

The Rainbow Maker's Tale



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Prologue

When had I become this misfit creature? Was I always destined to exist outside the boundaries of the life I had been offered...No – that couldn't be right...so why did I do this to myself? And why couldn't I stop?

I glanced down at the newest source of my discontent. The small receiver sat harmlessly in my open palm – a black plastic sphere connected to a transmission circuit – identical to the many components I had seen throughout my life on the space station: innocuous and regular. In itself it was nothing – meant nothing – but when...and if...I returned it to its place alongside the other harmless workings of the viewing screen, it would become something more once again.

It took all my strength to NOT crush the tiny piece of plastic inside my fist, to try and squeeze it into some unidentifiable, unworkable shape that would fit with nothing on the station. *If I could do that it would be just like me*, I realised with a silent, hollow laugh. Then I sighed, feeling my whole body deflate as the air left my lungs. Even my own bitterness was getting on my nerves today.

Slumping onto the edge of my tidily made bed – the silver-grey thermocontrol sheet crumpling noiselessly beneath me – I surveyed my bedroom. It was perfectly bland in its uniformity: the soft, cream plastic floor identical to every other domestic interior on the space station; the bare walls similar to those I saw in the brightly lit rooms of my neighbours when I gazed out of my window at night. The only exception to the generic space was the fact that the single viewing screen in my room now lay in pieces around the floor – with one small part still clenched in my hand. I had done it again.

Was I really surprised to find out that I was being watched?

After a few minutes consideration I recognised that I was angry, frustrated even, but not surprised. After all – to answer my initial question – I *knew* exactly when it was that I had become the misfit creature I was today...I remembered the horror of realising that there was something very wrong with the world I inhabited...I had been eight years old.

Of course, that knowledge was the very heart of my annoyance too: I knew – knew without a doubt – that there was something amiss with the inhabitants of the Space Station Hope: that they – or we – were not as we were led to believe.

But knowing that it was the community that was wrong and not I changed nothing. I was the outsider; I was the misfit. My frustration came from this being unfair. *Why me?* Just because no one else seemed to know... It did not seem right, that I had seen but no one else had. Then again, during the nine years since I realised something was terribly wrong with our lives, I had also come to understand that no one cares *how* something works, just so long as it does.

And that was why I found myself here. Sitting, surrounded by parts of a machine I would need to reconstruct before my parents came home: because I *needed* to know how it worked and why... Perhaps one day when I worked out how – when I had dismantled enough of the world around me to know how everything worked – I would understand *why*. So far, knowledge had only led me to more questions.

Chapter 1 – End of (School) Days

It was days like this when I felt it more than ever: I wasn't a real human.

Was the air staler today than usual? Perhaps subconsciously I detected mustiness to the oxygen that was moving through my body and that had caused the day to start on a sour note. Or perhaps – more likely – it was because pretty much every day I struggled to feel like a human being; I just hid it from myself better than I was doing today.

Generally, I believed I hid most things well, myself included. The ability to be invisible in a small room filled with people was a talent I was confident I had perfected during my seventeen years existence on the Space Station Hope. *Existence!* I laughed silently – harshly – to myself when I realised the word I had chosen...not *living* merely existing. I acknowledged the distinction grimly.

Ugh, I was feeling bitter this morning!

The alarm from the viewing screen chimed melodiously. Normally it would have brought wakefulness, but I was already awake today. Instead the sound was simultaneously piercing and soothing to my disturbed mind. It was *definitely* going to be one of those days. I sighed.

“Balik?”

I heard Mother's voice call out to me as she passed through the corridor outside my room, the accompanying knock was a reminder for me to get up, get dressed, come for breakfast, leave for school...or any or all of the above...I don't think it mattered because it was always the same knock and I always obeyed. And so I did just that: I got up, because that was what the knock meant right at that moment.

Kicking away the thermocontrol sheet that shrouded me as I lay in bed keeping my body at the optimum temperature level for comfort and easy sleep, I knew I was taking my frustration out on a harmless inanimate object and not for the first time, I wondered why I was so particularly annoyed that morning.

There was a part of me that hated the angry beast that lived always inside me – waiting to make itself known – while another part of me relished the familiarity of the feeling when it reared its furious head. Of all the human emotions I was familiar with, anger was the one I most particularly disliked, but also the one that permeated my moods most frequently.

Screwing my eyes tightly shut I breathed slowly in and out, in and out; the air pulling deep into my chest as it filled my lungs (stale or not I couldn't decipher) and cooling the heat of my temper. When I opened my eyes again I was calmer – controlled – and ready to face the world. Or at least, face my parents.

When I entered the living space, our apartment pod looked exactly the same that morning as it always did: polished white and cream plastic walls; empty chairs arranged neatly around the table (where my regulatory breakfast sat waiting, it's perfect balance of fibre, carbohydrate and vitamins familiar as it beckoned to me), whilst Mother stood in the kitchen staring out of the window.

“Good morning Mother,” I greeted her politely as I scraped a chair away from the table and took my seat, trying to ignore the awkwardness of the uncomfortable grating noise in the silent space. She turned slightly towards me and appraised my expression curiously, as though my words had alerted her to something about me that I was unaware of.

“Good morning Balik,” she replied finally after a second or so more of staring. “How are you feeling today?”

“Fine, thank you,” I answered, focusing on the breakfast plate in front of me as a distraction, inhaling the familiar smell of the food. In truth I felt blank and a little numb now that my earlier anger had passed and all I had left was another day of *existence* to look forward to. But this was not unusual: my blank mind was another permanent element of my life, especially around my parents.

