.

"I don't have anything to hide from her. Or from the tower, for that matter."

"Yeah, they know everything that's going on down here. I'm sure Vera has access to any recorded conversation she wants – and I'm sure she checks on you very often, even when... or especially when you're not aware of her doing it. They've got those x-ray telescopes watching us around the clock. They can probably count the bones from our toes in a blink of a second. They see the plants growing before they come out of the soil."

The bio-engineer was so amused, it made Rony smile too.

"You're probably right."

It didn't bother him that the voice assistant was monitoring him; he knew the

control tower was doing it anyway. It was their purpose. At least Vera provided some feedback for his actions. He had imagined her like an electronic eagle – and yet she was a real person. He could still feel the sharp authority hovering invisibly from the blue moon.

He got up, deciding to take a walk and find the ocean. The heavy boots and overalls were getting scratchy against the skin. Dust and sweat made everything uncomfortable.

“I'm going to the beach” he announced to the others.

“Don't forget to come back to make the tent for the guests before sunset”, Sheena the psychologist told him. “They're coming tomorrow, I've just received a message from the satellite. Five recruits between fifteen and eighteen years old, from rehabilitation camps.”

“Why are they sending us disturbed children?”

“They want us to help them to a fresh start. The teenagers are from restricted rehabilitating facilities. They had no chance back there on the space station – but here, they might learn to adapt.”

“So now, aside from growing plants we must also babysit some crazy teenagers who didn't fit in the space stations?”

The psychologist smiled kindly.

“I'm sure we'll manage, Rony. Don't worry: they're only five children. We're five adults. We can handle them.”

“I can handle a bunch of kids, but I'm not sure they will learn to behave in this new environment.”

“We'll make sure they do eventually.”

“How many other camps like ours did they send on this planet?”

Sheena thought for a while.

“I don't know exactly, but there are certainly hundreds of camps like this one. They're spread out separately to implement the establishment by adding power through independent development.”

“It sounds like isolated gangs.”

“The kids are just a group of disoriented youth, Rony. We'll be fine. They'll get

better.”

“It's easy for you to say, you're a psychologist. You're trained to deal with such kids. Me, I'm a pilot, not a counselor. “

Sheena smiled, understanding his worries.

“You'll learn to be both. You'll be great for them. They need someone who can offer them adventures, solutions and courage. Each of us needs to learn to be more and surpass our boundaries with new skills if we want to ascend with this planet to the light cluster Alpha State.”

“If you say so...”

The pilot turned to leave.

“I'm going for a swim, if there's any ocean on this planet.”

“When you find it, show us the way to that beach, so we can go too”, the nurse shouted after him.

He smiled. Of course everyone wanted to go to the beach, after so many days of living confined to the shuttle. They were finally out in the open, under a clear blue sky with a boomerang moon and a pink horizon throwing colored hues on the white dusty surface glowing of neon sunlight.

## Asterius Planet

The ocean was beyond rocky hills.

“No wonder I could smell sand and salty water in this damp air” the pilot thought pausing for a moment on top of the rocks, watching the breathtaking view.

The beach was a white strand of silver and transparent pebbles, appearing like scattered pieces of round glass and marble. Above the purple water the sky was changing to silver light green. Inside the water, luminescent creatures were flowing with the swinging soft waves, glowing like billions of little stars in perpetual motion. The ocean was a fluid reflection of the vast universe, an abundance of colors and lights, as if the galaxies were poured upside down.

Swimming in that water felt magical. The purple flow would sometimes turn light blue and transparent, so clear that he could see the rocks and sand dunes on the bottom of almost twenty meters depth. The little sparkling stars were slipping through his fingers as he slowly paddled the waves and the colors spread on his skin like an oily painting with fluorescent hues. The peace and serenity of the place washed away any worries or exhaustion as he emerged from the water calm and rested like a new-born baby. Even if the ocean was unknown and it could have been dangerous to swim so far away from the shore, he felt as if there was safety in the waves, there was certainty in the swirling dots of light, glowing in the purple vortex of endless motion.

Walking along the beach he encountered something unusual: a group of huge broken pillars, some standing halfway in the water, vertical to the sky, some rolled down on the beach. The marble pillars seemed too well rounded; the cylinders were arranged in hexagon formation, too symmetrical in shape and size to be a random result of natural storms carving some rocks. The pillars seemed to look like the remains of something intelligent creatures would do. Rony touched the surface of one of the pillars. Time had covered it in yellow salt, but the smooth polished trace

of intentional modification was still obvious.

Rony returned to the camp with many questions in his mind.

If there had been an intelligent presence before their arrival, what happened to them? Why had they abandoned the planet?

“Did you find the ocean?”

It was Nicole, the nurse.

“Yes, I found it” he answered. “It's not far, just over that hill.”

“Is it good for swimming?”

“It's great.”

She stopped in front of him, noticing something: his frown.

“What's wrong?”

“I don't know.. I found something disturbing. I don't know how to interpret it.”

“Show me.”

They went together to see the pillars on the beach. At the sight of the multitude of colors and sparkling purple water, the nurse was immediately enthusiastic.

