



THE LAST STORYTELLER



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For Dad:

*From the very first bedtime stories to our daily chats,
thank you for a lifetime of stories.*

I



LITA TOSSES ANOTHER PIÑON LOG ONTO THE FIRE. Sweet smoke drifts past us into the starry sky. Her knees crack as she sits back down on the blanket next to me. The cup of hot chocolate with cinnamon she's made me sits untouched this time.

"I have something I want you to take with you on your trip, Petra." Lita reaches into her sweater pocket. "Since I won't be there for your thirteenth birthday . . ." She holds out a silver

pendant in the shape of a sun. Its center is filled with a flat black stone. "If you hold it up to the sun, its light glows through the obsidian."

I take it from her hand and hold it up, but there's no sun. Only the moon. Sometimes I try to imagine I can see things I really can't. But I'm sure a faint glow filters through the middle of the stone. I move the pendant back and forth. It disappears completely when I move it too far from the center of my vision.

When I look back, Lita is motioning to an identical pendant around her neck. "You know," she says, "Yucatecos believe obsidian holds magic. A doorway to bring lost ones together." She purses her lips. Her brown skin wrinkles toward her nose like cracked bark on a tree.

"They shouldn't force me to go," I say.

"You have to, Petra." Lita looks away for a long time before speaking again. "Children are not meant to be separated from their parents."

"You're Dad's parent. He should stay with you then. We all should." Even as I say it, I know I sound like a little kid.

She laughs a deep, soft chuckle. "I'm too old to travel so far. But for you . . . Dios mío, a new planet! How exciting."

My chin trembles and I bury my head into her side, squeezing her around the waist.

"I don't want to leave you."

Her stomach lowers with a deep sigh. Somewhere off in the desert behind Lita's house, a coyote howls, calling for its friends.

As if on cue, the chickens cluck, and one of her fainting goats bleats.

“You need a cuento,” she says, referring to one of her tall tales.

We lie back looking up at the night sky. The warm desert wind blows over us as Lita pulls me into the tightest hug ever. I never want to leave this spot.

She points up at Halley’s Comet. From here, it doesn’t look so dangerous.

“Había una vez,” she begins her story, “a young fire snake nagual. His mother was Earth, his father the sun.”

“A nagual snake?” I ask. “But how can the sun and Earth be parents to something part human, part animal—”

“Sssh. This is my story.” She clears her throat and takes one of my hands in hers. “Fire Snake was angry. His mother, Earth, fed and nurtured him, but his father, the sun, stayed away. His father would bring crops, but he also brought great drought and death. One very hot day as Sun loomed over the nagual,” Lita waves her arm toward the heavens, “he challenged his father. Even though his mother begged him to stay with her forever, the young Fire Snake sped off toward his father.”

Lita remains silent for a moment. I know the stall is part of her strategy to keep me in suspense. It works.

“Then what?”

She smiles and continues. “With his tail flaming behind him, Fire Snake gained speed until he could not slow himself.

But as he approached his father, Sun, he realized his mistake. His father's flames were far more powerful and stronger than anything else in this universe. The nagual looped around his father, speeding back toward his home, but it was all too late. His father's fire had burned his eyes, so he could no longer see." Lita clicks her tongue. "Pobrecito, blinded and moving so fast he could never slow down. Never able to find his mother." She sighs. Now comes the part in all her stories where her voice becomes lighter, like she's casually giving directions to the corner panadería. "So, every seventy-five years, he retraces the journey, hoping to reunite with her." She points again at the fire snake. "Close enough to sense his mother, but never to embrace."

"Except this time," I say, heat running up my back.

"Yes," she answers, pulling me closer. "In a few days, the fire snake will finally find his mother. Y colorín Colorado, este cuento se ha acabado," she says, ending her cuento.

I rub her hand over and over, memorizing her wrinkles. "Who told you that story? Your grandma?"

Lita shrugs. "She told me bits. I might have made most of it up."

"I'm scared, Lita," I whisper.

She pats my arm. "But for a moment, did you forget your troubles?"

I don't answer out of shame. Her story *had* made me forget. Forget about what could happen to her and everyone else.

"Don't you be afraid," she says. "I'm not. It's only the nagual coming home."

I glance up at Fire Snake in silence. "I'm going to be just like you, Lita. A storyteller."

She sits up, legs crossed, facing me. "A storyteller, yes. It's in your blood." She leans in. "But just like me? No, mija. You need to discover who you are and be that."

"What if I ruin your stories?" I ask.

Lita cups my chin in her soft, brown hand. "You can't ruin them. They've traveled hundreds of years, and through many people to find you. Now, go make them your own."

I think of Lita and her mother, and her mother's mother. How much they knew. Who am I to follow them?

I clutch the pendant in my hand. "I'll never lose your stories, Lita."

"You know, the planet you are going to will have a sun or two also." She taps her pendant with her fingernail. "Look for me when you arrive?"

My lower lip quivers, and tears fall down my face. "I can't believe we're leaving you."

She wipes a tear from my cheek. "It's impossible for you to leave me. I'm part of you. You're taking me and my stories to a new planet and hundreds of years into the future. How lucky I am."

I kiss her cheek. "I promise to make you proud."

Gripping my obsidian pendant, I wonder if Lita will watch the fire snake through the smoky glass, when he finally reunites with his mother.

2



THE SHUTTLE FROM SANTA FE TO THE LAUNCH SITE IN the San Juan National Forest near Durango takes less than two hours. A half hour of that time was filled with a speech from Dad, explaining to Javier and me how we needed to stop squabbling, be kind, and work hard.

It seemed weird to me that the government specifically chose the Colorado forest instead of a military base. But when I see the secluded roads and kilometers of dense forest, I under-

stand. Even three massive interstellar colonization ships meant for the exodus off Earth could get lost out here.