I had no solid reasoning or tangible evidence for my conviction that certain people on the station could understand things about me, even though I had never spoken them aloud. But irrational as it was – usually I was the most logical of people – that was what I felt...what I *believed*. And so, it had been a long time since I had allowed myself to think and feel freely when I was with anyone else on the station.

My rational mind could only construe that the expression of my face and the meaning between my words gave away much more than I wished to divulge when I spoke to anyone and so over time I had stopped speaking...then I had stopped thinking...unless I was alone and free to be as angry and frustrated as I wanted to be. *What a wonderful person I was!*

“Are you worried about your examinations?” Mother asked her voice soft and probing as though she could sense something about me but couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was.

Her question caught me off-guard and I froze for half a second, my fork part way between my plate and my mouth; it wasn’t often she made conversation with me, especially in a morning. Usually she would hover around until I had eaten my meal and taken my vitamin pills before leaving quietly for another day of work at The Clinic.

What made today different?

Nothing was immediately apparent and so shaking away my question I answered her.

“Not especially,” I admitted honestly. It was the final day of school exams, but the worst was behind me, just History that afternoon and then I was free. Free of school, I corrected immediately, I wasn’t sure I could ever be *free* on the space station given all the limitations we had...but that was a whole other aggravation.

I glanced up and saw that Mother was still standing beside the table, her eyes fixed on mine: she wanted more. I swallowed noisily. “My least favourite subjects have all been done and they seemed to go well enough.”

“I heard from one of my colleagues at The Clinic that most of the leavers are going to Park 17 when the exam is finished. Will you be celebrating with your friends afterwards?” Mother pressed on, her eyes remained unblinkingly focused on mine.

It surprised me that she didn’t already know the answer to this – partly due to her uncanny ability to guess correctly things about me that I thought were well concealed – but more because it was so obvious from my lack of social interaction with anyone. I didn’t have friends.

It made me wonder whether Mother truly knew how good I was at making myself invisible among my peers, or why I might be doing that in the first place. But then, most of the time I didn’t really understand my behaviour myself...it wasn’t logical or planned, it just happened that way...so why would she understand anything more about me than I understood of myself?

I was an outsider; unhappy with the guarded and restricted existence we led on the space station, but too scared to reveal my true feelings that were so at odds with everyone else around me. It seemed that everyone else was happy with their beautiful

cage and so they didn't bother to want to see beyond the bars, or look into the shadows where things felt...*wrong*.

Shaking my head slightly once, I dismissed the numerous thoughts that had been whirling through my mind and focused on her question again, realising I would have to provide Mother with a reasonably coherent reply. "Probably not," I muttered searching my half-empty plate for answers that did not appear. And so I left it at that. I could tell that Mother was dissatisfied with my response, but satisfied that there was nothing more I had to say on the subject and so she returned to normal: hovering until I'd finished my food and taken my vitamins. I was grateful that she let the silence open between us once again, uncomfortable though it was, it was better than the alternative.

* * *

Many historians pinpoint the start of the rapid decline of human civilisation on Earth to the year 2045. What is significant about this date and the subsequent events of the period; particularly their environmental and geopolitical impact upon the human race?

The final question of the examination glared at me from the viewing screen. *Of course*, I muttered internally, *we need another reminder of why we're here after all...* A deeply resentful sigh escaped through my tightly pressed lips, filling the silent room with noise, or so it felt to me, but no one turned around to look at me in shock or confusion. I must have been as quiet as ever.

My gaze lifted from the screen to hover slightly above the glowing letters and I focused on the heads of the people sat in front of me: their necks were tilting their faces towards the screens in concentration, their automatic discourse headsets perched neatly on each of their heads. They looked industrious, bland and indistinguishable from one another in that moment.

In the next instant – for no reason I could accurately explain – I felt compelled to be different from them and as though my own headset had suddenly become white-hot I yanked it from my head, tossing it lightly towards its holder on my desktop. My attention was distracted again – by the one person in the room who was distinct for me – and I did not bother to pick the headset up or re-arrange its position when it bounced uselessly against the plastic frame and came to rest untidily beneath the screen.

Cassie sat in front of me – two desks forwards, one to the left – her figure drawing my gaze magnetically...just as it always seemed to. Of course she paid me no attention, being as generally unaware of my invisible presence as my other classmates.

But I was aware of her – always aware it seemed, as though I had some uncanny sixth sense when it came to her – mainly it was irritating as there was no real basis for the fascination: she was the same as everyone else, except that...*except what?* I'd never yet been able to answer that question, although that was hardly surprising as I'd barely spoken ten words to her during the years that we'd shared a classroom. No wonder I couldn't understand her – I could barely understand myself!

A movement to my left nudged me back to the reality of the exam room and my eyes gradually re-focused on what I had been staring at. Cassie had just removed

her own automatic discourse set and set it carefully down onto the plastic holder; the motion of her arm had been what I had noticed through unfocused eyes.

Watching her – I was engrossed only as a distraction at first – as she pressed her fingers against her temple where the headset had rested a moment earlier. She massaged the spot slowly, as though it were painful. I was immediately struck by how odd her actions were: the discourse units were supposed to be absolutely non-invasive when they extracted information from your mind and relayed it into the computer system, they shouldn't be painful at all.

Perhaps there's something else wrong? I mused, willingly caught up in the diversion and near forgetting about the unanswered exam question flashing away on the screen slightly to the right of where my attention was focused.

