



HOPE'S DAUGHTER

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“I know that I am mortal and the creature of a day; but when I search out the massed wheeling circles of the stars, my feet no longer touch the earth, but, side by side with Zeus himself, I take my fill of ambrosia, the food of the gods.”

Ptolemy

Prologue

HISS...

The viewing screen flickered to life, changing from charcoal black to a snowstorm haze of grey and white. For the moment there was nothing but the tinny electronic fizz of the speakers and random dots of static waving zigzag lines across the display.

“Are you ready?” My voice was a whisper – the words spoken beneath my breath – even though there was no reason to whisper anymore. We were alone.

My companion nodded in confirmation but did not speak. The youthful features of his face were unnaturally hard: his mouth fixed into a straight line and his eyes were ringed with shadows from nights without sleep. He looked, perhaps, all the more alert for those things.

There was something else in his expression, he was trying to hide it but I knew him well now and I saw it easily. The muscles in his jaw beneath his smooth skin moved involuntarily, clenching his teeth together. It was a basic human reaction and revealed his current anxiety. But I also knew that with him all fear was tinged with determination. He was strong: a fighter, a thinker. He was a survivor.

I gazed steadily at his dark eyes. *Survive*. If there's one thing the human race knows how to do it's survive, I mused. Perhaps after everything we'd been through I was a survivor too now. But we were heading into darkness and what awaited us there – whether we would survive *that* – was completely unknown.

I realised that the unfamiliar should not bother me. After all, everything I thought I had known to be true in my old life had been lies...knowledge was not what it appeared to be. We'd been taught about the world beyond our own confined existence,

but why should my understanding of what waited out here be anything other than more of their lies?

That was why we needed this recording. It was a precaution, in case our biological – *human survivor* – instincts failed us when we reached our final destination. It would ensure that our story was not lost, even if we were.

Inhaling deeply through my mouth I tried to clear my head of the thoughts – fears – that had been plaguing me for days now. The re-circulated air in the pod was chilled to the optimum temperature for comfort, but it was not comforting. Beneath the cool oxygen molecules that entered my body was a faint, stale taste of air that had been expelled from lungs and re-used again and again and again. The knowledge that it was part of an engineered process rather than a natural one tainted it even more.

Deliberating a while longer, I took another deep breath – in and out – I didn't know where to begin. What do you say when someone makes you question your whole life? What do you do when the world that you were sure of and everything you thought to be true has gone? All I had left was the one who brought the questions in the first place.

I didn't really have an answer to my queries – any of them – or not one that was clear anyway. All I knew was that pain and suffering were inherent to the knowledge we had gained. But it was better to be free in the unknown than enslaved in the familiar and false...I think.

There was a whisper of shuffling feet as my fellow traveller shifted position in the shadows – obviously uncomfortable – he was waiting for me. It was time. I nodded to let him know that I was ready. He pointed a small controller towards the tiny camera attached to the viewing screen and pressed a button. The static from the screen cleared immediately, displaying instead the mirror image of the girl sat on the opposite side of the lens. Me.

My green eyes fixed on the lens: I saw red tingeing the edges of each eye from too many tears and not enough sleep. The equal measure of fear and determination in my face made me look wild. I inhaled another deep breath of sour air and opened my mouth. “As I sit here, it strikes me that our participation in recent events is the outcome of pure chance. It *could* have been anyone; it just so happened to be us.

“There was always the possibility of someone, somewhere falling into the roles that we have taken: an accidental observation, unanswerable questions and then coming from those the need to protect the most important thing you have in life.” I glanced briefly at my friend beyond the camera as I paused to take a breath.

“In all honesty I’m surprised that they did not see that *we* would be inevitable. There are flaws to the system. More recently I have wondered – since we became aware of what was happening – whether there is the chance that there will be others like us in the future? I hope so, because that would make me more optimistic for those we have left behind...but a part of me fears that our footsteps will be erased now to prevent anyone following in them.”

Am I rambling? I wondered vaguely as I spoke. Then answered my own silent question. Yes, I think I am.

“Sorry,” I shrugged apologetically at the camera, seeing my actions mirrored in reverse in the viewing screen. “I know I’m rambling – I get a bit lost in my own thoughts. Everything I just said sounds rather cryptic, doesn’t it?”

A nod from the shadows agreed with me.

“It’s probably best that I start from the beginning and then you’ll understand how we got here.”

Pausing once more to clear my mind, I cast my thoughts back to the person I had been a few short weeks ago. She was a different me, living in a different world. I began again.

“I thought the Space Station Hope to be the most uneventful place in the world,”
I allowed myself a rueful smile as I spoke the words. “Oh yes, *the world*...let’s start
there shall we?”

Chapter 1 – History Lessons

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 the environmental and geopolitical impact of these events upon the human race?

I stared at the viewing screen, where the final question of my last examination glowed white against the dark blue background. I felt like I was in limbo: not quite the hell you feel at the start of the examination period, where the hours of testing on every subject you've ever studied stretches before you like a punishing road that you will be forced to travel along as time presses you on through the inevitable. But it was also not the exam-free paradise that beckons to you from two hours into the future.

Four hours of literature and two hours of sociology questions the day before had left my mind a muddled swamp of information. I knew that the answer to this final question was buried deep beneath the stagnant surface of my memory I just had to find it.

Removing the automatic discourse headset I had worn to answer the previous questions I placed it back into its holder. My head was aching. Again. It had been doing this a lot recently and I rubbed my forehead gently in a vain attempt to reduce the pressure headache throbbing in my temples. Massaging with one hand I reached out towards the screen and held my finger over the button for manual input, which flashed red and became live.

I closed my eyes to think. I needed to put my thoughts into order to answer this final question and recently I found the headset distracting when organising any kind of complex ideas. In fact, it had become irritating answering most questions: when I was aligning my thoughts to command the headset to write I would find my mind wandering through several similar answers, some of which did not even feel familiar to me.

Perhaps there was something off with my headset? I wondered. Because what was more frustrating – and odd – was when answers popped in to my head that were not my own, some of which I knew to be wrong. If it didn't sound silly I would have said it was as though someone else was answering *inside* my brain. And they weren't always so smart!

Anyway, aside from my recent issues with the headset, there was something therapeutic about reverting to the more old fashioned manual input system with its keyboard. When I typed it was as though my thoughts were flowing from my mind in a conversation with my fingers, instead of the monologue feeling the auto discourse system created. It even gave me an extra few seconds to question what I was writing and be sure that I was happy with the answer before committing to it.

At this stage in the examination cycle I didn't mind spending the extra thirty minutes in the answering chamber that you got for using the manual system. Although as I glanced around the neighbouring pods it looked like I was the only one who felt this way. My fellow students – all nine of them in my school year, five boys and four girls – were sat before their own screens with headsets activated, answering questions. Their illuminated faces were fixed on the monitors in concentration. All except one.

Occupying one of the desks at the back of the room was Balik and he wasn't watching his screen, he was watching me. He immediately turned his gaze towards his screen when I caught him staring and didn't look up again; instead he pulled a keyboard towards him and began typing.

That was odd, I puzzled as I turned back to my own monitor a few seconds later. Balik was normally the super studious, always-had-an-answer type of person – not someone I would expect to see daydreaming in the middle of an exam.

Balik's parents were a doctor and an astro-engineer just like mine, but we never really had much to do with each other, even though there were only ten students in our year at school. He always seemed nice, just a bit quiet...and perhaps a bit serious too?

Life on Space Station Hope always tended towards the more serious side in the first place. As descendants of the last surviving members of the human race to escape the Earth it was bound to happen. So, for my sanity, I gravitated towards people at the more light-hearted end of the spectrum, not ones who appeared so serious and comfortable with themselves that they were virtually their parents already.

Come on, I prompted myself, making a concerted effort to pull my mind back to the question in front of me. *That's enough time wasting: stop gazing around the exam suite and get on with it.* I gave in willingly to the firm voice of my studious side and after a few more minutes collecting my thoughts, pulled the small keyboard across the desk and began.

At first my writing was clunky: stopping and starting as I struggled to make the sentences work. But soon the words began to flow: slipping from my mind, down my arms and out through my fingers and I lost myself in the rhythm of my typing.

In July 2045 the Arctic experienced its first ice-free summer due to climate change, which many contemporary theorists view as being the starting point to a chain-reaction of global events, which collectively led to the destruction of humankind on Earth in the late twenty-first century.

Prior to this date, although some small concessions had been made to tackling the global threat of climate change, there had not been a consolidated and viable plan devised for nations to subscribe to. Instead huge amounts of research resources were under the control of private companies or billionaire individuals, who were able to direct funding into areas of personal interest or financial gain, which further jeopardised the ability of the world to undertake an appropriate response to environmental issues. It was this lack of co-ordination of resources and research, rather than the inability of mankind to achieve technological advances, that ultimately destroyed the global population.

In 2010 break-through research by biologists and futurists determined that senescence (the ageing of an organism) could be combated by reducing "wear and tear" on cells in the human body. Research was carried out predominantly in the developed nations, where the affluent and aging populations provided the greatest demand and resources for such investigations. Developments in cell technology provided treatments, which enabled older generations to improve cell repair to a similar level they had when young, and all but eradicated age-related diseases such as cancers. (Cancers would occur when ageing faulty cells gathered to form tumours rather than self-destructing as they did in younger people).

Those born in developed countries during this period of relative societal harmony and scientific progress had the opportunity of

greater longevity via technologies such as genome sequencing to identify their medical future and gene therapy for eliminating any genetic diseases at birth. There was speculation that continued development in science, particularly biology and biotechnology, would ultimately lead to humans being able to live for several centuries, if not longer (barring accidents), thus transcending the historical limitations of being human.

However, only a small minority would experience the full benefits of these developments because whilst technology improved drastically in areas such as medicine, less focus was given to key issues that would affect the global population, such as famine, overpopulation and environmental dangers. As the influence of climate change steadily increased towards the summer of 2045 it was these factors that ultimately brought about the end to human life on Earth.