Pleiades Corp designed these luxury vessels to take rich people across the galaxy in comfort. I'd seen their megascreen advertisements along hoverways showing a ship's five-star hotel interior. Chandeliers with Pleiades Corp's signature color, royal purple, illuminating the faces of actors in fancy clothes, holding martini glasses and smiling as they stared out at a fake nebula. A man with a voice like he gargled avocado oil each morning speaking over tinkling piano music: "Pleiades Corporation. Reimagining what you thought interstellar travel would be. Luxury living among the stars, reserved for the adventurous elite."

I think of what the ships are now. Those people on the megascreen with the bleach-toothed smiles were nothing like us: scientists, terra-formers, and leaders the government thought deserved to live more than others. And how did my family make the cutoff? How did those government politicians choose? What if Mom and Dad had been older? How many of those politicians got a fast pass?

It feels wrong to be sneaking off Earth while so many are left behind. They don't even inform my parents of our destination until the day before. Dad says Pleiades had been storing their ships in a massive underground facility at the old Denver airport—they weren't supposed to leave Earth on their first official trip for another two years. The maiden test flights into nearby space a few months earlier had been successful, but

because we're now leaving so suddenly, this will be the first interstellar journey.

If a solar flare hadn't shifted the comet off course a week earlier, we'd be watching Fire Snake harmlessly pass Earth in a few days like it had since the beginning of time.

The departure facility isn't more than an old, converted ranger station beyond some gates to the National Park. I try not to think about what I saw at the front entrance. From the station we're instructed to take a trail into the forest with other passengers. More families gather just behind ours, waiting for their turn to hike to the ship. The grove of aspen and pine trees filter the sunlight like the *Jonah and the Whale* stained glass panel at church. I jump at the outburst of baby bird chirps above our heads. I look up to see a mama barn swallow skitter off from her nest for more food. The babies' cheeps go quiet as soon as she leaves. The mama bird doesn't know all her work is a waste of time. I train my narrow vision on the tiny heads peeking over the edge of the nest. At first, I feel sorry for them, so small and defenseless. But then I realize, in a way, the birds are the lucky ones. They'll never know what hit them.

We continue to the ship along the path that could be any hiking trail. It's the least official final exodus off Earth you could imagine. My parents told me that chatter tracking showed too many fringe and conspiracy groups suspecting something was up out here. Turns out they were right. My little brother, Javier, skids to a stop when we emerge from the camouflage of the cedar canopy to an open field of green. A monstrous ship

resembling a stainless-steel-and-crystal praying mantis comes into view.

“Petra . . . ?” He clenches my wrist.

At the opposite end of the field sits an exact replica of our ship. So far away, it looks half the size of the behemoth in front of us. With only two ships left, I know one is already gone. Dad said they lost contact when the final ping came as they approached Alpha Centauri.

“It’s okay.” I urge Javier on, even though I want to run back into the forest too.

I think of Lita and my teachers and my classmates, and I wonder what they’re doing right now. I don’t want to imagine them being so afraid they’d try to hide from something they can’t hide from.

Instead, I picture Lita and Tía Berta lying under the red-and-black fringed blanket, drinking coffee with “secret sauce” as they watch the nagual snake come home.

“Berta! This isn’t the time to be stingy.” Lita would tip the brown glass bottle, pouring rich liquid of the same color into her coffee cup.

“I suppose you’re right,” Tía Berta replies. “We won’t have another Christmas to keep this for.” Lita will make an even bigger pour into Tía Berta’s cup. They’ll clink their clay mugs, take a long drink, and lean back shoulder to shoulder against Tía Berta’s one-hundred-year-old pecan tree.

This is the story my mind will keep of them.

Before my parents were chosen, lots of people had already

started looting. When I asked Mom why they bothered, when all that stuff would be gone soon, her eyes filled with tears.

“People are afraid. Some will do things they never thought they were capable of. We’re in no position to judge anyone.”

I still don’t understand how some people are so calm and others are rioting. I’m supposed to feel happy my parents were chosen to go to the new planet, Sagan. But I feel like I’ve been given the last glass of water on Earth and I’m just gulping it down while everyone watches.

I look up at the comet and wince. I *hate you*.

Like ants on an orderly march to our hole, my family and I walk quietly across the grass field with several scientists and one other family with a blond teenager. As we get closer, instead of the cement commercial launch pad I expect, there’s just freshly cut grass.

Mom speaks quietly. “You won’t even know any time has passed when we’re up there. There’s nothing to be nervous about.” But when I look over, I catch her scrunching her eyes tight and shaking her head like that will somehow make this all go away. “And when we arrive to Sagan,” she continues, “we’ll start over, like on a farm. There will be others around your age.”

She can’t make this better. I don’t want *any* new friends ever again. I even had to set Rápido loose behind Lita’s house. Maybe my tortoise will somehow survive the comet’s hit deep within his burrow, and live out his life without me.

“This is stupid,” I mumble. “Maybe I should just tell them about my eyes so they won’t let us on the ship.”

Mom and Dad exchange a glance. Mom takes me by the elbow and pulls me aside. She smiles at the other family as they pass.

“What are you doing, Petra?”

I feel tears rising up. “What about Lita? It’s like you don’t even care.”

Mom closes her eyes. “I can’t tell you how hard this is for all of us.” She lets out a breath and then looks at me. “I’m sorry for how this is hurting you, but this is not the time.”

“When will be the time?” I say too loudly. “Hundreds of years from now when she’s already gone?”

The blond boy now ahead of us glances back. His dad elbows him, and he turns back around.

“Petra, we can’t know exactly what will happen.” Mom glances furtively at the other family. She grabs her braid and twists its end in her hand.

“I think you’re lying.”

Mom glances at Dad and lays her hand on my arm. “In this moment, Petra, the world does not revolve around you. Have you thought of how others might be feeling?”