Not being stupid or in complete denial I knew that at least part of the reason I noticed Cassie was that I found her attractive. Her dark brown hair fell in soft waves to somewhere near the middle of her back and she had interesting green eyes, which I knew glowed more brightly when she was happy and laughing with her friends; she did this freely and often, but never with me.

I also recognised the keen intelligence behind those eyes that moved rapidly when considering the world around her, taking in all the important details; they would narrow slightly when she was grasping something critical or complex. In my opinion – unvoiced of course – Cassie was frequently more astute than she allowed others to see and I had often wondered why she wanted to hide that. Perhaps if I'd ever spoken to her I might have been able to work that out...

There was a flash of white as Cassie moved her arm again. Her skin was fair – much paler than mine, although the colour had a subtle creaminess to it – as though she had never seen the sun, which of course it hadn't living on the station as we did.

But neither had mine and my skin always held a warm, brown glow; the visible mark of my heritage of ancestors who had lived in the hotter areas of the Earth.

There was more movement in front of me.

Cassie appeared distracted herself, peeking around at our classmates whose illuminated faces were trained in concentration on their screens. Everyone was focused on the task at hand...everyone except me I remembered a second too late as her head swivelled in my direction and her sharp green eyes locked onto mine.

Damn!

I swiftly turned my attention back towards the screen where it should have been focused – registering mild confusion in her questioning expression as I did so – and pulled the keyboard towards me, thumping the keys randomly as though I had just paused a few moments to collect my thoughts.

Don't be stupid, I scolded myself, immediately embarrassed by my childish behaviour and shoving the keyboard away. It was obvious I had been watching her, I should just have smiled...or shrugged...or both, to show it was nothing...now I probably looked guilty and a bit weird as well.

Deep breath, I told myself. *Don't be an idiot, just glance back now and if Cassie's not looking at you like you're a complete freak, smile then get back to work.*

OK, I agreed, second chance.

Peeking back towards the spot that had held my interest a few seconds earlier, I was slightly deflated to see that Cassie's attention was back on her work. My well thought-out plan only half a minute too late to be any use; story of my life! I shook my head, irritated with myself and amused by my irritation in equal measure. Obviously I was more easily distracted today than usual.

Turning away I glared at the un-started question blinking insistently on my monitor. Beneath were the several lines of nonsense I had typed in my hurry to appear like a normal human being when Cassie caught me watching her...*very normal*, I observed dryly as I deleted the text, tapping the backspace key harder than necessary in annoyance.

Another loud sigh escaped my lips as I resigned myself to the task at hand. At a minimum I had to pass this exam to graduate onto the sequence of placements that would determine my long-term role on the station. The subject of History itself was not the problem...my interpretation of past events in my current frame of mind was the issue. But that could not be helped as I pretty much lived in this frame of mind...*the decline of human civilisation on Earth*...we still existed, why were they always asking us to look to the past and not the future? I shook my head, dismissing my own question; it was not the time or place for answering that.

My hand hovered uncertainly over the keyboard, debating whether to strap on the auto-discourse headset or to actually use the more antiquated equipment in front of me. I decided I needed a bit of space for my thoughts today and that would be better achieved with the keyboard. Pulling the lightweight panel towards me and settling myself properly into the chair, I leaned back and began to answer the last question of my final exam.

Chapter 2 – Making Friends

I was re-reading my answer – *diatribe?* – on the reaction of the human race to climate change and global upheaval. My essay definitely had a bias towards the surveillance states and population control that had developed in response to global warming. It was not a positive picture of humanity and I wondered how much my recent irritations with life on the station had influenced this or how much the behaviour of our ancestors was the source of my frustrations with life on the station. It was open for debate either way.

“Test period concludes in five minutes.”

I did not look up to acknowledge the familiar electronic voice when it made the announcement, although at the edge of my vision I noticed Cassie’s head tilt in the direction of the speakers as it disturbed her industrious silence. Finished with my own review I turned my attention away from the screen. There was nothing else in the empty room to focus on and so I absent-mindedly watched Cassie as she skimmed through her answer, pausing every now and again to make a correction. Of course that was just a good excuse for me...*how sad?*

Cassie had just flopped backwards in her seat, stretching out her arms and shoulders as though she were particularly stiff, when our screens closed down and the exam ended. For a few seconds I remained in place, before realising that she was not in any hurry to get up. I wasn’t going to choose today to start being chatty so I may as well get out of here, I reasoned with myself, and hastily shoved my chair away from the desk.

A piercing screech tore through the silent room and I cringed internally – *how loud?* Unsurprisingly my lone companion was shocked by the noise, jerking around in

her seat to stare at me in surprise. I had already moved quickly – motivated by embarrassment – and was by the door when it occurred to me to apologise for startling her.

“Sorry,” I muttered as quietly as I could, whilst still allowing Cassie to hear me. My voice carried easily in the otherwise soundless room, the silence following my apology seeming loud by comparison. I busied myself with gathering up my possessions as a distraction, hoping to escape as speedily as possible. It took me a few seconds to realise that Cassie was actually talking to me – not allowing me to be invisible as I normally was – *what was she saying?*

“...forgotten I wasn’t alone in here...brain is half-asleep...”

Only half-hearing her words I thought it sounded like *she* was apologising to me – what would she be apologising for? That can’t be right I must have misunderstood what she’d said. Looking up in an attempt to work out what she was saying, I saw her arm wave towards her viewing screen, but she’d stopped speaking now. *What did that mean?* I wondered, more confused than ever. Feeling rather lost I opted for a non-committal nod, which would hopefully not mean anything stupid or offensive.