“Wow! I've never seen anything like this!”

She ran towards the waves, plunging her hand in the foam and touching the swirling little stars like a child discovering the universe.

The others had heard them talk and were coming over the top of the hill.

“Amazing!”

Everyone was fascinated by the view. They came closer.

Rony pointed to the broken pillars in hexagon formation.

“Look at that! What do you think it represents?”

The group approached the marble columns with caution.

“It could be a temple.”

“That means it's ancient.”

“It might have been a landmark building or some monument.”

The pilot listened to their opinions and then decided to speak:

“Whatever it is, the main question remains: where are the authors and what

happened to them? Why aren't they here anymore?"

Everyone was silent for a few moments.

"How do you know they're not here anymore?" Sheena asked thoughtfully.

"They wouldn't have sent us to colonize an already inhabited planet", Evgheni argued.

"I think it's best to ask the control tower about this", the computer expert spoke objectively.

"Good idea, Yuri. They'll know the answer."

Rony clicked on the chip behind his ear. It beeped and lit up, feeling hot for a second. The burn used to make him anxious, but he had gotten accustomed to the anticipation and the certainty of the reply. The tower never failed to reply. Never, not even once.

"Yes control tower here. What's the matter?"

He recognized Vera's voice, but it was difficult to sense any emotional inflections in her tone. He felt uncertain of himself after finding out she was a real person. He felt he could make mistakes and change her impression or upset her – had she been just a robot he wouldn't have cared, but her being a person made him more self conscious and it significantly increased his wish to do well and have a better dialogue. For some unexplained reason he was suddenly more attentive and talking to her didn't seem as easy as before. He tried to maintain his composure:

"I'm calling from the base 12 camp Greenhouse. This is pilot Rony."

"Yes Rony, I know who you are. Stop presenting yourself, you called me and I know your frequency. What's your question?"

"I found something on Asterius surface. It looks like the remains of a building or a monument on the beach."

"Can you send me an image?"

"How?"

"Activate the camera in the chip. Blink twice while you keep your hand on it and it will send me the neural signal from your brain, with the image of what you've seen."

He did as instructed and then heard her voice again.

“Okay, I received the image. I'll make a short inquiry and get back to you with a precise answer.”

He waited. The others were watching him.

“What did she say?”

“She said she'll look into it.”

“That means they don't know either.”

“Let's wait. Maybe they do know.”

Rony heard her announcement in his ear.

“Control tower coming in.”

“Shh, shut up” he whispered to the others.

Vera spoke nonchalantly, with an abundance of details:

“Here's what I found about the remains of the building. It used to be a landing site for some civilization hundreds of thousands of years ago. The form of life is unknown. The only remains are the pillars – the blue prints of the landing sites. Everything else vanished, including the living beings. It is possible they are still on Asterius planet, in another form and they changed shape and dimension when they passed through the cluster of light. As you know, the galaxy we're in is about to cross paths with the Alpha State cluster again. It does that because the two spin around each other and every hundred thousand years they actually cross paths. When that happens, matter becomes unpredictable and it changes, under the vibration of the two fields altering everything when they merge. We don't know the complete effects yet. We're preparing for the ascension level when energy overcomes matter. That's probably what happened to the former inhabitants of Asterius: they ascended to Alpha State.”

“That means they simply vanished.”

“Exactly, if you see it like that. But you also know nothing ever really vanishes in the universe, it only changes the way atoms and energy are arranged. It simply transforms or it goes somewhere else.”

“That leaves the question what will happen to us.”

Vera was silent for a few seconds. Then she said calmly:

“We'll evolve.”

Rony wasn't surprised by it. He just said:

“You have an answer for everything.”

She didn't comment. It was a personal observation and she didn't elaborate when the dialogue took a personal turn. He turned the chip off. There wasn't anything else to say.

He stared at the glowing stars in the water and wondered if the sparkling creatures were the former inhabitants of Asterius. For a moment, he felt as if their swirling moves were whispering something, trying to make sense of the waves. The impression went away in a few seconds. The blue moon was almost touching the horizon line. Rony seemed to wake up from the reverie.

“Let's go” he said to the others. “I'll tell you at the camp what I heard from the tower.”

After telling the crew the news about the perspective of crossing paths with the Alpha cluster and not knowing what could become of them, or what the ascension meant, or what happened to the inhabitants before them, everyone was troubled.

“We're doomed”, Evgheni said. “The minute I see the plants successfully appear in the greenhouses I'll ask for a transfer out of here. I'm not gonna wait around to dissipate into the cluster of light. One month and I'm back on the satellite!”

“Damn, and I thought this was supposed to be a new life, in a better place...” Nicole mumbled to herself. “Now we'll just turn to dust.”

“You don't know that”, Rony intervened.

“Come on, Rony! You brought us here to disintegrate!” Evgheni argued.

“I don't think the tower control told us the truth. They probably know what happened to those before us”, Yuri said. “But it's a version they can't disclose because it's too frightening for us and we wouldn't agree to remain here.”

“And damn right we don't! I'm the first to leave!”

The bio-engineer was losing his calm, pacing around in the tent like a lion in a cage.