During the last one hundred years of the twentieth century temperatures increased by one degree celcius – although scientific evidence suggests that most of that change occurred within the last decade of the century. At the dawn of the new millennium temperatures worldwide began to increase more rapidly – by approximately one degree every twenty years.

Rapid industrialisation of developing nations between 1990 and 2025, increased worldwide reliance upon fossil fuels, as well as demand for commodities such as iron ore, copper and wood. In

equatorial countries, such as Brazil, widespread deforestation of the rainforest to create land for farming and hydro-electric power generation contributed significantly to the rise in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels. In a single year the loss of rainforest in South America alone had more impact on carbon dioxide levels than all vehicle and aeroplane emissions worldwide.

Initial government reactions to climate change were slow, particularly due to the fact that those in "developed economies" were reliant upon technologies, which directly contributed to global warming and they did not want to see any detriment to established levels of comfort in their individual countries. Political engagement with the issues focused on local problems or made minor changes, which provided little improvement. A collective response from all nations was required to balance quality of life worldwide with the basic requirements of all global inhabitants for food, clothing and safe shelter being addressed, however, this was never truly achieved.

As global instability grew, energy dependency became an increasingly important factor in the policies of all national governments in order to secure the future of their countries. Following the ice-free summer of 2045, sea levels worldwide rose rapidly prompting the mass migration of people from affected areas (initially south east Asia, but then spreading quickly through northern Asia and into continental Europe). Interventionism became the main political approach and very quickly the threat of war between nations

over security of energy supplies and protection of their borders from the impact of mass migration progressed to being a reality.

* * *

“Testing period ends in five minutes,” the neutral electronic voice announced, breaking the industrious silence that existed beneath the light clicking of fingers across keys. The noise disrupted my concentration for a few seconds, before I re-focused on the concluding paragraph I had just typed.

Perfect timing. I flicked back through the pages on the screen to the beginning of the essay and began to re-read what I had written. Skimming through the sentences I realised that my last-minute revision must have paid off after all.

The final minutes of the test flew by and I had just finished reading the last sentence and sat back in my seat (reasonably satisfied) to stretch out the aching muscles between my shoulder blades, when the writing disappeared from the screen.

“Testing period over,” the electronic voice confirmed unnecessarily.

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, letting the air escape back out of my lungs slowly as my mind pulled itself out of the *exam mode* it had descended into. Gradually, the phrases and facts about the downfall of the human race on Earth drained away leaving an empty void where my thoughts could rattle around. It seemed rather lonely inside my brain without the distinct purpose of the examination to direct my thoughts.

It’s over. Seven years of Upper School and it all ended a couple of minutes ago with that exam. What an odd feeling. I shook my head – no point getting sappy about it now – at least the exams were finished. Right? Secretly, I rather enjoyed the pressure of an examination: focusing all of my collected knowledge into a specific time and place. Not that I’d admit it to anyone – what kind of normal person likes exams?

I jumped minutely as the sound of a chair scraping across the plastic covered floor broke the post-exam silence. Turning at the noise, I saw Balik and was reminded that I wasn't alone. Of course, Balik also had the additional thirty minutes because he'd been using the manual input system as well.

When the other eight students had filed silently from the room at the end of their exam period – Ami throwing me a giddy wave as she went – I had been so absorbed in my work I barely registered their movements. I'd completely forgotten about seeing Balik working with the keyboard on the last question.

“Sorry.”

The word hung oddly in the air between us, Balik murmuring so softly I almost hadn't heard him. He was collecting his shoulder sack from near the doorway and had obviously noticed my jumpiness.

Perfect. Even people I barely knew could see I was a skittish fool.

“No, it's my fault. Sorry,” I apologised quickly. Then paused. I was surprised that Balik had spoken at all – it was so out of character. His eyes met mine for a short moment, the expression in them completely unfathomable and when he said nothing further I blundered on nervously. “I'd forgotten I wasn't alone in here and my brain is still half-asleep after that,” I gestured towards the screen with my hand to indicate that I meant the examination and nearly knocked it off the desk.

What is wrong with me?

Balik merely nodded his head upwards once in understanding. He was probably wondering what was wrong with me as well.

Chatty as ever, I thought sarcastically, feeling slightly uncomfortable as the silence stretched out in the cramped room. Uneasiness always brought out the more acerbic side of my personality. Luckily I tend to keep comments like that in my head rather than blurting them out. It must have been an enduring trait from the shy person

who hid inside me, disguised by the more confident one that went out into the world each day.

Well, enough with the uncomfortable post-exam banter. I was supposed to be meeting Ami and my other school friends in Park 17 to celebrate the end of our exams and school-life. Why I didn't really feel like enjoying myself just now I couldn't actually explain...perhaps it was nerves...?

My gaze dropped uncertainly to the floor as I walked towards the exit. When people didn't speak it made me want to fill in the silence with some meaningless chatter. But as usual I had no idea what to say and now that made me even more nervous. I opted for uncomfortable silence, keeping the senseless chatter strictly to myself. Should I look up? Do I ignore Balik as though that was the end of the conversation? Was that even a conversation...no it was more like an *exchange*... See I can do mindless prattle all on my own, I thought, forcing myself to be quiet for a second or two.

Why was Balik still standing there? This was getting frustrating. I had no idea what to do with myself, as Balik remained by the doorway – slowly adjusting the strap of the shoulder sack he had just slung around his neck – and I had to get past him to retrieve my own bag from the floor.

Why can't he just leave so I can get out of here? I thought irritably.

“Here you go,” Balik said.

When I looked up I saw that he was holding out my bag towards me. “Oh! I mean – er – thanks!” I stammered, realising that I had been concentrating so hard on looking at my feet as I walked that I hadn't even seen him scoop my bag up from the floor.

Reaching out I took the offered bag and swung it onto my shoulder, almost hitting another viewing screen standing behind me as I did so. *What an idiot!* I fumed at

myself, mortified by my complete lack of co-ordination. Internally, my body temperature shot up about forty degrees, but a glance at my reflection in the clear wall behind Balik reassured me that any embarrassment I felt was not showing on my face.

Balik remained still, considering me with an odd expression on his face. What is it, I wondered. Then I realised. He was smiling. It was only a small smile – more of a smirk really – but as I gawped I realised that it was the first time I had ever seen his face light up like this. I opened my mouth soundlessly then closed it, thinking I probably looked foolish.

You are a fool! I told myself as I realised for the first time ever – as though I had only just met him – that Balik was not just a little handsome: he was *gorgeous*. Trying not to be obvious, I considered Balik's features while I waited for some further indication that he was going to speak again – or confirm that our *exchange* was over – I really couldn't tell.

Balik's dark brown hair was thick, with a definite wave to it that curled a little near the back of his ears. Tawny brown eyes glowed softly beneath darker lashes and matched the warm golden colour of his skin. His complexion marked him as a likely descendent of the southern European contingent in the space station, or possibly Arab, although everyone on the space station was essentially the same race now: an expatriate of the Earth.

How can a smile make such a difference, I mused, trying not to gawp. A dozen images of Balik through the years – from all of my classes and group trips – passed through my mind. I realised with surprise that he had always been this way, I had just never noticed before. Each image of Balik from my memory showed him standing to one side, hovering in the background, almost as though he were trying not to exist or more precisely, not to be noticed. Even in the images from our classes when he was

being called upon to give one of his textbook perfect answers Balik appeared more shadow-like than real.

The pressure of the silence between us remained, growing each second we stayed there and making me nervous once more. “Thanks,” I repeated myself – foolishly, needlessly – as I found my voice.

It's only a bag for goodness sake! An inner voice mocked. It was right. I gave myself a mental shake and took a pace towards the exit, turning away from the intense glow of Balik's eyes before I could make myself look any more ridiculous. He was probably just waiting for me to leave anyway. Pressing my hand to the nearby scanner panel, the door activated and slid back automatically to let me through. I was about to step into the corridor beyond the examination room when Balik spoke.

“What did you think of the exam?” His voice was soft, but deep, with an attractive resonance I had never noticed before. *Probably because he never speaks*, I reminded myself. I turned back, deliberately keeping my gaze from his eyes and focused, somewhat blankly, on his face instead.

“Not too bad really,” I smiled slightly, “but who likes exams?”

“I quite like them,” he replied with a casual shrug of his shoulders, “something to do with the pressure I guess – and I kind of enjoy the feeling of testing yourself – ”

He glanced towards me and stopped speaking abruptly. I knew why. My mouth had fallen open and I was looking stupidly in his direction.

“Are you OK?” His forehead wrinkled with what I took to be a confused expression.

I closed my mouth and blinked my eyes forcibly, trying to engage my brain. It did not work. “Yes – sorry,” I apologised. In my haste to prove I was not the brainless idiot I was coming across as, I blurted out the truth. “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...you would feel stupid saying what I said..." he repeated my words and I heard how they must have had sounded to him.

"No – not stupid...it's not stupid...it just surprised me to hear you say it, I guess."

I clamped my mouth shut to stop myself divulging any further useless information or insulting him. *Get a grip, Cassie, he's hardly spoken to you in twelve years and you're probably reminding exactly why that is!*

"You don't tell people the truth," Balik observed bluntly.

"No – I mean yes – I do tell people the truth. That's not what I said." My tone was immediately defensive.

It was his turn to apologise.

"I didn't mean to imply that you *lied* to people." Balik's words were hurried and he dropped his gaze from mine to begin fiddling with the strap of his bag. Now it was him that seemed nervous. "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...oh forget it, I don't know what I mean!" He stepped past me towards the corridor, still empty beyond the open door.

My face softened as Balik began rambling and looked distinctly uncomfortable. It made me feel better and slightly less foolish, and it made him appear a little more human than he normally did. Maybe he didn't have an answer for everything after all?

"Don't worry about it," I said as he passed me. "I think I know what you meant."

Balik paused and I saw him smile faintly. "I think I know what you meant too," he repeated my words, giving an attractive twist to them.