I was wrong – whatever she had taken it to mean – my nod was not favourably received: Cassie’s eyes narrowed slightly as though I had irritated her, although I couldn’t see why such a simple action would have that effect. Her expression changed swiftly once more and I saw she was trying to disguise her initial annoyance. This was not how I would have wanted a conversation between us to go at all. I tried to open my mouth with the intention of apologising again...maybe even admitting that I hadn’t heard what she’d said in the first place, if it made things better...but it was too

late. Her eyes had drifted away from me to focus on the floor instead as she began making her way towards the door.

Fidgeting nervously with the strap on my shoulder bag I debated saying something else, but the words stuck in my throat and the silence remained. *Stop squirming!* I commanded – frustrated with myself now – and my hands dropped uselessly to my sides. Just then I noticed Cassie’s school sack sitting on the floor beside my foot and saw a chance to make amends for whatever offence I had caused a few moments earlier. Swooping down, I slid my hand fluidly through the arm loops on the bag, lifting it quickly and quietly from the ground.

“Here you go,” I said as politely as I could, trying to convey my courteous intentions as I held out the bag towards her.

Cassie looked up – appearing surprised by me again, but perhaps more positively this time? – her eyes flickered to mine and held my gaze. I was close enough now to see her lovely green irises spark as they conveyed disbelief...then gratitude...softening to something else I couldn’t translate – I hadn’t seen the expression before.

“Oh!” She exclaimed, her eyes flashing appealingly once more. “I mean – er – thanks!” She seemed nervous herself now...or at least unsettled...that was interesting.

We waited a second or so in silence while Cassie appeared to be taking her time making up her mind what to do next, before she reached out and took the bag I was still holding for her. She swung the strap onto her shoulder so quickly it almost smashed into the viewing screen next to her. I nearly laughed aloud as her expression rapidly registered shock, then embarrassment – dropping her eyes from mine – before she gained control of her features again. My mouth twitched into a half-smile that I

was unable to disguise by the time she looked back at me and for once – feeling bold and brave – I didn't look away, but met the full force of her inquisitive eyes.

Cassie was an interesting person to read: her features remained largely still with only minute movements and changes to her eyes indicating what she was thinking – or perhaps feeling. I was already aware of her expressive eyes, but was surprised by how much more I could read in them now that she was standing a mere arm's length away from me. She opened her mouth once, preparing to say something before she seemed to change her mind. My mouth twitched into a wider smile as I waited for whatever it was she wanted to say; I was quite enjoying the effect my presence seemed to be having on her. It was...new...

Only a few short moments passed, but I was aware of her gaze roaming curiously across my face, meeting my own eyes fleetingly, before looking away. "Thanks," I heard her mutter again. It was less than I expected after such a long silence and I struggled to interpret how her words connected with the changes in her expression. I had no more time to wonder as she reached past me to activate the door panel, a clear indication that she wanted to get away.

No. I was taken aback by the firmness of my unuttered statement – I did not want our *non-conversation* to end – I wanted her to stay. Without thinking I spoke up, finding my old voice – the one that wasn't scared to be heard, that wanted to remain invisible – hoping that Cassie would stop and answer me.

"What did you think of the exam?" I asked urgently, my words rushing out in a half-jumble. It worked. She paused and turned back towards me, but did not look at me properly. *What does that mean?*

"Not too bad really, but who likes exams?" She replied quickly and smiled, shrugging lightly as she dismissed her own words. It felt slightly unnatural, like it was

an automatic reply. Without thinking I blurted out the first thing that came into my head.

“I quite like them,” I admitted honestly then shrugging, unconsciously mimicking Cassie’s previous movement before I could stop myself. I was speaking just to fill in the gap and I realised that I was saying what I thinking without pausing to edit. Now I had to say something more to try and explain myself but as I hurriedly continued, talking until my words ran out, I knew I was making it worse: “...it’s something to do with the pressure I guess – and I kind of enjoy the feeling of testing yourself –”

Not the right thing to say, I realised as Cassie’s mouth dropped open and she looked at me like I was crazy. Even though I regretted even more my unrevised honesty, I couldn’t leave it alone. My first thought was that I had to make amends, but I wasn’t sure how. This whole experience was highly confusing...Cassie’s reactions were not at all predictable. “Are you OK?” I asked finding my voice again. It was all I had to offer.

For a few seconds Cassie did not answer. I had to admit – it might have been a lame thing to confess – but I couldn’t see what was so horrendously offensive about the statement I had just made to justify her continuing shock. Even if Cassie did not agree with me, it was hardly the worst truth I could have told her...I had plenty of others that sounded more crazy than true, even though they were real. But then, she hadn’t left the room either, so I could only assume that she was planning to respond...sometime...

“Yes – sorry,” Cassie said finally, her lips curving into a small contrite smile as she spoke. Again I did not understand what she would be apologising for and my curiosity was about to force me into speaking when she continued. “It’s just that I

actually *do* like exams, pretty much for the reason you just said but I've never thought that anyone else might feel like that and so I would feel stupid saying it."

"Oh right..." I paused, unsure at first how to respond to her admission that we had something in common. I certainly had not expected that. Then I heard her words again in my head; she felt the same way I did, but thought that she was stupid for doing so? That didn't make sense. As I was mulling this over I repeated her words aloud to myself: "...you would feel stupid saying what I said..."