I *almost* say the world might not revolve at all anymore, but my arm vibrates. I look over and see Mom is trembling.

She points back in the direction we came. “Did you notice the people waiting outside the gates?”

I look away. I don’t want to remember the woman pulling off her wedding ring and pushing her baby forward, toward the armed guard. “Please, please,” she mouthed over and over as we

drove right through the gates. Just like the tracking had predicted, that young family and hundreds of others had somehow figured out the government was hiding something out here.

"They'd give anything to be onboard with us." Mom leans down, her eyes boring into mine. "Do you want to leave?"

I think of the mom with her baby, and if I never saw Dad or Mom or Javier again.

"No," I answer.

A woman and a young girl approach holding hands. The girl has a silver spiraled horn jutting out the top of her head from her hoodie. As they pass, she makes an obvious head turn and stares at me suspiciously.

"Suma, *tttccch*," her mom whispers, and the girl looks away.

Mom glances in their direction, and I know she's seen them watching us too. "So, can you please keep your opinions to yourself for now?"

Mom walks ahead and marches right past Dad and Javier. Dad raises his eyebrows at me and motions with his head. And with that, I know even he's had enough. Javier runs back to me, nearly tripping on a rock on the path. He falls into me and I pull him to a stand. He takes my hand. "It's okay," he says, just like I had to him moments earlier. This time, he urges me along.

I take a deep breath as we approach the entrance ramp of the praying mantis ship. Its front end, the size of a soccer field, looms over us. Windows around the front section look like its mouth is cracked open, baring long teeth between the top of its

head and bottom of its jaw. Two hind legs hinge onto the field anchoring it in place.

In the distance, tiny specks enter the belly of the other bug ship, set to leave shortly after us.

Javier points to two oval wing-like compartments at the back of our ship. "Is that where we'll be?" he asks.

Dad nods.

"It's bigger than my school," Javier whispers.

"Yep." Mom fake-smiles like she's trying to convince him we're going to Disneyland again. "Very few ships can carry so many people so far away."

"And we'll be asleep?" he asks.

"Just like a nap," Mom says.

The "nap," and what it will give us, is the only bright spot. But unlike Javier's thirty-minute catnaps, this sleep will last three hundred and eighty years.

3



I DON'T KNOW HOW I HADN'T PUT TOGETHER WHAT WAS really happening in the week before we left, when I *accidentally* overheard my parents talking.

They lowered their voices in the living room—I knew the technique. It meant that while they knew we were asleep, they weren't taking any chances at us overhearing something. I yanked off my Josefina American Girl Doll's head and splayed her dark hair over my pillow. I hadn't even played with Josefina

for five years, but I kept her within arm's reach for these exact occasions.

I tiptoed out of my room and passed Javier's door. The glow from his aquarium cast enough light into the hall for me to see.

A whisper loud enough to shock Josefina to life came from his room. "Where are you going, Petra?"

His door squeaked as I hurried inside. "Nowhere. Just getting a glass of water."

He scooted over in his bed to make room. Instead of his jammies, he wore his Gen-Gyro-Gang hoodie he hadn't changed out of for three days. Ever since the Chinese geneticists recreated Wally the Woolly, and the tiny, cloned mammoth clomped out onto a world stage, every kid under the age of eight had a GGG hoodie with Wally front and center, a baby Hypacrosauras on one side, and a dodo bird on the other. Javier reached up and handed me his *Dreamers* book, a real paper version that had been my dad's when he was little. It was so old, it was written long before librex and story generators even came along.

"Not now, Javier." I slid his favorite book back in the shelf over his bed.

"Awww," he whined.

For a second, Mom and Dad's voices stopped, and I put my finger to my mouth. "We're supposed to be asleep." I leaned over to give him a goodnight kiss and cracked my pinky toe on the side of his bed. I slapped my hand over my mouth and fell into the bed next to him.

"Sorry," he whispered.

I grunted. "It's not your fault. I didn't see it." I massaged my toe. "Stupid eyes."

Javier reached out to hold my hand. "Don't worry, Petra. I will be your eyes for you."

A knot formed in my throat, and I spooned around him. I took his hand in mine and rubbed my finger over his constellation birthmark, a smattering of freckles in the crook of his thumb, our silent message only he and I know. I settled into his pillow, my head next to his, and we watched his African dwarf frog swim back and forth from the bottom to the top of the tank. With his lanky legs and webbed feet, he looked like a tomatillo with toothpicks jutting out of it. "You're feeding that frog too much."

"I named him Gordo, so it's fine," he said.

I giggled and rubbed his birthmark until his breathing deepened. From the outer spine of his *Dreamers* book, the mother's watchful gaze looked down on us—her eyes and lips kind, like Lita's.

I slid out from behind Javier and onto the floor. The hall was dim, so I decided it was safer to crawl to the living room to eavesdrop. I felt my way there, so I didn't bump into something, and crept to the backside of the sectional.

"It's sort of morbid," Mom said. "One hundred and forty-six people, exactly the number of Monitors on each ship, is all it takes for humans to continue with enough genetic diversity in case the rest of us die."

They were always posing some scientific hypothetical with

each other for fun. I thought this must've been just one of those nerd date-night conversations.

Mom continued. "It feels like the Monitors are making such a sacrifice for the rest of us."

"They were chosen for this mission for a reason, just like us," Dad said.

"But we get to travel the entire way."

"They're still passengers," Dad said. "And we don't know exactly what awaits us. Who's to say if their lives will be any better or worse than ours?"

It was starting to sound like it wasn't a hypothetical conversation. The ten o'clock chime rang out from the clock in the kitchen.

"Screen on," Dad said, turning on the ten o'clock news programmed specifically for them.

I peeked through the upper part of the couch cushion.