“You can't leave the camp, we hardly got here”, Sheena tried to reason with

him.

“I don't care! I'm leaving as soon as they send a shuttle for me. They must send it! Rony, you have to take me back to the satellite.”

The pilot watched them and wondered about the tower's intentions.

Sheena touched his hand gently.

“Rony... do you think we're an experiment to them?”

His eyes were looking at the dark sky outside the tent, where the blue radiant moon had emerged on the other side of the horizon, glowing brighter than in daylight.

“What I know for sure is that they are going to be in the same situation as us. It makes no sense to expose themselves to something that would mean the end. If they know something, it's not exactly the worst we can imagine. It's probably something they can't explain to us right now.”

“Do you trust the control tower?”

The psychologist seemed to trust him and was waiting for his answer, to decide how to face the unknown future. He knew that most of the crew would stand by his decision, relying on it. It was a big responsibility: he had brought them there and he had to give them motivation to keep staying and achieving what they had come to achieve.

He looked at them. He remembered the relentless determination in Vera's voice and her amazing intelligence.

“I trust the tower”, he answered calmly. “I'm staying to see what happens.”

“Then I'll stay with you”, the psychologist said without any regret.

“What the heck... I might as well finish what we started”, Nicole joined the party. “It could be fun.”

“I guess I'm staying too”, Yuri spoke, shrugging innocently. “It might be interesting from a scientific point of view, to find out what's going on with that ascension phenomenon. I guess it's once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Evgheni was annoyed by their resolve.

“Damn, you're a bunch of crazy lab rats! You'll be fried like monkeys on a wire. Once in a lifetime you say? Sure! I'm not staying!”

He left the tent.

Rony stood up, but Sheena grabbed his sleeve.

“Let him go. He's just angry, but he won't leave. There's no shuttle taking off from Asterius right now.”

Yuri looked at them a bit confused.

“Guys... what are we going to tell the kids?”

Sheena shook her head.

“Oh, the kids... I forgot... They're coming tomorrow!”

“So? You're the psychologist. What do we tell them?”

She sighed.

“Of course, the truth. We'll tell them the truth. But not as soon as they arrive, we'll give them time to adjust to the camp first.”

“That's another way of lying to them.”

“It's not lying. It's delaying the moment of truth until they are ready for it.”

“Great! We'll wait until we're swallowed by Alpha cluster and then when they see their arms flying off, we tell them hey kids, guess what, now we play the game of disintegration.”

“That sounds terrible, Nicole. You don't know if that's what's waiting for us.”

“But nobody seems to know for sure.”

“So life is unpredictable. We chose to come here. We must be brave enough to face it.”

“It's easy for you to say, Yuri. You're a scientist.”

“And you aren't?”

“I'm trained to save lives and cure illness, not sit around waiting for the sky to fall...”

“Calm down, Nicole.”

Rony left them talking and went outside. He needed time to himself, to think – away from the crew's anxiety or arguments. He needed to think and look at the sky.

He stepped in the dark, glancing at the glowing moon. The white dust from Asterius surface was a pale shade of gray in the night. Rony kept staring pensively at

the vast space above. There were no clouds and the stars, the nebulae and countless distant galaxies were visible in their cold greatness, expanding to the infinite space in dots of colorful mist. A day on Asterius had only 20 hours. The neon sun would rise and set in a pink stripe horizon, while the blue moon was always there, day and night.

Rony looked at the blue globe. “Were you lying to me, Vera?” he asked her in his mind. “Can you hear my thoughts? Do we really evolve?” For a moment, he felt as if the moon would glow brighter. He almost could sense her presence in his mind, he could have sworn she was able to hear him thinking. But then again, he knew it could be only his imagination projected on a mysterious distant sky. He asked anyway. “What's around the corner, Vera? Do you know?”

## The Kraken Game

“They're here”.

Rony had gone swimming early in the morning. When he returned, Sheena was waiting for him in front of the big tent.

“The children are here”, she told him. “Yuri's showing them around, the greenhouses and how to use the equipment to take care of what we planted. Come, let's look at their files.”

Rony took a towel, wiping the colorful remains of ocean water in his hair.

“Okay, show me their files.”

Sheena turned on the laptop screen.

“We've got two girls and three boys. First girl: Zenna, fifteen years old. She ran away from her rich parents to join a fighting club. She used to gamble her daddy's money until she got interested in kickboxing. She's probably a fierce temperament and needed to blow off some steam, being the only child, restricted to a house she wasn't allowed to leave. The sport suited her well, but it also got her in trouble. She got into some fights and broke a guy's jaw. Finally, she was taken into custody by the rehabilitation camp. And now we've got her.”

“Great”, said Rony, looking at the picture of an athletic redhead, with steely green eyes and pointed chin. “I get the idea. Go on to the next.”

Sheena scrolled down the screen.

“Next girl: Penelope, seventeen years old. She's rather quiet and reserved, but highly intelligent.”

“So what's wrong with her?”

“Nothing's wrong, she's just a type of rebel against the system. She was caught stealing books, so she was sent to rehabilitation camp. She escaped from the camp twice and was brought back.”

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