"No – not stupid..." Cassie interrupted quickly, attempting to explain I thought, "*it's* not stupid...it just surprised me to hear you say *it*, I guess." She was struggling.

"You don't tell people the truth," I observed, my words sounding brusquer than I had intended them to, although the fact remained: she said one thing but meant another, based on what someone might think of that. It was an interesting reversal of my own behaviour: I stayed quiet and behaved one way, when in reality I wanted to do the complete opposite, based on what people would think. I wanted to run and scream and fight...but instead I stayed, silent and peaceable.

I was so preoccupied by my private musings on this that when Cassie replied her voice surprised me. "No – I mean yes – I do tell people the truth. That's not what I meant."

Her tone was defensive and I realised that she had heard the bluntness in my observation and taken it as a criticism of her behaviour, rather than it being a statement of fact uttered by someone who hadn't conversed with anyone properly for a very long time...*how many misunderstandings could you get in one short dialogue?*

"I didn't mean to imply that you *lied* to people," I tried to clarify, finding it hard to meet her angry eyes. As I searched my suddenly empty brain for some more

words, my nervous fingers sought some diversion and found the strap of my bag. They began ineffectually fiddling with the plastic clasp whilst I mumbled and stuttered incoherently. “I just meant that you said something as though it was how you felt when you don’t feel that way at all...I mean...” Words failed me. “...oh forget it, I don’t know what I mean!” I muttered finally as I tried to step past her and escape into the empty corridor outside. *This whole conversation was a mistake!* I berated myself angrily. *You’re not right for this place – you’re not right for her – so just stop this nonsense and leave!*

“Don’t worry about it,” I heard Cassie’s delicate voice murmur as I passed. She sounded cautious but forgiving. She was not annoyed. “I think I know what you meant.” My feet paused involuntarily, ignoring my order to leave and forcing me to acknowledge the effect this young woman had on me: her anger made me apologetic; her forgiveness made me happy. I smiled slightly, recognising a sensation inside me that had lain dormant for a long time.

What had I become during these last few years of my existence? The emotions and thoughts I suppressed around others on the station had moulded me into this empty vessel that moved alone through the routine of my daily life. But the truth of it had eluded me until now. I literally *knew* that I had been empty before because in that moment – in this girl’s presence – I was aware of a peculiar feeling inside me of *filling up*: something nervous fluttered vaguely in my abdomen, matching a sensation of expansion in my chest that was not physical but strangely *other*. It had taken me years to subdue, but a few short sentences spoken with her and I remembered something human about myself that I had restrained in my pursuit of something else...just then that purpose felt void.

“I think I know what you meant too,” I acknowledged as my smile widened with understanding of both myself and her. We were similar creatures; more similar than I had expected because I always supposed my attraction to her had been due to our differences – it turns out that they might have just been superficial.

This newfound knowledge gave me confidence and I felt sure of myself as I turned back towards Cassie with the intention of prolonging our encounter as long as possible. *What a remarkable change...* “Where are you going now?” I asked casually, not even having to work at sounding nonchalant.

“Now?” She sounded confused, as though she were uncertain of what exactly I was asking of her. I thought it best to clarify.

“Well – as much as you *love* examinations, I assume you don’t intend to spend the rest of the day in the assessment room, do you?” I was teasing her I knew – but it didn’t feel impolite, more comical – I felt another smile playing cheekily with my lips as I waited for her answer.

Cassie responded similarly, her tone mocking: “I don’t know – I do really like it in here...” I was briefly entranced as her green eyes flared brightly on meeting my gaze and I had to roll mine – acknowledging her joke – to pull myself free of them before she answered properly. “I was going to head over to Park 17; most of the other classes end up there for a bit of wind down after the last exams.”

The park...others...her friends... I nodded in understanding. Right then I should probably have walked away. I had no reason to be doing this. It wasn’t as though we could be friends, not with what I had been planning to do...*was* going to do I corrected myself firmly. I could not excuse getting Cassie in trouble or putting her in any danger because of me, but at the same time I knew that I was not going to walk away...not just yet.

“Do you mind if I walk with you?” The coward inside me invited calmly, assuring himself that it was *only* a walk.

“Of course,” she accepted quickly. Her voice sounded eager (I liked to hope), which was even worse. I shouldn’t be hoping.

Standing aside in the corridor to make space for her, Cassie stepped out to join me and we walked away from the classroom side-by-side. I found myself glancing at her, examining her features when I believed she wouldn’t see me. Once or twice I thought I noticed her doing the same thing, peeking carefully at me through the shield of her dark hair.

“Ahhhh,” I couldn’t help myself – sighing loudly – as we emerged from the dimly lit building into the bright, *almost* natural daylight of the late afternoon.

“What’s that for?” Cassie laughed, regarding at me with interest.

“The sunlight feels so good after being trapped in that little room,” I grinned back, before turning my face upward to fully capture the warm glow. My eyes closed and I focused for a few seconds on the hot pinky-red colour of my eyelids, as they were backlit by the afternoon sun. I inhaled deeply.

“And here’s me thinking that you *love examinations...*” Cassie teased me softly, throwing my own words back at me and making me smile again. “...*trapped* doesn’t make it sound like you enjoy them that much.”

“That’s just the room, not the activity,” I explained, enjoying the warmth of the sunlight on my face too much to turn away as I answered. My guard was clearly down because when a question ambushed me a moment later I repeated it aloud before I could stop myself. “Don’t you find that living here is just...” I struggled for the word, trying to tie down what the feeling I had was, “...claustrophobic sometimes?” As soon as the words had passed my lips I regretted them...why would

she find the world as negative a place as I did? But then in the same instant, another thought struck me: now that I had said this aloud to someone else – to *her* – I wanted to explain myself. The compulsion to do so was undeniable.