"Tonight, we join the Global Peace Forum, where an international movement is growing." The newscaster raised her eyebrows, but not a single wrinkle lined her forehead. "This . . . interesting new movement has received both great praise and even greater criticism."

A man with his hair cut sharply at his temples and a pointed nose spoke. His soft voice didn't match his sharp features. "This century has seen many trials. Soon, there will be more. Imagine a world where humans could reach a consensus. With collective unity, we can avoid conflict. With no conflict, no war. Without the cost of wars, no starvation. Without differences in culture, in appearance, knowledge . . ."

I poked my head farther through the cushions for a better look. Behind him, men and women with bleached, slicked-back hair and matching uniforms stood in a stiff row, hands folded over each other at their waist. Identical smiles and not a single hint of makeup.

"Inconsistency and inequality are what have led us to such unrest and unhappiness. This collective effort ensures survival," the man said.

"Yeah," Dad said to the guy who couldn't hear him. "At what cost?"

"Isn't that what we're doing too though?" Mom asked. "Surviving?"

Dad sighed.

The man took a step back so he was in line with the others. "Join us. Our Collective is stronger as a single unit. With your trust, we can erase the hurt and pain of the past. We will . . ."

They all spoke in unison. "Create a new history."

Dad muted the speakers. "I think they're talking an entirely different kind of survival. Tell me *that* isn't frightening," he said, pointing.

I sat back on my feet. The world those randos proposed didn't sound so bad to me. No war. No starvation. No figuring out what you'd have to wear to school the next day.

As if Dad was reading my mind, he continued: "What they want isn't so much the scary part, it's how they propose doing it."

I normally couldn't stay up late enough to watch the news, so

I knew I must've been missing out on some good stuff this whole time. What exactly was this guy proposing that was so scary?

I saw Dad shaking his head. "Equality's good. But equality and sameness are two different things. Sometimes those who say things without really contemplating what it truly means . . . That dogma runs a thin line."

I told myself I'd look up *dogma* the next day.

"You don't think a few will make it through." Mom pointed toward the screen.

"We can't worry about that. We have bigger problems, competing with other countries for ships."

"I guarantee at least Japan and New Zealand have a few leaving in the next few days. The question is whether or not they have a secret viable settlement too." Mom sighed. "Maybe this Collective is right. So much for international peace and cooperation."

I heard a thump-thump and knew Dad was patting her knee. "It'll be our job to remember the parts we got wrong and make it better for our children and grandchildren. Embrace our differences, and still find a way to make peace."

I crawled back to my room and pushed Josefina onto the floor. I wondered if one of those Monitors they mentioned would help me clean my new room. What part of the U.S. was this ship taking us to, for Mom and Dad's new project? How could I get Javier to stop overfeeding his frog?

It wasn't until later I learned that, on that night, unlike me and the people on the news, my parents already knew what was

going to happen. We weren't even going to be awake to interact with the Monitors, or make a mess in our rooms. We weren't going to somewhere else on Earth. My parent's "mission" is on a planet outside our entire solar system, called Sagan. The Monitors, chosen to watch over us while we sleep, won't even be alive to see it. But hopefully, their great-great-great-grandkids will be there when we wake up.

And Javier's overweight frog is in a pond eating as much as he wants.

4



APPARENTLY, THE GUY WHO INVENTED EN COGNITO (aka Downloadable Cognizance) bought his way onto the third ship by giving access to every passenger leaving Earth. So, while we're unconscious on the journey, I'll be getting the botany and geology lessons my parents chose for me. But because I'm nearly thirteen, I get to choose an elective too. My En Cognito elective alone is probably worth more than our house and Lita's combined. Hundreds of years . . . and lifetimes and

lifetimes of folklore and mythology lessons, will be deep in my mind by the time we arrive on Sagan. I can't even imagine all the stories I'll know.

I'm so busy thinking of how proud Lita would've been, I barely notice my mom motioning to my dad as we walk up to the ship. Dad grabs Javier's hand, and Mom grips my elbow at the same time. "I gotcha," she whispers.

Suddenly, I know what they're doing, and I want to cry. I know what they aren't saying out loud—they can't risk me screwing this up for us. The organizers don't want someone with a "genetic defect" like my eyes for the new planet.

Waiting at the entrance ramp are at least seven people, all young, all dressed in identical dark-gray jumpsuits. Only their heads show rainbow tones of neutral skin colors from white to dark brown. They search the crowd and one by one approach someone in the group we've walked in with.

A young man with round wire glasses walks toward us quickly from the ship's ramp. He looks down at his tablet and smiles at my mom. "Dr. Pena?"

"Yes," Mom answers. "But, it's Peña with an ñ," she corrects. "Like, *lasagna*."

He smiles. "Sorry. Peña." He pushes something on his tablet, and it beeps. He turns to my Dad. "And . . . Dr. Peña?"

Dad nods.

The man taps his holotack and speaks into its tip. "Peña: two adults, two minors. Nice to meet you. I'm Ben, the children's Monitor for the ship." He motions for us to follow him in.

“Sorry to rush, but we’re a bit pressed for time.” He glances nervously in the direction of the perimeter gate behind the trees. I look back too but see nothing other than the forest we just came from.

The other Monitors are already disappearing into the gaping entrance of the ship with the rest of the passengers.

“Here we go,” Mom says almost to herself—but also the cue that she’s leading me in.

Purple strip lighting encircles the entrance, just like on the Pleiades Corp commercial, but beyond that it is dark except for a faint blue glow. Every other company emblem indicating the ship was meant to be a luxury liner has been erased. I scan with my eyes from side to side at the surroundings to get a bigger picture like the eye doctor told me I should. My vision is still okay with lots of light, but by twilight I have to shuffle my way around even at home, or trip and die on one of Javier’s toys. It’s called retinitis pigmentosa and it’s like watching the world through a toilet paper roll. It’s supposed to worsen as I age.