I smiled back, relieved I think. I couldn't be sure why, but some part of me didn't want our strange conversation – exchange – to end.

“Where are you going now?” Balik turned fully back to face me from the corridor. The brighter hallway lights made his brown eyes glitter warmly and I found myself distracted by their sparkling intensity.

“Now?” I repeated, the dim-witted part of my brain unfortunately taking control of speech again.

“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?” Balik raised his arm, gesturing around us.

Was that a joke? I was shocked: completely and utterly baffled by the stranger that stood before me, chatting away as though it was the most natural thing in the world. It *was* normal, just not for Balik. Where had this person come from?

Balik was still waiting for an answer. Luckily, just then a fractionally more intelligent part of me took control of my voice and I was able to respond with some coherence. “I don't know – I do really like it in here...” He rolled his eyes good-naturedly at my poor attempt at humour, obviously waiting for a genuine answer. “I'm heading over to Park 17 – most of the other classes end up there for a bit of wind down after the last exams.”

Park 17 was one of the smaller recreation areas on the western side of the Family Quarter, not far from the school. A large viewing screen at the entrance informed you that it was designed in the style of a traditional municipal park, similar to those that had once existed in cities all over the Earth. Inside the park neatly shaped grass spaces encircled the flowerbeds, trees and a small lake; it was tidy, orderly and pretty.

Balik nodded. “Do you mind if I walk with you?”

“Of course,” I replied, sure that our classmates would happily welcome this new, talkative Balik. To be honest they would always have welcomed him before, it was more that *he* seemed to avoid being around people. As far as I knew he didn’t have many friends, in or out of school. He always appeared more comfortable in his own, quiet company.

We walked out of the main school building into the bright light of the afternoon. “Ahhhh,” Balik sighed happily, and surprisingly loudly.

I laughed softly. It was still odd to hear him speaking. Strange but nice, I admitted to myself, unsure exactly why I thought this. “What was that for?” I asked, studying him closely.

“The sunlight feels so good after being trapped in that little room.” Balik’s eyes were closed, face tilted upwards.

“And here’s me thinking that you *love examinations...*” I mocked gently, throwing back at him the same words he had said to me a few minutes earlier. “*Trapped* doesn’t make it sound like you enjoy them that much.”

“That’s just the room, not that activity,” Balik clarified, without turning his head away from the sunlight. With a sigh he added, “don’t you find that living here is just...claustrophobic sometimes?”

I shrugged my shoulders, unsure. In all honesty I hadn’t really thought about it before. Sure, occasionally I could tell that the air I was breathing in or the water I was drinking had a slight, stale element to it, having been recycled repeatedly through the various processing systems of the space station. But did that make me feel claustrophobic? I didn’t think so. And I had no frame of reference to compare it with, having always breathed the same air and drunk the same water. Just then Balik spoke – he was obviously not expecting an answer from me – and I realised that it had been a rhetorical question.

“Even out here, I feel it sometimes,” he opened his eyes turning towards me as we started walking. “Perhaps it’s because I know that when I look up and see the sky, that it’s 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 somehow...” Balik’s voice trailed off, as though he realised he was being brutally honest with a complete stranger.

“Don’t stop,” I encouraged, startled by the earnest in my voice. I was truly interested in what he had to say. Balik appeared equally surprised and appraised me with an air of curiosity for a few seconds.

“Sorry – I have a tendency to waffle once I get going – you don’t need to listen to my morose views on life here,” he said finally, obviously deciding he didn’t want to share this with someone he barely knew.

“Don’t be sorry. It’s nice to hear you speak,” I replied shyly, before realising what I had said and flushing a deep crimson. *What the hell was wrong with me? Since when did I say exactly what I thought without some serious editing?!* “What I meant is you’re normally so quiet...” *Stop talking! That doesn’t sound any better at all!* I cringed to think what Balik would suppose my words to mean. But when I looked over at him – noticing that he was a good head taller than I – he was staring straight ahead and did not seem at all bothered by my words. I wondered if he was even listening to me. Taking the opportunity I clamped my mouth shut and continued walking, distracting myself with looking around at the other pedestrians wandering the streets.

As usual there were a lot of parents with young children, most wearing matching day-suits in pale colours, moving between the various recreation areas that proliferated this part of the Family Quarter. There were also a large number of older students happily strolling in the late afternoon enjoying the freedom from school after finishing

their exams. The students appeared slightly different to the others: their suits were accessorised with unusual belts or fastenings here and there, while the girls wore their hair styled quirkily to reinforce their individuality.

The need to stamp independence on their appearance was something I found strange if I were truly honest. But then there were things about me: the way I felt, even the way I *thought* sometimes that made me feel distanced from my friends on the station. So it wasn't the only thing I found strange about life here. I wasn't always convinced that I belonged here and fitted in with everyone else in the same way my friends did. I suppose that was what made it harder for me to be like them. Did any of the others accessorise to make themselves different, only to make them appear like everyone else? That was the reason I did it.

"Why don't you use automatic discourse in your exams?" Balik asked, unexpectedly breaking into my thoughts.

I was taken aback by the sudden question. *Why would he have noticed that?* "I don't always use the keyboard," I countered, "I was using the headset today."

"Not for the whole exam though – what made you change?"

Was he spying on me, I wondered, half-joking. It surprised me that the half-serious part of me that thought he might have been wasn't bothered if it were true. He's just observant I told myself; it *is* quite unusual for someone to manually input.

"I just like to use the keyboard for answering certain types of question," I shrugged. It wasn't a big deal. And I wasn't about to reveal my more recent problems of hearing odd things when I used the headset.

"What types of question?" he persisted.

Balik's interest encouraged me to answer honestly – with some sensible exclusions – and so I let myself ramble on a little bit. It was nice to talk after the hours

of exam silence I had endured the past couple of weeks. And although I wouldn't have marked Balik down for chatter, he seemed a willing audience.

"It's 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 organise and regurgitate them simultaneously as I find myself doing with the headset sometimes. What about you? I noticed you using the keyboard this afternoon –"

"I've seen you use it in the past and wondered why – just thought I'd try it," he replied.

"And...?" I probed, when he didn't elaborate further.

"And...once I got used to it I found that it helped to keep thoughts clear in my head for answering the question. Especially once I was planning out more complex arguments." His reply was thoughtful...almost as though he were surprised somehow.

"Do you enjoy history?" I wondered aloud, finding myself caught up by his questioning mood. Perhaps that had been a tough exam for him and that's why he'd been gazing around when I saw him?

"Yes, but not like you do," he said. It seemed an odd answer.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing bad," he explained hurriedly, "just that I always got the impression it was one of your best subjects, along with literary studies."

He's just observant, I told myself. All the same I was a little surprised as Balik was exactly right. *Don't read anything into it, my mind warned, it's not like you don't know that he's the best astro-engineer in the year.*

"And yours would be astro-engineering I take it?" I noted, putting my thoughts into words.

"Engineering is probably my best subject, but I think my *favourite* is biochemistry," he emphasised the difference carefully.

I groaned quietly. They were about my least favourite subjects. Balik laughed at the expression on my face as though he could read my thoughts.

“What’s the matter? You’re good at both of them!”

“I get by,” I corrected him firmly. “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?” he asked, stopping suddenly on the pathway.

I stopped too. “What?”

“Our parents have exactly the same jobs and had their children at the same time, but you and I are quite different.”

I wasn’t sure why that would qualify as funny, but his knowledge of our families did not surprise me: I already knew our parents had the same jobs and obviously Balik and I were the same age, so with the one-child policy of the space station community the second part was obvious.

“Why would that make us alike?”

“Well, just that with the whole nature/nurture thing, you would have expected some similarities, but it seems we’re quite different.” He replied matter-of-factly.

Balik fell into step beside me as I started walking again, but the silence remained. Not uncomfortable, just thoughtful. Our conversation today – with more words spoken than had ever been said before in twelve whole years – indicated to me quite the opposite of what he had just said. Aside from surface differences, I thought we might actually be rather similar. Balik obviously had a tendency to say whatever was passing through his mind at the time, which was my natural disposition too, but one that I carefully suppressed.

Except today, a little voice reminded me.

Except today, I agreed. I wonder why that is?

Glancing across at the familiar stranger walking next to me I understood exactly why...Balik wasn't at all the person I'd thought he was: quiet and content with life on the station, easily fitting with the society we lived within. In fact, it seemed that the reality was almost exactly the opposite of my perception of him. Even though he'd not said it plainly I got the feeling that he was rather *dissatisfied* with something.

We approached the park and walked through the archway that curved gracefully over the main entrance. It was cast to look like wrought metal but was actually made from a dark synthetic resin. The pavement beneath our feet changed, from the hard grey plastic that covered most of the *outside* walkways in the space station, to a pretty wooden one that clunked hollowly under foot. I always found the noise...reassuring...a reminder of something natural and *real* in a world made of plastics and electronics. To me the parklands always felt like the closest place to Earth I had ever been: they had real trees and water and plants. Some even had animals, which I always found to be a novelty no matter how many times I visited.

Earth. Sometimes it felt strange to long for a place I had never been. It was almost as though I had been there once and was taken away, even though I knew I was a fourth generation child and had spent my whole life aboard the SS Hope.

“What are you thinking about?”

Balik's voice startled me from my musings, causing me to look up. I wondered if he found it rude of me – or odd even – that I'd drifted off into my own world. Most of my friends would have if I had been with them. I could almost hear the impatient little cough Ami would use when she could see my mind roving.

But when I looked over the expression on Balik's face suggested not: it was more curious and...*intrigued* perhaps? A light blush crept into my cheeks as I realised I felt flattered that he might find me interesting.

He won't find you interesting if you don't speak to him though, will he? I was reminded, remembering that he was waiting for an answer to his question.

“Can I ask you something?” I murmured, still half caught up in my daydream and answering his query with one of my own. “It’s a bit random,” I warned.

Balik nodded, but didn’t reply and I assumed he was waiting for the question.