“Even out here, I feel it sometimes,” I turned to look at her now, the warmth forgotten as I wanted to see her reaction to my feelings. “Perhaps it’s because I know that when I look up and see the sky, that it is not really *the sky*: there are no clouds, no stratosphere and troposphere, nothing...just thousands of mirrors, precisely angled to follow the path of the sun as we orbit around it and recreate day and night as though we were still on Earth. It feels real, but I know that it isn’t and so that feels *wrong*...”

Cassie watched me closely, listening intently it seemed, as though she were truly engrossed in what I was saying. “Don’t stop,” she encouraged when I paused. The intensity of her voice was persuasive but I felt unsure now, my earlier confidence fading. Revealing my thoughts unedited no longer seemed as appealing as it had a moment before.

“Sorry – it’s just that I have a tendency to waffle once I get going – you don’t need to listen to my morose views of life here,” I sighed finally, reining myself in. My attempt at nonchalance hit a false note and I wondered whether Cassie would notice.

“Don’t be sorry. It’s nice to hear you speak,” she confessed. It was obvious that *she* was the one who was speaking without thinking now, surprising herself as well as me I thought. Cassie blushed attractively, blood pooling beneath the soft, creamy skin of her cheeks as she struggled to explain her words, clearly trying to take back what she had just openly admitted. I suppose it was a little mean of me not to step in and save her the effort, but again I selfishly found myself enjoying her unease, hoping that it was more to do with me than it probably was.

“What I meant is you’re normally so quiet...” She sputtered to a stop once again and I could see her mentally revising her words before she continued. I decided it was too cruel to leave her scrambling for apologies and so I turned away before she looked at me, feigning indifference to make her feel better. It was a struggle to keep a smile from my lips, but I managed it.

We lapsed into a comfortable silence, moving through the late afternoon pedestrians meandering on the plaza, each of us preoccupied with our own thoughts. I paid little attention to the people milling around – reverting to my normal behaviour in company – with the exception that I was thinking for once; thinking solely about the pretty girl walking by my side. Now that I was focused, I realised that the comfortable silence was no longer so simple: I didn’t want to waste the time I had with her, which I knew would be very short. I wanted to know more. If I could, I’m sure I would have wanted to know *everything*, but that was never going to be possible. I settled for the first question that came to mind.

“Why don’t you use automatic discourse in your exams?” I spoke louder than necessary in order to pull her from the happy abstraction she appeared to have fallen into, but then felt guilty for disturbing her.

“I don’t always use the keyboard,” she disagreed, eyeing me warily as she answered and I wondered whether I had irritated her with my interruption, “I was using the headset today,” she pointed out.

“Not for the whole exam though – what made you change?” The question was spoken in a rush, nerves overtaking me. My conversation skills were so rusty it was apparent that I couldn’t engage someone without annoying them. But then a glance at her face told me something else: Cassie didn’t look aggravated; her expression was more...*intrigued*...?

“I just like to use the keyboard for answering certain types of question,” she shrugged casually as though to convey that it was nothing, but I couldn’t harness my curiosity. *Why did I always have to know the answer to everything?*

“What types of question?” I persisted, even though I wanted to stop myself. I was so annoying.

“Usually the longer, essay-type ones; I find it easier to arrange my thoughts in my head and then type them out, rather than trying to sort them out and regurgitate them simultaneously as I find myself doing with the headset sometimes...” Cassie politely answered me – irritating as I was – and I realised that she actually seemed to enjoy responding to my odd questions. Then she turned the focus back on me. “What about you? I saw you using the keyboard this afternoon – ”

How do I answer this? Honestly... Well, to tell you the truth I was day-dreaming about how – out of everyone I’ve ever met on the station – you seem to hold some strange fascination for me, which I’ve never been able to understand and instead of answering the question I was occupied with an in-depth assessment of the lovely creamy appearance of your skin, but then you turned around and saw me and so I pretended to be typing so you wouldn’t think I was a weird stalker.

No – the truth was not an option.

Keep it simple, I told myself: “I’ve seen you use it in the past and wondered why – just thought I would try it.” Accompanied by a relaxed shrug, I was sure I looked the picture of casualness.

“And?” she pressed, her eyes widening to emphasise the question.

“And...” I echoed her drawn out tone. “...Once I got used to it I found that it helped keep thoughts clearer in my head for answering the question...” *Ha, that’s*

actually true, I realised with a silent laugh. "...especially once I was planning out more complex arguments."

"Do you enjoy history?" Cassie asked as soon as I finished answering her last question. It seemed that she was genuinely interested...well, honesty was fine for this one I supposed.

"Yes, but not like you do," I forgot myself and answered a little too honestly; my knowledge surely revealing the particular interest I paid to her likes and dislikes. *Stalker*, I accused myself again.

"What do you mean?" She demanded curiously.

Of course my odd knowledge was confusing to her – it baffled me – I tried to be dismissive, back to being casual and thinking before I spoke this time. "Nothing bad – just that I get the impression History is one of your best subjects along with Literary Studies..."

Apparently she accepted this simple explanation. "And yours would be Astro-engineering I take it?" she replied.