I turn back for one final glimpse at the sky and bump into something. “Sorry,” I say, before noticing it’s just a door jamb. Javier and I snicker.

Mom puts a finger to her lips and shakes her head in warning.

I close my eyes and inhale, taking my last ever breath under Earth’s open sky.

We continue up the ramp until we are standing in the hold of the ship. A shiny dark shuttle squats in the shadows like a

carpet beetle, waiting for when it will go into duty in four hundred years.

Rows and rows of metal bins line the hold like a warehouse. Ben leads us toward the elevator where the door has just closed with the two families we walked in with. While we wait, Ben motions to a steel door with a flashing blue light, its latch encased within a clear locked box. "Food stores and water filtration, treated and sealed for arrival on Sagan." Then he points to an empty dark corner of the hold and looks at Mom and Dad. "That's where your labs will be."

Dad raises his eyebrows.

Ben smiles. "I know it doesn't look like much now, but don't worry. It will be assembled and waiting for you upon your arrival." He motions toward the entrance ramp we just walked in on. "And that will be converted to the shuttle dock."

The elevator chimes softly, and the door opens. Its outer walls are made entirely of rounded glass, but a circular tube of dark metal encapsulates the glass walls. Ben presses 6 and the glass doors slide shut.

We rise up and up inside a suffocating dark tube. Javier grips on to Dad's leg.

Ben smiles at Javier. "The worst is over," he says. "The distance from the hold to the main floor is half the height of the ship."

As soon as he says it, the elevator chimes for the first floor. The metal enclosure disappears. Windows on one side of the elevator stare down into the cavernous body of the ship.

I have the same dizzy sense I had when I walked out of the tunnel into the Olympic stadium in Dallas on our class field trip.

Javier releases Dad's leg and runs to peek out into the ship's belly. "Whoa!" he says, hands splayed flat on the windows.

I realize even I am gasping. I'm staring out at an atrium as cavernous as six football fields.

Bing. The elevator chimes for the second floor.

On the opposite side, just like a football stadium, hundreds of private suites overlook a field of green several stories below. A massive park covers nearly the entire lower floor. Walking paths, like veins in a leaf, weave through the green below. Scattered benches and tables along the trails look miniature from where we stand at least fifteen meters above. Lanterns glitter like fireflies lighting the paths.

On the second level just above the park, the entire perimeter is lined with eight lanes separated by white stripes just like a running track. Along the wall behind the lanes, I catch sight of exercise equipment and the rectangles of turquoise blue from individual lap pools.

Human dots in the distance travel up and down glass elevators on each corner. The elevator chimes for the third floor.

"My room is right there." Ben points to a door directly across from us by the window suites overlooking the park. He shifts his finger two floors below his room. "Just above the theater," he says, motioning to the main floor. There's an outdoor amphitheater with a stage and holoscreen way larger than the ones at

Cinetrak 8. For a second I wonder who decides what movies they'll watch.

"Cafeteria," Ben continues, pointing to the main floor.

A large open room that could be a food court at any mall lies directly behind the park. Tables and chairs meld directly into the walls to be part of the ship. Cubbies hold food rations from floor to ceiling, enough for all of the Monitors for hundreds of years. I gag thinking about where they'll get the liquid to hydrate the meals. There's no way the ship has a compartment big enough to hold enough water for three hundred and eighty years. A wall of magnawaves is the only sign of anything resembling a normal kitchen.

Bing. The elevator chimes for the fourth floor.

Any awe I'm feeling for the ship suddenly disappears when I remind myself why we're here. I'll only get to use it all just before we land anyway. The feeling in my stomach is replaced by a boulder thinking of the things I'm trading for this. Like Lita's kitchen and the earthy smell of soaking husks and green chile.

I stare down at the ship's cafeteria, which I'm positive has no masa or chile verde. Lita would have never fit in here anyway. I see her dark wrinkled hands spooning masa onto a corn husk.

I blink over and over trying to make the tears evaporate before they trickle over. I can't be the only one feeling like this is all a big mistake. God will figure it out and nudge Halley's comet . . . or the nagual . . . or whatever it is back on track.

Bing. The elevator chimes for the fifth floor.

I look up, hoping no one will notice my watery eyes. The domed ceiling, at least another thirty meters above our heads, is lined with two giant screens. Billowing clouds drift across what looks like the real sky. Massive banks of LEDs throw out full-spectrum lighting just like Mom's greenhouse.

Ben stands next to me and looks up too. "It will shift to the night sky in two hours, so it'll feel just like home for us."

I follow his finger as he points down again at the park. "Real plants even," he says.

"It's beautiful," I whisper.

Mom kisses my cheek and I know our fight is over. She speaks softly in my ear. "Look carefully in the middle."

I slowly scan to the center of the park. A circle wall of cobblestone sits like a medieval centerpiece. In the middle of the ring of stone stands a small tree.

"A Christmas tree?" Javier asks.

Mom snickers. "It's Hyperion."

I turn toward her, and we bonk noses. I chuckle. She must be delirious. My depth perception can't be *that* off. There's no way that sprig is the tallest tree in the world. Even though Hyperion's true location is protected, anyone with a botanist for a parent would know about the famous tree. My mom even saw it in person once. She said she hugged it and cried.

I glance over at her. She stares at the tiny tree adoringly, with the first genuine smile on her face I've seen in the past few days. "Well, not Hyperion exactly, but I was able to acquire her

sapling.” Her voice quivers. “We’re leaving behind so many beautiful things. Bringing the offspring of something with such strength and resilience was the one thing that made the most sense to me.” She sighs. “It will still be a baby compared to its mother when we arrive. They’re using the time-released nutrients to control its growth and keep it and other plants alive.” Mom casually refers to her revolutionary soil additive. She laughs nervously. “No pressure.”

Bing. The elevator chimes for the sixth floor.