“Do you ever feel like you miss the Earth? Even though you’ve never been there? Do you think it’s possible – or even normal – to miss something you never had?” We lapsed back into silence as we walked, Balik presumably mulling over my obscure thoughts, or trying to think of a way to escape the conversation. Finally he spoke.

“I *think* it’s possible – likely even – to miss our original home. I wonder if it’s the same as the way I think about the sky: because I know it isn’t real, I find it disappointing. None of this is *real* – unlike Earth – and so it becomes false and you miss the reality.”

It didn’t sound like the same thing to me. I wasn’t sure that I missed the Earth simply because I knew that things were re-created on the space station...and arguably, as this was the only place humans now survived, wasn’t the station as *real* as anything else?

“But do you feel like you *miss* the sky?” I persisted. “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...?”

Balik smiled at my words. When I saw this I was confused by his reaction and so meeting his gaze as his eyes softened was a mistake – I became diverted from working out what he was smiling at as I watched the chocolate in his eyes melt.

Damn! That was attractive and distracting!

In equal measures I was irritated with myself and surprised at how I was reacting to this whole experience. Why *did* Balik make me so nervous?

“Is that funny?” I was able to ask at length, pulling away from his engaging stare.

Balik shook his head – no, not funny – but he appeared to delay further before explaining himself. It was as though he was unsure of what he could say to me. When I looked at him I felt I could read the question in his eyes: *what can I tell you?* From this point of view his answer was unexpected.

“I was smiling because you sounded...happy or free or...something...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.*”

Was he quoting Wordsworth? No, that was Coleridge...and here’s me thinking that I was the literary one! But Balik was probably right; most of my interpretations of life on Earth came from fictional literature. Perhaps I did get carried away with myself.

Without meaning to I found myself staring at him once more – the afternoon was turning out to be full of surprises. I couldn’t be sure, but it looked like Balik’s skin had coloured lightly around his cheeks and he dropped his eyes away from mine with a dismissive shrug when he saw me looking. Probably thought I was a weird stalker-type staring at him that way.

“I’m surprised you remember that kind of thing so well,” I acknowledged trying to diffuse the slight atmosphere and searching to find his eyes again. Balik continued staring resolutely towards the ground.

Perhaps it wasn’t me I realised, abruptly recognising that his pink cheeks could have been caused by his own embarrassment at quoting poetry. Just in case – to cover any awkwardness – I repeated my earlier question feigning ignorance: “so...do you actually *miss* the sky, or is it something else?”

Balik's features lifted slightly. I could tell he was glad for the distraction as he mulled over my question for a few seconds longer. "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. I want to live on the planet that created us, rather than floating around a few hundred miles away from it in space. We came from the dust of that place and I want to feel that same dust that created us beneath my feet."

"But there's nothing left!" I exclaimed surprised by his answer. "When the expats came aboard the space station they were the last humans who were going to survive; the rest were...doomed!" I finished lamely, unable to find a better word to describe what our ancestors had left behind. *Doomed* did sound rather melodramatic, even if it was the truth.

"I suppose you're right," Balik agreed slowly, but there was something behind his eyes that told me he did not believe what he was saying, just closing the subject. "Anyway, that's all a bit deep for a post-examination conversation, don't you think?" he was deliberately trying to lighten the mood.

"Yes," I agreed honestly, glad of his attempt.

"What are you going to do with the holidays?" he prompted, allowing a complete change of subject to a nice safe area.

"I've not got any," I admitted glumly, my face drooping into a slight frown as I was reminded of the decision I'd made to spend additional time on placements in both my parents work areas...no holidays for me, but at least I would have a better chance of finding a placement early.

When I glanced at Balik I read impatience in his eyes and realised that he was not privy to the convoluted workings of my mind and so would have no idea why I was pouting just then. Probably thinks I'm oddly moody.

“I’m going straight on work placement with my parents,” I explained hurriedly and was relieved when he nodded, understanding my grimace now. “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 like that – ”

Shaking my head as I realised I was babbling I lapsed into silence, feeling the frown return to tighten my features. I was thinking about the coming weeks, when I could have been free but would now be working – and working hard.

My parents...they were both lovely people, but parents being parents, they were not always on my wavelength and the thought of spending an extended period of time with either of them or others like them was not the most appealing thing I could imagine. This was especially true because it meant no holidays, unlike some of my classmates who would be revelling in freedom for the next few weeks instead of stuck with serious adults and lots of work. There was also the fact that I would be expected to excel in one or other of their professions – most people’s children followed in their footsteps – and if I wasn’t confident about medicine, I certainly wasn’t thinking that engineering would be a good career option for me. They only took two people from every year group into the profession and I couldn’t see myself being one of them.

“Why the face – it can’t be that bad can it?” Balik laughed as he scrutinised my expression.

“No,” I agreed, not wanting to reveal the uncertainty and nightmares I had about my future on the station to someone I barely knew. And someone who would no doubt excel at both the professions that were terrifying me. “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!" I grinned sheepishly and Balik laughed at me again, more loudly this time.

"I suppose you're right." He smiled as he stopped laughing.

Balik's features brightened by laughter made my heart judder slightly in my chest.

What is going on with you? I demanded. *A couple of smiles and a quick chat and your stomach is doing flip-flops! You are so lame.*

In the next moment we rounded a corner in the path and I saw six of our classmates across the grass in front of us, lounging around and relaxing in the sunshine. Balik saw them at the same time and his steps slowed.

He's not going to join us, I realised. Disappointed, my face fell. *So lame*, I reminded myself.

"Are you not joining them?" I asked, even though I already knew the answer. It also made me wonder that I had automatically grouped my friends as *them* in my question. Would that make Balik and I *us*?

"It's a little...crowded for me." Balik replied, his face transforming to its normal appearance – blank almost – with all traces of the previous laughter erased.

"You don't have to go," I urged, hoping that he might be persuaded to stay, but I could see it was no use. Whoever had been here talking with me a few moments ago was no longer there.

"I have to get home," Balik murmured, sounding like his usual self once more. "I might see you on work experience if you're with your parents. Bye Cassie."

I turned to face him, mouth opening to protest – perhaps suggest *we* do something else, even though I couldn't explain why I'd do that – but he was already gone. All I could do was watch him leave as he turned away from our classmates to face back down the path we had just walked along.

“Balik?” I called out to him as he moved away, but he didn’t answer. My fingers twitched at my side, desperate to reach out and touch him, stop him, but I didn’t – he was not my friend. I didn’t know him. “Balik?” I called more softly, even though he was further away; my question felt automatic not conscious. This time he did respond: his hand rose briefly in a small wave, but he did not turn around.

“Hey Cass!”

I heard my best friend, Ami, shouting me from across the grass and I turned towards her voice. My legs felt leaden and reluctant to stir themselves in the direction of my friends. For no reason I could fully explain I felt deflated and could gladly have gone home alone right then. But I couldn’t do that – my friends were waving at me, waiting for me to join them – I couldn’t just walk away, even if I wanted to. Moving half-heartedly towards the people I had actually come to meet, I didn’t really feel like celebrating the end of the exams anymore.

Forget about Balik, I told myself firmly, irritated by my sudden preoccupation with him and the fact that it was making me crabby, it’s up to him if he wants to keep to himself. At the back of my mind I knew I was right. Fifteen minutes of conversation – no matter how interesting – was not going to change a lifetime of virtual silence.

“Hey Cass!” Ami shouted again, closer this time, sounding slightly irritated, probably due to my lack of response. I waved my hand in reply and glued a smile onto my face as she reached me.

Ami’s glossy, black bobbed-hair swung neatly around her pretty oval face as she bounced to a stop next to me. She looked as cute and perky as ever – I was fairly sure she wasn’t going to be worrying at all about how well she did or not in her exams – things always worked out for her, no matter how much effort or thought she put into them. I wondered vaguely whether Balik was similar to Ami in that way: he never

appeared to have any problems at school. Maybe it was just me who had the confidence issues.

Unable to stop myself, I looked back along the path I had just walked down and the tall figure striding away from me. Despite my resolve to forget our conversation I was still distracted. Ami's eyes missed nothing and she pounced on me hungrily.

"What was all that about?" she nodded in the direction of Balik's retreating back, her dark eyes flashing brightly, eager for some new gossip.

"I honestly don't know." I told her, shaking my head.

After considering me for a few moments longer, Ami shrugged dismissively, swiftly diverted by the obvious truth in my voice. I had been her friend long enough to know that if there was no scandal it wasn't worth the effort for her.

"You took so long!" She told me impatiently, taking my hand and pulling me along, instantly forgetting about Balik. "I need to talk to you."

It was obvious she had some news to share and – from the look on her face – I suspected it would concern her boyfriend Patrick. Most of her gossip usually did these days, but it was nice and I was happy for her. With Ami it was impossible not to get caught up in her enthusiasm, even though I wasn't really that bothered about who was doing what and where.

With one exception...

I ruminated on this for a moment, before agreeing with my subconscious. Balik remained in my thoughts, right at the back of my mind even though I tried to close him out. I wondered where he had gone and what he might be doing now.

This was not good. Obsessing over someone who I'd never really spoken to before – what kind of loser was I? I really needed a distraction.

"So – what's the gossip?" I asked Ami as we headed towards our friends, forcing enthusiasm into my voice. She looked over at me several questions evident from

her inquisitive expression, but none of them appeared to be suspicion that I was anything but engrossed in what she was going to tell me. I smiled encouragingly at her, eager for her to begin talking and divert my attention. I hoped that I could lose myself in her story.

Chapter 2 – Losing Friends

Dragging my feet lightly along the plastic pavement I dawdled walking home, lost in thought. It had been a long day – a long fortnight of exams – and I felt drained. After Balik left me in Park 17, I'd struggled to focus on the jokes and conversations of my friends who were all in high spirits because of the end of school.

Why hadn't I felt the same relief and excitement as them?

It was odd because after spending most of the past week not speaking, normally I would feel the urge to gabble on to anyone about anything, just to get up to my full quota of words. Today felt different. I just didn't want to talk and I couldn't put it wholly down to being mentally tired after the exams. Perhaps it was the finality of leaving school behind?