Her familiarity with *my* preferences startled me; perhaps I was not quite as invisible as I thought? *Don't flatter yourself*, I scoffed, *you've come top of the class every year; she'd have to be pretty obtuse never to have noticed that!* Ignoring the pragmatic voice, I spoke truthfully for once, wanting this stranger to understand something about me – something *real*. "Engineering is probably my best subject, but I think my *favourite* is Biochemistry."

A small groan of aversion escaped her lips and at first I thought I had said something wrong – *how could I have offended her?* – then I saw the expression on her face and remembered that they were probably the least popular subjects for everyone else at school, why would Cassie be any different?

“What’s the matter? You’re good at both of them!” I laughed lightly, causing her to grimace even more.

“I get by,” she amended. “Don’t get me wrong, I find both of them interesting, but neither of them is a natural strong point for me.”

“You know what’s funny?” I realised suddenly, speaking my thoughts aloud as my feet froze mid-step – walking and talking seemed a little difficult for me today.

Cassie paused too, curious once more. “What?”

“Our parents have exactly the same jobs and had their children at the same time, but you and I are quite different.” *Surely our genetically similar backgrounds and upbringings by parents working in the same professions would have generated some similarities between us? Even our basic academic preferences appeared at odds with one another...*

Cassie was regarding me with confusion, she didn’t appear to be convinced by my observation. “Why would that make us alike?” She wondered, a dismissive shrug accompanying her words and I realised that she did this more than I’d ever noticed before, repeatedly shrugging to down play her words or opinion. *Was she less confident than I’d always thought?*

Pushing my observation aside, I answered her question, trying to explain myself. “Well, just that with the whole nature/nurture debate, you would have expected some similarities, but it seems we’re quite different.”

Cassie began moving again, apparently satisfied with whatever information my limited answer had given her. She had walked a couple of steps before I had to remind my feet to move too and with a couple of long strides fell back into step beside her. She appeared lost in thought and I did not want to disturb her and so was

content to simply walk beside her in silence. I focused on my feet, padding along easily next to hers and lost myself in blank musings for a while.

The time passed too quickly and we were entering Park 17 before I knew it. Curling over the entrance to the park, the archway – designed in the style of heavy Victorian ironwork, but made of plastic – felt odd and contrived to me. Familiar stirrings of irritation swirled in my stomach as this registered in my mind. Crossing into the park I heard the new sound our footsteps made as the pathway changed from plastic to wood – constructed from the trunks of banana trees that were grown in the agricultural sector – its purpose purely decorative and intended to give the sense of a home none of us had ever known. I couldn't imagine that the use of wood for this purpose was accurate: it would not have been durable enough to survive the natural elements on Earth for long...as usual, the lack of authenticity aggravated me. I needed a distraction from the acidic thoughts beginning to bubble in my mind and so – quite gladly – I turned my attention back to Cassie.

The features of her face seemed relaxed as she watched her own feet, examining the wooden pathway we were clumping along. She was still lost in private musings. I wondered whether she saw something different here than the frustrating artifice I did and I found myself eager to know what absorbed her thoughts so completely.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked lightly, not wanting to startle her. It did not work and she jumped at the sound of my voice. Turning abruptly towards me as though she had forgotten my presence altogether – easily done I'll freely admit given the effort I normally put into being invisible – Cassie began silently interrogating me with her eyes. In the first instance she looked apologetic, but that rapidly melted into the same unidentifiable expression I'd noted earlier. She was so

confusing to me. There were questions in her eyes that I longed to understand, but it seemed she was in no hurry to make them known. The light rose that blossomed on her cheeks as she blushed at some unknown thought surprised me. *Huh – that was attractive and frustrating...*

“Can I ask you something?” she finally replied dreamily, preventing me from bursting with impatience. I nodded quickly, not trusting myself to speak without my eagerness leaking through. *She’ll think you’re completely crazy if you don’t restrain yourself*, I warned sternly.

Cassie’s face scrunched up slightly as she concentrated – apparently searching for the words to articulate her question – quite adorable I noted distractedly before the anticipation began to mount again. *How hard can it be to ask a question?* I muttered internally, realising that patience was obviously not a virtue of mine. At length she found her words.

“Do you ever feel like you miss the Earth? Even though you’ve never been there...do you think it’s possible?” Her green eyes sparkled now, inquisitive and eager to know my answer and I almost lost myself in them.

Pulling my gaze reluctantly away from her I focused blankly on the park around us, before lifting my eyes upwards as I pondered her question and considered how truthful or not I should be. *Not that it matters*, I reminded myself of my earlier promise, *this is a one-off. You won’t need to see her after today.*

“I wonder if it’s the same as how I think about the sky...because I know it isn’t real...”

“But do you feel like you *miss* the sky?” Her insistence made it sound as though I’d answered the wrong question, she pressed on explaining, “as though there

had been a time when you sat beneath it to watch cloud patterns spreading over you or marvelled at a great expanse of sapphire blue, unmarked by anything else...?”

While I thought for another few seconds – trying to clarify what specifically she was asking me – I couldn’t help smiling. Her tone was so endearing and wistful when she was talking about this; it made her sound like she was from another time, another world.

“Is that funny?” she asked me, sounding unsure as she noticed the expression on my face.

No, not funny. I shook my head.

It appeared that was not enough. Cassie’s eyes remained fixed onto mine, their sparkling green demolishing my guard and when I spoke again all I could do was be honest.