“Congratulations, by the way,” Ben smiles. “Truly remarkable.”

Mom gives him a small nod. The door slides open, and we step out.

The rest of the passengers have already disappeared through one of the mazes of corridors. We follow Ben into a tunnel closest to the ship’s outer edge. It slopes upward and the lights are dim, so I hold onto the railing. We near the top of the tunnel, which means we are nearing the front tip of the mantis’s right wing.

“You know,” Ben continues, “I know Dr. Nguyen, who’s in charge of the seed vault and plant starts during the first leg of our journey.”

Mom’s smile falters a bit as Dad pats her back. “She’s a friend,” Mom says. “When you see her, please tell her thank you. And . . .” It grows uncomfortably quiet.

“Of course,” Ben says. “I will pass along your message.”

I peek in open doorways on either side. People wearing gray jumpsuits like Ben's stand at panels, gliding their fingers over holoscreens.

"Teen stasis room," Ben says, motioning to an open door to our right.

An empty row down the middle of the room is lined on each side with what looks like at least thirty white coffins with glass-domed tops. Most of the lids are already shut, fluorescent fluid glinting inside.

I ease my hand out of Mom's and hesitate at the door.

A woman with a tight bun and a tablet stands in front of one of the pods. The family with the older blond kid is in front of her. She glances up at me, her forehead scrunching like I'm a fly who just landed on her control panel. She pokes her tablet with her holotack, and the door slides shut with a thunk.

Ben leans toward me. "Lead Monitor. Takes her job pretty seriously."

I'm just grateful we have Ben instead of that lady.

"Dr. and Dr. Peña, you'll be on the fore-starboard of the ship. Your children will be housed on the aft-port. Just ahead—"

Dad stops. "Wait, no one told us we were going to be separated."

Ben turns back toward Dad, stumbling over his words. "It's . . . it's protocol." He lowers his voice. "I'm really sorry, Dr. Peña. You'll just be across the ship." He glances toward the room

with the Lead Monitor. "We have orders to sort and store by age for efficient observation."

Sort and store? Like we're eggs in a carton. Over-sanitized air burns my nostrils and eyes.

My parents exchange a glance. Mom looks just as concerned as Dad, but she clenches my dad's forearm. "It'll be okay, sweetheart," she says.

Dad gives her a quick kiss on her forehead. I look down at Javier, who has the same half-frown as Dad. I grip his arm and kiss his forehead. "It'll be okay, sweet-fart," I whisper, mimicking Mom's voice.

Javier smiles and leans into me.

Ben looks relieved as Dad motions for him to continue.

He walks through the open door, then turns to face me and Javier. "Here we are. Youth. Ages six to twelve."

5



THE LIGHT IN THE “YOUTH” ROOM IS EVEN DIMMER than the rest of the ship. Three rows of six stasis pods line the room and sort of look exactly like . . . eggs in a carton. All but seven of the pods are already occupied. Dark shapes float in the center of the glowing liquid. It reminds me of the green water of the mangrove canals near Lita’s childhood home in Tulum, the most peaceful place on Earth. But I’ve always wondered if

the looming dark shadows gliding just under the surface might munch off a toe or two.

Javier grabs me around the waist.

Ben bends down to Javier's eye level. "I know it looks a little scary. But I'll be taking care of both of you as long as I'm around."

Ben twists a latch on one of the empty pods. With a suctioned pop, the lid springs open. "See, just like a well-check scanner at the doctor's office."

"Who'll put you guys in?" Javier asks Ben, pointing to the pod.

Mom throws an arm around Javier's head, wrapping her hand over his mouth. "Sorry," she says. "He doesn't understand."

Ben bends back down in front of Javier. "We have the coolest job ever. We get to live our whole lives on this ship." Ben waves his arm. "Traveling through space. Did you see how awesome my new home is?"

Javier nods.

He's right. I guess it is better than dying on Earth. But Ben's park still won't have the smell of the desert flowers after the rain. The massive screen overhead might simulate the day and night sky, but it won't have the crack of a lightning strike or rumble of thunder. His view into the darkness of space is empty compared to the orange and reds of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains back home.

Ben continues. "I even got to help the people on the first ship fall asleep before they took off. Builders, farmers . . . lots of

kids. And when your ship lands on Sagan, they'll be ready for"—he taps Javier's forehead—"the science our ship brings."

I think of the other ship we'd seen on the way in, and wonder how many kids are traveling with their parents like us.

Ben hands my mom a plastic bag and pulls out a changing partition. While Mom helps Javier change, Ben motions for Dad to step closer to the pod. He lowers his voice, and his tone shifts like he's already said the exact words a hundred times that day: "En Cognito's downloadable cognizance puts the organs and brain to sleep immediately. The gel preserves tissue indefinitely, removing senescent cells and waste. It not only provides nutrients and oxygen the body will need for such a long stay in stasis, but lidocaine in the gel numbs nerve endings, making the gel's colder temperature comfortable upon awakening."

Dad takes a deep breath. "I understand. Thank you."

Ben quickly changes the subject, and his voice shifts back to a normal level. "And"—he looks at his tablet—"I have both Javier's and Petra's En Cognito programs. Standard core, with an emphasis on botany and geology in the sciences."

"Yep," Dad says, giving me a thumbs-up.

I roll my eyes. At least I won't have to actually "listen" to the lectures, since the En Cognito device that puts us to sleep is also programmed to embed those topics directly into our brains. By the time we arrive to Sagan, I'll be as much of an expert as Mom is in botany and Dad in geology. Obviously, though, that isn't the good part. With all the folklore and mythology, along with

Lita's stories, I have at least a chance to try and convince Mom and Dad I should be a storyteller instead. But like Lita said, I'll have to make the stories my own.