Life would be different now as I moved on to my vocational placements and looked for my *grown-up* role in the station. Although right now I didn't think it was possible to feel less mature and unprepared for that step.

Right on cue I had another reminder of how unready I was for growing up. The large viewing screen on the side of a nearby apartment block glowed to light with bright images of two young faces: a cute-looking boy and a girl who looked vaguely familiar, though I couldn't quite place her. *Another elopement!* The announcement proclaimed.

My lazy feet were distracted and I paused to watch the full segment. They were the latest happy couple to leave the Family Quarter for their new lives in the Married Quarter. The screen now flashed on the delighted faces of their parents, waving excitedly as they themselves left for the Retirement Quarter, their roles here fulfilled.

I watched the announcement as it recycled a couple of times, before the screen reverted to a basic update page showing local information from The Council and

activities taking place over the next few days. I wasn't interested in the library advertisements and so I turned away and began plodding once more.

I felt worse than ever. That girl could barely have been a year older than me and yet she was already happy enough to be running off to the Married Quarter to settle into the next phase of her life. Then there was me: no boyfriend – never had one; no job – probably won't find one.

My, my – someone is feeling sorry for herself. I ignored the sarcastic voice. The last thing I needed was to be mocked by myself!

Even though I'd left the post-exam celebrations early, it was taking me a long time to find my way home. I'd wandered from Park 17 to the animal sanctuary at Park 23 and spent a while walking around the enclosures watching the creatures inside them.

Although I loved to see the different animals, so beautiful and distinct from humans, it also made me a little sad to think of them, interned here instead of wild and free as I imagined them on Earth. But then, I suppose captivity was better than death, right? Probably a conundrum I wouldn't ever have to give much thought to. I moved on.

The animal section was quite small really and so I found myself looping around in circles as I wandered aimlessly. Many breeds had been lost in the last decades on Earth, while others had been considered too dangerous to live in captivity within the Family Quarter. I'd heard rumours of special preservation areas elsewhere in the station where many animals were kept with the hope of re-introducing them to a natural world if we found one that could sustain us. They were probably just rumours.

Aside from the agricultural sector where the farmed animals lived, there were no other animals in the Family Quarter. The birds I watched fluttered around a large aviary instead of flying free within the skies of the station. Of course, I knew it was too dangerous with the life support equipment and rotating ceilings to have them loose and

so this was to protect them from getting hurt. But still, I wondered sometimes whether they would have preferred the risks of freedom to the safety of imprisonment.

Balik's face rose in my mind – for about the thirtieth time that afternoon – and I was irritated by how obsessive I had become. I hadn't realised what a stalker I could be. Quite unsuccessfully I tried to justify my preoccupation, thinking that our conversation on the way to Park 17 had taken my thoughts down a particular path and left me trapped there. That was why I had been unable to get back to a place where I could gossip and chatter easily with my friends.

That wasn't true. I did want to talk; only I wanted to talk about things that actually meant *something*. Maybe things that I was having a hard time understanding – like the random voices that had been interfering with my concentration throughout my exams – well, probably *not* that – anyone I told would think I was crazy if I admitted that.

If I was *really* crazy – which was impossible because mental illness had been eradicated within the space station population – I'd be doing more than hearing people who weren't there. I'd be acting crazy, and I wasn't.

Was I?

The more I thought about it, the more I wasn't sure. I felt normal. I couldn't remember doing anything weird. *Except for avoiding my friends, talking to strangers, climbing rocks in a deserted park...* a small voice pointed out (at least I knew it was mine this time).

I shook my head. That's just great: listen to me, talking to myself. I really am losing it! Even so, I couldn't stop myself from responding to the allegations: the stranger comment doesn't count – I've known Balik for years and really I wasn't avoiding my friends, I just wanted to some time to myself.

To go rock climbing, perhaps... The suggestion dripped with innocent sarcasm. My inner voice was really starting to get on my nerves today and I shoved it away.

I might not know *what* exactly I felt like talking about, but some part of me was sure that Balik would be the person to have a conversation with. This odd realisation both intrigued and scared me.

The avenues were virtually empty as I neared home. The artificial daytime was coming to an end as the mirrors high in the ceiling of the space station rotated slowly away from the light of the sun, many thousands of miles away, and allowed the darkness to take hold. The shadows between the apartments grew longer as I walked, merging in to one another as I made my way deeper into the residential Green Zone, leaving behind me the open spaces of the parklands and plazas. By the time I turned into my own small avenue it was fully dark.

Lights shone invitingly from the entrances of the buildings I passed and from a distance I could hear voices and music merging together from the viewing screens inside. The apartment blocks were made of the same pale, strong plastic resin as the pavements, and virtually everything else on the space station for that matter. Small, square windows looked down onto the shadowy avenue. Some windows glowed softly, illuminated only by the viewing screens within; others were brightly lit, throwing yellow patches onto the pavement at my feet. But most were black and empty, as though they were closed eyes trying to sleep now that darkness had come.

As usual, I didn't have a pocket viewing screen on me and so I wasn't sure what time it was. It couldn't be too late as I hadn't been in the park that long and it had only just turned dark. It must be around 7.30pm I decided.

On the left side of the avenue, four buildings down, on the third floor was my family's neat, normal apartment pod. Our apartment building was identical in every single way to the other nine on the avenue, which lined up neatly five each side of the narrow walkway. Our street was identical to the other four avenues of the Green Zone, which were in turn identical to the streets of the Black, Red, Blue and White residential zones of the station. A lot of things in the Family Quarter were duplicated, presumably for ease of construction and maintenance. Schools, Clinics, Libraries, even our individual apartment pods were all built to a single template – everyone had the same.

There were two other areas of the station I had never been to and knew virtually nothing about: the Married Quarter and the Retirement Quarter. It seemed odd to me that there was nothing to tell you what either place was like until you actually went there. The lack of information made it feel a little scary somehow – to me at least – although that didn't appear to bother the couples who were eloping off there all the time.

Maybe there was some special information pack you received when your parents thought you might be ready to go? Or perhaps you learned more about it once you'd completed your placements and found your future role on the station? I was quite caught up in my musings about the Married Quarter as the door to our apartment slid aside and I stepped into my home.

“Hello?”

Silence greeted me.

Pushing my day shoes off my feet I walked barefoot into the apartment. The front door glided shut behind me, emitting a soft *whoosh* as it went.

“Mother...? Father...?” I called out, not really expecting a reply.

There was no answer.

Walking through the main living space I glanced at the viewing screen on the wall – the time glowed brightly in the corner: 7:38pm. They must be working late I realised, which was not at all unusual these days and so I headed straight to my bedroom.

My parents both worked much longer hours as I'd gotten older and was able to fend for myself. When I was younger Mother had worked very flexibly and we spent most of our time together. Father as well, seemed to have been able to work very little whilst I was small. I suppose there was some kind of trade-off on the station so that once your child was older you made up for the time and covered for others who now had young children. With only a slight twinge of guilt I realised that I was glad to have the apartment to myself, some time alone would be nice.

Slinging my school bag onto the floor beside my bed I walked over to the viewing screen, touching the surface to access the main directory. Some quiet background music was what I needed to help me relax. The andante movement of one of Borodin's string quartets was close to the top of my personal selection and so I opted for that, not wanting to have to think too much about what to listen to.

When the last people came aboard the station from Earth, music was one of the most important things they had brought with them. Although there had been music of various types right into the mid-twenty-first century only the most important pieces were brought to the space station and so I had never heard anything composed much later than the early 1900s.

I loved music; it was so different to the other art forms we had on the station. There was a beauty and life in music that was distinct from the artwork, which hung in the two galleries, or could be viewed on screens. It felt alive and real, all on its own as if were a creature; each piece a different beast, moving and flowing in a particular way.

Beethoven was one of my favourites. Each of his compositions felt to me as though it were the product of a great creative struggle. When you listened to his pieces you had the sense that every note chosen had been agonised over to ensure the perfect harmony and effect. His labours infused every piece I had ever heard. Mozart was also very popular on the station and although I liked his work it always had an effortless feel to the composition, which was attractive in its own way, but I missed the suffering for perfection that I felt with Beethoven.

Stepping out of my day-suit I lay down on my bed not bothering to switch on the bedroom light. The gentle sound of violins swelled through the room. I had never seen the instrument – as none existed on the station only pictures on a viewing screen – but I knew the sound of it by heart. Lying in the darkness I listened to the music of dead men – both composer and orchestra – played on instruments that no longer existed. It was simultaneously depressing and reassuring to me: sadness for a human time on Earth long gone and irretrievable, contrasted against the ability of mankind to survive its own self-destructive nature, which had created people like me who could still listen.

As each slow triplet flowed around me in the darkness I began to relax and let my mind wander back over the events of the day, flicking swiftly through my exam and trying to go more slowly through my conversation with Balik – his face and voice lingering in my thoughts longer than I knew they should.

When I'd spent an inappropriate amount of time on that subject my thoughts drifted back to Park 17 and Ami.

* * *

“So, what’s the gossip?” I asked tossing my school sac onto the soft grass and plopping down beside it.

Our friends were lounging on the lawn around us, enjoying the bright sunlight and celebrating in a post-exam euphoria. Ami carefully placed herself between the others and me making it obvious she wanted my full attention. Whatever it was she wanted to tell me she must think it was important, or at the very least not want to be interrupted.

“OK,” she began, glancing across her shoulder towards our friends and then turning back to me, “you know how I’m friendly with Katy who was a year ahead of us?”

I nodded, yes; “Katy who lives two apartment buildings down from you?” I clarified.

“That’s her,” Ami’s dark brown eyes grew wider as she began her story, her petite features moving precisely and delicately beneath her golden skin as she spoke. “Katy ended up working in the agricultural sector in research once she finished her placements last year. Her parents were both Medics, so it was quite a surprise when she didn’t end up at The Clinic, but I suppose there are always some people who aren’t suited to their parents’ professions...”