“I was smiling because you sounded...happy or free or...something...” I said, my voice sounding almost as wistful as hers had, unable to really find the words I was looking for. Nothing more came and so I rushed on without thinking. “I don’t know – when you spoke like that – you sounded like one of the romantic poets expounding on the beauty of nature asking me if I missed the *hot and copper sky, the bloody sun at noon.*”

Poetry?! I instantly scoffed at myself as the words passed my lips and I had to look away from Cassie. You’re quoting poetry at this girl?

I know...I know...I almost muttered my frustrated response aloud, but not quite. But yes, quoting poetry to someone you’ve barely ever spoken to...it was obvious I had issues...far too many to mention!

I waited. Waited for Cassie’s laughter or confusion...*something*. There was just silence. *Shocked silence?*

“I’m surprised you remember that kind of thing so well,” Cassie said at length. She sounded normal, perhaps even slightly impressed I thought.

No, that couldn’t be right? I questioned myself, but could not look over to meet her gaze to verify whether she had me pegged as crazy or smart.

“So…” Cassie continued eventually, “do you actually *miss* the sky, or is it something else?”

I smiled to myself once more, as I became sure that I hadn’t ruined the moment, ruined the conversation with my openness and answered her question. “It’s the reality I miss – or crave is probably a better description – I want to *know* what it feels like to truly be human; to live on the planet that created us, rather than floating around a few hundred miles away from it in space.”

“But there’s nothing left!” She cried out; shocked by my statement. “When the expats came aboard the space station they were the last humans who were going to survive; the rest were…doomed!” Her voice faltered at the end, as though her initial reaction was being re-considered as she spoke.

That was not what I had meant. I wasn’t thinking that I actually wanted to go back to the desolate Earth that our ancestors had left behind to protect us. Just that the *reality* of what had existed there would be natural for us to crave. If Cassie reacted so strongly to this, how would she feel about some of my more radical notions about what was and was not right about the community we lived within?

I thought it best to appease her for now – make the most of our conversation while it lasted as it would be the only one – and so I steered us away from this contentious topic. “I suppose you’re right,” I conceded neutrally, before moving along. “Anyway, that’s all a bit deep for a post-exam conversation don’t you think?”

“Yes,” Cassie looked relieved that I was not going to press the issue.

“What are you going to do with the holidays?” I enquired, opting for a nice, safe topic. It was not something I would normally be interested in – my ability to make small-talk was extremely limited – but once I’d asked the question, I realised that I was actually interested in what her answer might be. Well, until she pulled a face that is...*how did I manage to keep getting it so wrong?*

“I’ve not got any; I’m going straight to my first work placement with my parents,” she revealed. “There was the option to start the rotations early if you were going for placements in the medical or engineering fields and seen as I had to do both I thought it would be better to start sooner – more practice, or something...”

This calmed my initial doubts that I had said the wrong thing again: she was not happy with the situation, rather than with me. This realisation prompted me to laugh – at myself, of course for jumping to conclusions – but then I had to disguise it as a reaction to her words. “Why the face – it can’t be that bad can it?”

“No,” she admitted reluctantly, although I got the feeling she was holding something back still. She shrugged dismissively – a sure sign that she meant something more serious than she was about to admit – before continuing. “It’s me being a whining teenager I suppose! It’s just as you get that bit older you realise that you’re going to become your parents one day – in some way, shape or form – and that’s quite scary. Going to work alongside them makes me feel as though it’s the first step on that slippery slope!”

So...she was scared of turning into her parents; that sounded truthful enough and the awkward smile that appeared on her lips as she said this convinced me of it even more. I felt like Cassie had told me something she’d not shared with anyone else before – I couldn’t be sure of course, but I’d never seen her look sheepish when I’d watched her with her friends – and the thought of that made me intensely happy. I

laughed aloud. “I suppose you’re right.” A grin stretched my face as she laughed with me.

We were still walking. Cassie was so close beside me I could feel the warmth of her body as my arm brushed past hers. It was hard for me not be distracted by this but I was, because I had just realised that this would be the end of our conversation. We were close to the centre of the park now and a short distance away from us a group of young people were sitting around enjoying an afternoon of freedom. They were *our* classmates, but her friends: I would not be joining them.

Unwillingly my feet slowed not wanting to leave her, but unable to go on further. One or two members of the group looked up as they recognised Cassie approaching – both of them boys – it did not surprise me that their faces wore particular expressions of interest.

“Are you not joining them?” she asked, noticing my pace slowing. I hoped I heard a trace of disappointment in her words.

“No, I’ve got a better idea – why don’t we just go somewhere else – just us...” I wanted to say, but of course I didn’t. I couldn’t. One time only, remember.

“It’s a little...crowded for me.” I said instead, smoothing my face into a mask so that I could not betray myself any further. This had been a mistake – a pleasant one, but a mistake nonetheless.

“You don’t have to go,” Cassie murmured as I was preparing to leave. I barely heard her words: my mind was elsewhere now, disengaging quickly as I planned my escape.

“I have to get home,” I replied flatly. No other excuses presented themselves and it seemed pointless to even try. I was already walking away. “I might see you on work experience if you’re with your parents.” I knew that I wouldn’t. I wasn’t taking

an early rotation. “Bye Cassie.” It was an afterthought...a final polite farewell to close the conversation...you can’t finish without saying goodbye.

“Balik?!”

I heard Cassie call my name and pushed my feet faster, moving me away as quickly as I could go without running. Unsure of whether I could actually control myself and not go back if I turned around. *Did she call out to me again?* I couldn’t be sure, but thought I heard my name a second time. Raising my hand briefly in farewell, I continued unable to look back at her.