Javier walks out wearing small black shorts, like he's going to the beach. As Mom hands Ben the plastic bag with Javier's clothes and favorite book, Dad picks Javier up and grips him into a hug.

Mom rubs Javier's back, while he stares at the open pod.

"I wanna go home," Javier whimpers. "Please, can we go home?"

Mom eases Javier from Dad's arms. "It's just a nap."

Javier's breath catches over and over as he tries to hold in his cries. Mom sets him gently in the pod, her arms still wrapped around him.

I want my brother's last memory going into centuries of sleep to be something good. I kneel over him and set my cheek on his. I close my eyes, imagining my hand in Lita's, piñon smoke drifting into the New Mexico sky. I hold his hand just like Lita held mine. I rub the freckled constellation birthmark on his left thumb. He makes the smallest smile. I decide to tell him the story Lita told me my last night with her, the one that calmed me most. Softly and patiently just like her, I speak. "You know, the stars are the prayers of abuelas and mothers and sisters . . ."

Javier sniffs in my ear. I continue.

" . . . for the children they love. Each star, filled with hope." I sit back and point up. "¿Y cuántas estrellas hay en el cielo?"

"How many stars in the sky?" he repeats, cracking open an eye to stare at the ceiling like he's imagining the night sky. "I don't know," he answers.

I lean in close and whisper in his ear. "¿Cincuenta?"

"Only fifty?" He smiles, probably imagining a gazillion stars.

"Or *sin* . . . cuenta?" I smile, and rub his head just like Lita had.

"Countless," he whispers, understanding Lita's riddle.

I wonder if I've told it as well as she had, if my hand in his is as calming as Lita's was in mine. I can't remember the rest. She ended it in a way that felt . . . comforting. What did she say? "All those *estrellas* that will surround us out there, those are our dead ancestors. They will whisper messages in our ears."

Javier sits up. His eyes go wide. "Stars are dead relatives?"

"No, Javier. I meant like—"

"Like ghosts? In space?" Javier grips the side of the pod and tries to get up. "Mom. Please. I don't want to go."

This is not going the way I'd hoped. "That's not what I meant," I try to correct. But it's too late. Javier is on the verge of ugly cry.

Ben interrupts. "Dr. Peña, please. We really need to get going."

Mom rubs Javier's head to calm him down like she does when he has a nightmare. "Yes, yes. I know." She lays him back down. She turns to me. Wrinkles angle outward from the narrowed corners of her eyes. "Really, Petra, this isn't the right time for a story."

Her words are a sledgehammer to my stomach.

Javier's chin shakes. "I want to go home."

Maybe my parents are right, and I should just study plants and rocks like them. Maybe wanting to tell stories is "living in a fantasy world" or me with my "head in the clouds."

"We *are* going home, Javier," I try to recover, sticking to what I hope will be true. "We'll run and play on Sagan just like we always have." Javier nods, but his attempt at a smile looks more pained than convincing.

Dad pats my back.

I force a smile back, but I think I've already done too much damage. What's Lita's secret? I will never be as good as her.

"Ready?" Ben whispers to my mom.

My mom nods stiffly, but her eyes are filling with tears.

He presses a button and straps slither out, holding Javier in place.

I feel the heaviness of Dad's hand on my shoulder. He squeezes slightly, his way of letting me know it'll be all right.

"Mom, please," Javier begs. He squirms, but with the restraints he can't move more than a few centimeters.

Ben slips on plastic gloves. He opens a metal box. In large letters along its side I read: *En Cognito Downloadable Cognizance—Pediatric*. Shiny silver spheres sit inside. Ben lifts one of the "Cogs" out and sets it in what looks like a miniature ice cream scoop. He presses a button on its handle, and the Cog glows purple.

A tear falls down Mom's cheek, and her voice is higher than Javier's. "It's okay, little one. I promise you'll be fine. Be brave."

Javier's body trembles, and tears pour down his cheeks too. I squeeze his hand tighter and keep my thumb gripped on his birthmark.

"Almost done," Ben says calmly. Using the ice cream scoop, he slides the purple Cog along the base of Javier's neck, then holds it in place. "Only a few seconds now."

Javier clenches his eyes shut.

I lean in, and his eyelids flutter, opening to meet mine for just a moment. I move even closer. "See you when you wake up," I whisper in Javier's ear.

Javier sniffs, then squeaks back, "When we wake up—" and in an instant, he goes limp and stops breathing.

I let go of his lifeless hand and stand, collapsing into Dad's chest. Mom cocoons her arms around both of us. I use Dad's shirt to wipe my eyes, hoping no one but Dad notices.

The smooth female voice of the computer speaks. "*Stasis pod seven filling.*"

I can't look. I know the other children in their pods are resting peacefully, but none of them are my brother. Javier was talking just a few moments ago.

I keep my head buried in Dad's shirt as the clicks of Javier's pod being latched echo in the room.

"I'm sorry to rush you, but . . ." Ben says.

Dad eases me across the room toward one of the few remaining empty pods. "We understand."

I wipe my eyes on Dad's shirt again and look up.

Ben is moving slowly to stand in front of me. He tilts his head in confusion.

Mom clears her throat. Her eyes widen at me. What am I missing? I hurry to look down, trying not to be too obvious. Right in front of me, Ben's holding out the same bag he'd given Javier. I hadn't even seen it.

"Your clothes?" he says.

My hand shakes as I reach out to take it from him. "Thanks."

He glances at my parents. Did he notice? No one says a word.

"Petra?" Ben looks directly into my eyes. "Did you not see me?"

I bite my lip and drop my head. I glance up at Dad, and he gives me a weak smile, then looks away. This is so messed up. But I've ruined everything.

I set the bag down and can't help my desperate stare at Ben.

I feel my Mom push her arm forward in front of me, as if to protect me, but then Ben picks up the bag. He hands it back to me. "Let's get Petra dressed," he says, nodding at my parents.