I swallowed uncomfortably as she said this: her words hit a nerve for me, but Ami was oblivious and continued with her story.

“Anyway, she met this guy there – he’s from the Black Zone and so she hadn’t known him at school – and they started seeing each other. They kept it quiet because Katy didn’t want to rush things and end up heading off the Married Quarter too quickly. Her best friend at school had done that, leaving with a boy from their class when she was just sixteen – they didn’t even take their exams before they left, so I don’t know what they’ll do for a job when they come back, unless you can complete school once you’ve moved to the Married Quarter – do you think you can?” Ami didn’t wait for an answer. “Katy and this guy were really good friends and everything – ”

“Like you and Patrick?” I interrupted her with a knowing smile when she said the word *friends*.

Ami beamed with pleasure – just as she always did whenever the subject of Patrick came up – before continuing as though I’d never spoken.

“He’d meet Katy each morning to walk out to the agricultural sector they were working at, you know...I saw her last week and she seemed really happy: everything was going well with her placement and obviously with him too. We got talking about what they might be planning to do in the future and she was still against the idea of moving on to the Married Quarter yet: they both have lots of friends and were enjoying the freedom they had here, so there was no rush, you know?”

“Sure,” I agreed, even though I had no personal experience of this to go by, so didn’t really know at all.

“Anyway, when I was on the way to the exam this afternoon, I thought I’d stop by and say hello ‘cause I’ve not seen her for a few days and I was sick of revising...but when I called at her family’s apartment she was gone.”

“Gone?” I echoed trying to muster up the required shock that Ami apparently expected. Obviously – by the expression on her face – it had not sounded the way I had intended to. I was an awful actress, but in my defence it was hard to get that involved in the story of someone I didn’t really know that well.

“You know – eloped!” Ami finished with irritation. “After everything she’d said about it, they just disappeared two nights ago – no message or anything for anyone – just gone!”

“Oh,” I replied.

What did Ami want me to say?

To my mind it was always the same story: people would meet someone they liked and it was never long before they disappeared – eloping one night to the Married

Quarter – and not returning for a long time until they had a child to raise. I had no idea why this was bothering Ami so much.

“Is that all you have to say?” Ami demanded angrily. This was not like her at all.

“What do you want me to say?” I shrugged apologetically. “You know I’ve not really had any close friends go to the Married Quarter, but I thought that what you just described was pretty much the way it happened. Didn’t you?”

“I suppose, but still...” Ami’s face fell and her bottom lip curled into her mouth as she nibbled on it nervously. Something was wrong.

“Still what, Ami...? Why has this bothered you so much?” Concern for my friend was evident in my tone.

“Because Katy *promised* me,” Ami murmured, dropping her gaze towards the ground.

“Promised you what?”

Ami looked up at me and I saw there were tears pooling at the edge of her eyes. Her words poured out in a whispered rush. “She promised me that she would tell me when they were going to go. Katy knew all about Patrick and me, what was happening to us was so similar; we promised that if either one of us was going to leave that we would tell the other...”

“You’re upset because she didn’t tell you first,” I concluded, but I was wrong.

“It’s not that,” Ami shook her head, brushing the tears away quickly before they spilled onto her cheeks. “Neither of us *wanted* to go yet – no one ever tells you what it’s like in the Married Quarter, even when I’ve asked my parents they’re really vague about it. And you know that once you’ve left you can’t come back here until you have children...both of us still wanted to spend time with our friends and everything, we

didn't want to move along too soon – we didn't feel ready – if Katy changed her mind why didn't she tell me?"

I reached over to touch her arm gently as Ami's head bobbed down. I knew she was trying to hide the new tears that had appeared.

"Look, maybe she didn't want to say anything in case it made you feel bad for not wanting the same thing...?" I suggested, not really knowing what Ami wanted to hear.

"Maybe," Ami conceded, but mainly sounding unconvinced.

"Are you sure she hasn't left you a message or anything?" I wondered aloud, half to myself.

"I've checked already, there's nothing...and her parents have already moved out to the Retirement Quarter. I didn't even see them leave."

"I'm surprised at your reaction," I admitted quietly after we had sat in silence for a few minutes, "I didn't realise that you knew Katy so well to feel like this."

"I know I'm being silly," Ami half-agreed. I could see her eyes were dry once more. "It just scares me I suppose."

"*Scares* you?" I asked, surprised by her admission. Ami was confident and popular, self-assured in everything she did it always seemed to me: she did not get scared.

"Scared because I don't understand what could have happened in two days to do that...make Katy change her mind so completely?" There was a plaintive tone to her question.

"I'm sorry, but I have no idea either. And I'm not the best person to ask am I – the sad, lonely girl without a boyfriend, remember?" My joking self-pity brought the smile to Ami's face I had hoped for, although it was still much thinner than I'd have liked.

“Ha-ha, very funny,” Ami chuckled before sighing again. “Katy was just so *certain* when we spoke and felt exactly as I do...if she can change her mind so quickly, what’s to say the same thing wouldn’t happen to me?”

“Because you’re not the same,” I told her firmly, understanding now what she had seen in her friend’s behaviour. “Anyway – you and Patrick haven’t even been together that long – you don’t need to worry about it.”

“You think?” She was still uncertain.

“I’m sure,” I told her confidently. “You’ve plenty of time for that and I can’t see you running off to the Married Quarter without me in tow and I am *way* behind on the guy front!” My self-effacing tone worked better now and she laughed, her smile reaching her eyes.

“That’s true! And there’s no way I’m leaving you behind, so it will definitely have to wait!” Ami grinned, returning fully to her normal self. “Speaking of which...I wonder if there’ll be any interesting guys on your first placement at The Clinic...?”

* * *

“Cassie – are you awake?”

Mother’s voice on the other side of my bedroom door brought me back to consciousness. I realised I must have dozed off whilst I was listening to the music, which had ended some time ago judging by the time on the viewing screen. It was 9.42pm.

Too groggy to move just yet, I lay still and remembered what Ami had been saying in the park. I’d completely missed it when I’d seen the elopement announcement on the board when I was walking home, but that girl had been Katy – Ami’s friend. I must have been more preoccupied earlier than I realised.

“Cassie – are you in there?” Mother asked again, her voice with a sharp edge to it.

“Yep,” I called back. My own voice sounded hoarse and sleepy so I coughed to clear my throat. “I’ll be out in a minute.” That sounded better. “Illuminate,” I muttered and pulled the pillow across my face just a fraction of a second before the lights came on. “Dim to level 2,” I instructed and saw the bright glow surrounding the edges of my eye-shield reduce to a softer yellow. Another thirty seconds later my eyes were ready to face the room without the pillow.

Dragging the cushion off my face, I lay still on the bed and focused on the blank, polished ceiling above me and thought about nothing. I was tired, but having dozed for a couple of hours now I knew it would be some time before I could sleep again. With a sigh I pulled myself upright and twisted my legs around until my feet landed on the cool floor. My toes fumbled around for a minute searching for my apartment slippers, as I couldn’t be bothered to look down and see where they were. Finally they found them and my feet shuffled inside.

Pulling on my robe from the hook by the door I trundled noiselessly into the corridor and made my way through to the living space of the apartment. Stifling a yawn as I wandered into the lounge, I slid into the large armchair in the corner, curling my legs up beneath me and resting my head on my knees. I closed my eyes and listened to my parents talking in the kitchen.

“She’s missed her evening meal and pill today,” Father said, he sounded almost cross and I wondered if he hadn’t realised I could hear them.

“Well, we’ll just have to make sure she has it tonight, it’s not a problem,” Mother answered, her voice matter-of-fact, “I collected one on my way back here so we’re fine.”

What an odd conversation? I thought in my half-wakeful state. I know it was the *rules* that you had the set meals each day and took your vitamin supplements to keep you healthy, but I hardly thought it would kill me to miss a single meal!

Unfolding my legs I trudged into the kitchen. My parents had their backs to one another: Mother sitting at the table – with what was presumably my dinner in front of her – and Father standing, looking out of the dark window. I had no idea what he could be staring at, as all I could see was the reflection of our kitchen in the dark windowpane.

Sliding into one of the white, curved chairs opposite Mother I leaned forwards to pick up the pink tablet sitting on the table and the cup of water beside it. I gulped it down with a quick slug of cold liquid. “It’s OK, there’s no need to worry, I’ll have my dinner now – I just forgot to get it on the way back from the park today...” My voice trailed off as both my parents turned to look at me with the oddest expressions on their faces. It was as though they were surprised that I had responded to their conversation. *It’s only dinner for goodness sake!*

Mother was the first one to re-arrange her face into a normal expression – a moment ago she looked bizarrely half-confused, half-surprised at my words – and she pushed the plate towards me. It was very strange for them to react to anything, let alone *overreact*...Must have been a hard day at work or something. Her eyes were attentive as I picked up my knife and fork and began eating. I really wasn’t hungry, but it was not worth all the questions that would follow if I refused my dinner.

“Have you already eaten?” I asked, pausing between a mouthful of potato (carbohydrate) and green beans (fibre).

Father had resumed his position looking out the window, whilst Mother remained next to me at the table. “I got something at work this evening,” she replied, her eyes still reviewing my movements.

“Are you working this weekend?”

“Yes,” they replied in unison.

“Oh,” my fork scraped lightly against the thick plastic plate. I carried on eating and the silence began to stretch. *This is painful.*

“How was your exam?” Father’s voice finally broke the silence and I exhaled with relief.

“It wasn’t too bad to be honest. I think the revision paid off so hopefully it should be a good mark.”

“You are good at history,” Mother noted, “you always remember a lot.”

“I suppose so,” I replied, not overly sure how she would really know what I remembered or didn’t seen as it was all inside *my* head. Then again, it often surprised me how Mother was able to say things with authority that she couldn’t possibly know, but that *were* true.

Silence fell. I vaguely wondered at what age it was that I stopped having much to say to my parents...but when I cast my mind back I almost felt as though we had never had much to say. Ever.

That couldn’t be right, could it?

I sipped my water and wondered whether to ask my parents about what had been playing on my mind. I supposed it couldn’t make the conversation any worse.

“Do you know Katy’s parents – they live in our Zone on Ami’s avenue?” I looked up at Mother now that I had finished eating. There was a slight pause as my parents glanced at one another before Father spoke.

“They’re both Medics aren’t they?” he asked.

“Yes – that’s them.”

“What about them?” Mother asked, as she picked up my empty plate and walked over to the disposal chute.

“Katy eloped a couple of days ago and they’ve moved to the Retirement Zone already.”

“Yes, I heard at work,” Father replied. “Why are you asking?”

“I just thought they might be a bit young that’s all – Katy’s only a year older than me and just coming to the end of her placement cycles...”

“But when it’s time it’s time,” Mother said, turning to look at me, her gaze scrutinising my features until I became uncomfortable and dropped my eyes to concentrate on my water glass. I hated it when she did that: it felt as though she was searching for something more than my words alone would tell her.

“Most people choose to move to the Married Quarter within a couple of years of leaving school you know,” Father added.

“Why do they do that though?” I asked bluntly, letting my thoughts come straight out without pausing to edit. I was not normally so frank with my parents; it did not make for a good conversation when I was.

There was silence once more. Then I heard my Mother mutter: “We will have to give her an answer.”

My head flicked quickly upwards so that I could see them both. Mother had made no apparent effort to whisper so I would not hear her. *Why were they behaving so oddly tonight?*

“Sorry – what did you say?” Even though I had heard quite clearly I could not help myself.

“We haven’t answered you yet,” Mother replied, examining me cautiously.

“I...” I started to contradict her then stopped. Maybe *they* weren’t the ones behaving oddly I thought...I’d been half-asleep a short while ago, brain filled with exams and silly questions and now I was imagining things. It wasn’t a great stretch of imagination to think that it was me who was not behaving normally rather than them. In

fact, grilling my parents on the conventions and setup of station society was pretty out of character for me – no wonder Mother was staring at me strangely.

They probably think I'm losing my mind! If they knew I was hearing things too they'd send me off for testing right now.

“Sorry,” I muttered, irritated with myself. “I was just wondering why we have the Married Quarter at all – why people don’t just stay with their friends and families, like we used to on Earth?” Pausing after my rush of words I waited now for a *real* answer to my question.

My parents looked at one another for a long moment and then both sat down at the table across from me.

“I had a feeling that you might start asking about this sooner or later,” Mother said, reaching across the table and patting my hand. It was an odd gesture for her – we never had much physical contact – but I didn’t pull away.

“Have you met someone at school?” Father asked.

“No!” I scoffed immediately and almost laughed out loud when I realised they thought I was asking for me! It unnerved me that Balik’s face flashed through my mind a split-second before I made my denials. I shook my head imperceptibly to get rid of the thought before it made me blush, ridiculous as it was. “It was this thing with Katy that made me wonder.”

“Right,” Mother nodded, apparently satisfied with my answer. “The Married Quarter was set up about a generation ago – your Father and I went there as a younger couple – it was mainly to help people get settled into married life and prepare them for raising a family, without the distractions of the outside world.”

“But why is it so difficult?” I asked.

“It’s not necessarily difficult,” Father spoke slowly he seemed to be considering his words carefully. “It’s just that it is a different experience than those that you have in this part of your life and over time it was considered better to separate them out.”

“I can understand that, but why do people do this thing – eloping?” I persisted, unable to restrain my questions now that we had begun. “Why don’t they just tell people they’re going and *then* leave?” I looked at Father and waited. It took a while longer for him to answer.

“Sometimes it’s just too hard for people, they can’t face saying goodbye and so they simply leave. But there are plenty of people who don’t elope, that say goodbye to everyone before they cross over. It’s not always that way.”

“I’ve not heard of any who haven’t eloped” I said, my voice a little petulant I realised as soon as I spoke.

“That’s because you barely know anyone who has moved over,” Mother replied dismissively. “Just because Katy did it, doesn’t mean that everyone will.”

“I know...it just it seems a bit unfair on the people left behind though. What if they never meet someone and get stuck here forever?” My voice was glum now and I was surprised when Father laughed at me – it was an unusual sound to hear.

“Don’t worry Cassie – there’s always someone for everyone – you don’t see any old maids around here do you?” The smile he gave me was odd, I knew it was meant to be reassuring but it looked wrong...it looked sinister. A chill ran across my bare arms, even though the room was comfortably warm.

“I suppose,” I muttered, pushing my chair away from the table, eager to escape now and half-wishing I’d kept my questions to myself. “I’m off to bed – it’s been a long day.” Really I wanted a bit more time alone to think. My head had started aching – just as it did when I was using the automatic discourse headset – and I wanted to lie in the

dark again, alone with my silly thoughts about eloping and old maids. Talking with my parents had made me feel worse not better.

As I turned away from the table a sharp pain pierced through my temple. It felt as though something pointed and hot was being pushed into my skull. I'd never really suffered with any kind of health problems before – why was I suddenly being plagued by these headaches?

An errant thought flashed through my mind in answer to the question. *Perhaps the headaches are connected to the voices you pretend you aren't hearing.* But I shoved the idea roughly aside before I could really consider it. I just have an active imagination, I reassured myself. People didn't hear voices in their heads – that was madness. I was just tired and needed some rest...with no more exams to worry about I was sure the headaches would stop on their own.

“Goodnight,” I waved sleepily at my parents as I headed out of the kitchen.

“Goodnight,” they replied in unison.

I shuddered: it was downright eerie when they did that.

Chapter 3 – Placement

I groaned loudly as the alarm on the viewing screen began its piercing shriek to announce the start of a new day. *Ugh*. I had not slept well.

“End alarm,” I mumbled incoherently, my mouth muffled by the pillow I had wedged over my face.

The wailing stopped.

Knock knock.

Mother was at the door already. I couldn't believe she could move that quickly. In fact, sometimes I could swear that she waited outside my room every morning for the sound of the alarm, just to check on me.

“Are you getting up?” her voice called cheerfully from the other side of the door.

“Yes!” I called back, removing the pillow for a few seconds to try and make myself sound as though I was awake in the hope it would fool her and give me a few more minutes of peace.

She wasn't fooled. “Get the pillow off your face and come out for breakfast, you'll feel better with something in your stomach.”

How did she know? I grumbled to myself as I threw the pillow onto the soft, cream plastic floor of my bedroom and lay blinking up at the ceiling. Slowly the room came into focus as I woke up properly and after another few – too short – minutes I pulled the light silver-grey thermocontrol sheet away from me and sat upright in bed.

The walls were bare – as always – with the exception of the single viewing screen in my room, which was the only point of information and entertainment in mine, or anyone's room for that matter. The apartment pods in the Family Quarter were all

identical: an open-plan living space with kitchen, dining and sitting area; a private study room for the parents, which was next to the kitchen and then there was the bathroom and two bedrooms, one for the parents and one for the single-policy child. In our apartment: me.

I had been into the bedrooms of every friend I ever had and theirs had all been identical to mine: the same dimensions; the same bed, table and chair; the same blank, cream walls and of course, the same viewing screen.

I wonder if Balik's room is like mine?

The thought ambushed me and I shook my head, as though to shake it out and gain control again. Random thoughts about Balik had been accosting me all weekend, with varying frequency, as though making up for the twelve years I had never thought of him. It was getting annoying.

“Why would Balik be different to everyone else?” I muttered irritably beneath my breath and not expecting an answer.

You think he is different and that's why you're wondering about it.

My thoughts hijacked me with an answer that took me by surprise, mainly because I realised that was exactly right. Balik *was* different. *How* he was different I couldn't say, but somehow I knew that he was. Maybe that was why thoughts of him had been bugging me all weekend!

From the corner of my eye I saw the viewing screen light up with an incoming call. I recognised Ami's code straight away and so answered it, not bothering to worry about my dishevelled appearance.

“Hey there Cass – whoa!”

Well, that kind of greeting fills you with confidence, doesn't it? I sighed to myself.

“Morning Ami, what are you doing up so early?” I asked between yawns.

“I’m just calling to say good luck on your first day. Did you actually sleep at all last night? You look awful.”

Great. “Yeah, I was a bit nervous I suppose, so haven’t slept so much.”

“I don’t know why you’re worrying about this or even taking the early rotation at all, you’ll be fine,” Ami said, her head bobbing in agreement with her words. I wished I had her confidence.

“Well, every little helps I suppose.” My voice was barely a whisper.

“You never know, there could be some cute guys there too,” Ami pointed out with an irrepressible grin. “Not that you’d probably like any of them...”

“Yeah – it’s shocking to me that *boys* are where your thoughts are focused at this time in the morning, so unlike you.”

Ami laughed off my sarcasm. “No need to be so grumpy, just get some make-up on those bags and you’ll be fine.”

“Sure, sure,” I agreed without enthusiasm.

“Oh! I know what I wanted to tell you – you’ll never guess who Thomas is chasing after now...”

Hmmm, never guess or can’t be bothered to guess – it was a hard call. I yawned again, glancing at the bed, which was inviting me to clamber back inside and pull the sheet over my head. So tempting, but not practical.

“See – I told you you’d never guess!” Ami continued enthusiastically, taking my silence as thoughtfulness. “Well, after you’d left the park on Friday...”

Ami continued her chatter as I wandered around my bedroom trying to organise my belongings and myself for the day ahead. Whenever she stopped talking long enough to wait for my response I would throw in a nod or an “uh-huh”, which appeared to satisfy her.

“Cassie – are you coming for some breakfast?” Mother’s voice came from the viewing screen this time – interrupting the flow of Ami’s monologue – although her face did not appear on screen as it would have done if she was calling me. It was just a message forward.

“I heard that. You need to go, right?” Ami asked, already leaning forward to disconnect the call.

“Yeah, sorry,” I agreed, without much commitment, I’d barely heard a word of what Ami had just said. “I’ll give you a call later and let you know how things go?”