Mom makes a hiccupped cry. "Thank you," she answers.

I can't help noticing Ben glance out the window toward the forest again. "We do need to hurry."

I walk behind the partition and open the bag. Sandwiched between the clothes is a silvery white cap like the kind swimmers wear. I imagine shoving my tumbleweed of hair in that thing, and know I'll look just like a brown Q-tip.

I try not to think of it. Why do I care about that right now?

I drop my clothes to the floor and pull on the shorts. They

skid to a halt at my thighs. With one final yank, I wonder if I'll wake up as a balloon animal, pinched off in the spots the suit covers. I hurry to slip the tank over my head before my mom can barge in to help me.

I pull the pendant Lita gave me out of my pant pocket and clutch it in my hand. The sun's silver rays poke into my palm. Metal tiles chill the bottom of my feet as I walk out.

My hand trembles as I hold my obsidian pendant out to Ben. "I can't lose it." My body feels like it's held together by strings that are splitting and fraying inside me.

Ben steps forward and takes the pendant from my hand. He gently sets my magic link to Lita inside a plastic pouch. "It'll be right here when you wake up," he says, smiling.

I can't catch a full breath. Mom wraps her arms around me, her breathing jagged in my ear.

She kisses my cheek. "I love you so much."

I squeeze her back, but there's a lump so large in my throat, I can't tell her I love her more. We move toward the pod where Dad and Ben wait.

"I promise you," Ben says to my parents, glancing toward the window again, "I'll do whatever I can to get them there safely."

I want to thank him, but it'll call more attention to how weird it is that he's going to spend his entire life babysitting me. Dad helps me step up into the pod, kissing my forehead. I lay my head all the way back, stretching to make sure no skin pinches or pulls. My entire body shivers just like Javier's, and I can't stop it.

Mom sets her hand on my forehead, and Dad stands next to me, holding my hand.

Ben pulls on new gloves and lifts one of the Cogs from the box. He sets it in the Cog installer and presses the button. It glows purple. "Botany. Geology. Standard core. Looks like we've got it all."

"And my elective?" I ask.

Ben's brow furrows. "Elective?"

I'm suddenly a lot colder. "Mom?"

Mom turns to Ben. "We arranged for Petra to have a mythology elective as she's nearly thirteen."

Ben sweeps his finger over his tablet and shakes his head. "I'm sorry, it's not here," he says. "The Lead Monitor finalized all the curriculum herself."

I think of the grumpy woman with the tight bun. Why would she leave them out? Pinpricks run up my spine. I need those stories. Without them, how can I be a great storyteller? The one word comes out wobbly. "Please—"

Ben gives me a weak smile. "I like stories too." He nods toward a desk in the corner. "More priceless than anything else on this ship."

I can't see distinctly, but it looks like he has a stack of librex there. Each of those are capable of storing thousands of holoscripts. "I'll talk to the Lead Monitor and see what I can—"

"Ben!" Dad interrupts, running toward the window.

Ben sets down the Cog installer. His eyes grow wide and he walks slowly after my dad. "We thought we had more time."

Dad sighs deeply and leans his head against the window.

“What’s happening?” Mom asks, finally turning away from me.

I sit up in the pod but can’t see what they see. I stand and walk toward the window. Dad tries to block my view, but not before I see a swarm of dark shapes running toward the ship from the forest. Many of them are carrying objects. I don’t want to think of any of those dark objects being anything more than some garden tools the people found in the ranger station’s shed.

A deep thud echoes near our window. Mom stands next to me and grips my hand again.

A soft robotic voice comes over the main speakers. “Closing main doors.”

“What?” Mom’s hand breaks out in a sweat. “Now?”

“We’ll have to move even quicker,” Ben motions with his head to a padded chair bolted to the wall. “Only one jump seat per room in this sector.”

Dad directs me back to the pod. My parents both hurry to situate me into it, their eyes desperate.

Ben rushes, fumbling to activate the Cog again. Its fading purple light glows bright again.

Just like with Javier, the ropes cinch around my head, waist, and feet, holding me steady.

“Ready?” Ben says.

I blow out a deep breath but don’t answer. I try to keep my lips from shaking. I bite the inside of my cheek. With the

download, I would've had other stories. Not anymore. I will be just as normal as I always was. A tear trickles down one cheek.

Ben slides the Cog along my neck at the top of my spine, until it catches in the indent at the base of my skull.

I focus on my breathing in and out slowly and think of the most comforting thing I can. *The prayers of abuelas and mothers. Estrellas sin cuenta.*

"En Cognito's Cogs are biocompatible," Ben says. "She won't feel anything."

But I do. It gouges into my skin like a jagged rock. I need to stay still so this goes quickly. I swallow and wait for it to sink in and put me to sleep.

Ben pulls his hand away. Impacted-zit pressure burrows just under the surface of my skin. Suddenly, I can't move or breathe or speak or blink. Part of the Cog is working.

But something is wrong. I should be asleep. Eyes wide open, I can still see. I can hear.

I try to scream. Nothing comes out.

Ben swipes on the pod's screen. The system responds, "*Stasis pod twelve filling.*" Pinpricks like fire ant bites run over my skin as the cold gel seeps around my body and into my ears.

Gel pours over my tongue and down my throat. Seconds after it makes contact with each area, I no longer feel a thing there.

It hits the corner of my eyes, and a green glow covers my vision.

Ben's words are garbled, but I still hear them. This can't be

happening. I'd rather be outside with the people attacking the ship than trapped like this. The only thing I can think of to help are Lita's prayers for me.

Estrellas sin cuenta . . .

"Why is she staring at me?" Mom's voice trembles.

Estrellas sin cuenta . . .

"That's a normal reaction. She's already asleep."

Estrellas sin cuenta . . .

Ben leans over, and with his gloved hands, pushes my eyelids shut.