“Sure – Patrick and I are heading out to the park later but I should be back this evening.”

“It’s a hard life you lead,” I sulked, but managed to drag up a small smile for my friend.

“It is indeed,” she laughed. “Remember – I want to know what the guys are like, so don’t be your normal reclusive self, eh?”

I just shrugged. Romance was really at the bottom of my list today, if it even made the list at all. Ami shook her head, dialling off the call with a little wave.

Though it was hardly a great distance to the kitchen of our apartment and I could have just as easily leaned through my bedroom door and shouted a response to Mother, I didn’t. We just didn’t do that kind of thing – my parents didn’t like shouting. So instead I walked over to the screen and touched the cool surface to activate it and send a message back.

“Message Forward Reply: I’ll be through in a minute.”

The message transmitted immediately and I knew that Mother would hear it in the kitchen where she would be rattling around putting out breakfast. I’d better get a move on.

The screen was still live and so I checked my appearance quickly before heading through to the living area of our apartment. “Mirror,” I instructed and in the next instance my reflection peered back at me from the screen – captured via a small camera mounted in the frame rather than the glass equivalents used historically on Earth.

The only plus point I could see as I glared at the screen was that my green eyes looked bright this morning, unfortunately that was just because the rims were so red that it made a startling contrast and the accompanying light grey circles beneath my eyes confirmed that both elements were due to a lack of sleep. My skin was pale as ever, but seemed to have a slight grey-ish tinge, which was not normal – sleepless nights had done nothing for my complexion either it would seem. The dark brown bird nest that was my hair looked impossible: knotting in several directions at once and indicating that the only small chance I had of sorting it out would be to wash the knots away. *Attractive*, I noted sarcastically before gloomily muttering “off” at the screen.

It was no worse than I had expected after the nights of broken sleep I had been having recently...but still, seeing it confirmed was depressing. I couldn't work out why I wasn't sleeping either, which made that part even more irritating. The exams were over, school was finished forever and I was moving on to my first development break...there was a minimal amount of community work allocated to me and so I would have more free time than usual...and most of my friends were in the same situation. I should have been happy and sleeping like the dead.

But I wasn't. Each night I was being awoken repeatedly, only remembering odd snippets of images – completely unrelated to me – as I tried to grasp what had startled me in to wakefulness in the first place. None of it made sense. It was almost as though I was jumping around my dreams looking at the world through someone else's eyes.

It wasn't always like that though. Sometimes there were no images just voices instead, talking in the darkness: a jumble of words and sentences that meant nothing to

me. The words were worse than the images in many ways, as they were just as invasive but had no context for me to even try and make sense of them.

If they were nightmares I could at least understand them, I mused for about the fortieth time. But they weren't scary at all, in fact everything in them was normal: familiar and mundane. Just not mine.

"Cassie...?" Mother's voice came from the viewing screen again, the word drawn out in a warning.

"Coming, coming," I muttered slipping my feet into indoor pumps and hurrying through the sliding door of my bedroom, heading towards the living space. It was the first day of my work placement and not only was I looking horrendous, but was probably going to be late too.

A reassuring breakfasty smell filled the air as I reached the open-plan lounge making my tummy gurgle expectantly. I slid into a seat at the table and in a single motion swept up the tumbler of orange juice and vitamin supplement left out for me. I gulped the juice quickly, washing down the small pill along with it suddenly realising I was quite thirsty.

"Sorry," I mumbled to Mother's back as she worked in the kitchen, "I didn't sleep well last night."

"Not sleeping?" Mother turned quickly to face me, her tone immediately concerned. "Are you feeling ill?"

I shook my head, stalling before answering.

What to say? No, I'm not ill but I might be dreaming someone else's dreams... I don't think so, Mother would probably have me removed immediately for psyche testing! Then there's the completely inappropriate obsessing about a boy who I've only spoken to once... that would hardly make me seem any more normal, would it?

I finally settle on the hugely imaginative, “no, I’m not ill,” as a response. The look on Mother’s face tells me immediately that she’s not falling for such a blatant rebuff. In fact, I can almost see the frustration she feels at my indifferent answer rolling off her in dark, angry waves. That’s new I note, unused to sensing strong emotions of any kind from my parents.

There’s only silence in the room. When I notice that Mother’s expression remains unchanged I am distracted from my previous observation by the realisation that it’s *so* not worth the interrogation that will follow if I to try and avoid answering her fully a second time. With this in mind I swiftly search for some suitable – and plausible – prattle that will satisfy Mother’s curiosity.

“I don’t feel unwell,” I began, pausing to cough in an attempt to clear my suddenly dry throat. “I’ve just had a lot on my mind the last few weeks and my head is probably a little too full.” I try to smile, but it’s more of a grimace and I realise I’ve not really done a much better job at closing off the conversation.

“What kind of stuff?” Mother prompted, walking over to me carrying a small plate of breakfast food.

“Probably the excitement of finishing the exams,” I shrugged, not wanting to get drawn into an extended conversation on the matter and regretting having mentioned not sleeping now. You could never make a passing comment to either of my parents; they would always want to question and analyse it until it had been fully worked out. It was as though everything had to be logical and lead to an answer...it couldn’t *just be*.

“But the exams finished on Friday, why would you still be excited?” Mother said pushing the breakfast plate towards me, waiting as I picked up my fork.

Just like this, I thought, irritation rising inside me as Mother began interrogating me as she always did. I paused for a few seconds to think – taking the time to stab a

pale yellow piece of protein onto my fork and scraping the plate noisily in my annoyance – but my mind remained empty of suitable answers.

Peeking up at Mother I was surprised by her expression. I was that sure I'd hidden my feelings well – I'd stayed silent after all – but when I glanced at her I could have sworn from the look in her eyes that Mother knew exactly what I had been thinking about her. Immediately remorseful I searched for a reply that would negate any further questions and calm the bad-tempered part of me that had been caused by the lack of sleep. Perhaps honesty would be best.

“I'm a bit nervous about starting the placement this week.” I admit finally, thinking that this might actually be something she expected.

“You don't have to loose sleep over that,” she reassured me breezily, almost chuckling to herself, “your Father will be there and some of your classmates are on rotation at The Clinic as well this week, so you'll have company of your own kind.”

My own kind... I mused, repeating her words to myself. It often felt that way.

Suitably appeased by my confession Mother began to talk about what the placement would be like. Allowing my brain to fog over into a murky blank space I only had to insert the occasional positive noise to show that I was listening and avoid any further questions. My silence allowed me to make my way through my nutritionally balanced breakfast of protein, carbohydrate, fibre and unsaturated fats in just three minutes.

Pushing the plate away as I finished, Mother picked it up before I even had chance to stand. She never ate breakfast with me, having always eaten before I was up or grabbing something when she got to work. As all food was provided at central points in the station – to a set cyclical menu – and could be taken home or anywhere you liked really it did not matter where or when you ate, so long as you had your three meals a day, plus two snacks and vitamin supplement. My parents usually collected mine for me

from the local point before I'd even made it out of bed. Sometimes I could swear they didn't sleep the amount of stuff they managed to get done in a day.

They're just organised, I guess, which is a trait you could have done with inheriting, I told myself when a glance towards the viewing screen in the kitchen reminded me that it was nearly 7.15am and we had to be at The Clinic for orientation in an hour.

"Thanks for breakfast," I said, hopping up from the table and heading towards the bathroom. A swift dart through the shower to wash the nest of knots that was my hair and wake me up might make me feel halfway human again.

"Father will be ready to walk with you at 7.45am," Mother called to my retreating back. "Just so you know where to go."

"OK," I replied, but I don't think she heard me through the closing bathroom door.

* * *

"Are you feeling alright?"

Father's voice broke into my meandering thoughts. It was the fourth time he asked me the same question since we'd left the apartment. My silence must be very annoying for him to persist with it.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to be so quiet." I shrugged. My mind was all over the place and I couldn't stay focused on one thing or another for very long. Certainly not long enough to hold a coherent conversation. It unnerved me to feel so jumbled – even more when I admitted that the majority of the things in my head were unfamiliar to me.

"You seem a little chaotic this morning," he observed.

I glanced upwards at Father and could see he was scrutinising my face, as though he could read what I was thinking just by looking at me. I don't know how he

got to *chaotic* from my being quiet, but he was exactly right I realised with a sigh. I had no answer for him.

“Sorry,” I mumbled before reverting to silence.

It wasn't long before we emerged from the closely built avenues of the Green Residential Zone and made our way down one of the wider thoroughfares towards The Clinic, which sat on the main plaza between the Green, Blue and Black Residential Zones.

My silence continued now as I tried to focus on the day ahead. The development placements automatically followed on for all school leavers at the end of their final year. Although our studies helped us to demonstrate abilities in specific areas, it was the development placements that would determine the roles we would fulfil in our future lives on the station.

It was normal for everyone to undertake their first placements within their parents' professions, as most people found that these suited them the best. *The whole nature/nurture thing*, my mind recalled Balik's words from Friday. The reminder irked me a little when it replayed the words in a perfect imitation of his voice – warm and resonating – and immediately brought to mind an image of his face, which I had been working hard to get rid of for most of the weekend. Obviously *that* was going well.

With some effort I pushed Balik's face to the back of my mind – along with other things I was ignoring – and concentrated on where I was heading. My stomach fluttered and lurched when The Clinic came into view. Even though I had used being nervous as an excuse earlier that morning to avoid an interrogation from Mother, I realised that I actually *was* nervous.

My jaw clenched uneasily, grinding my teeth onto one another as hot dry air caught in my throat. It took several more seconds for me to unlock my mouth, thinking that I might tell Father I was nervous about today – it would at least be a belated answer

to his previous questions. But I knew that if I did that, Father would then ask why I was nervous and I could not bear the analysis to get to the bottom of a question I was unable to answer for myself.

I'd spent a ridiculous amount of time over the weekend on self-analysis and retrospection, only to reach the groundbreaking conclusion that my biggest fear was about not fitting in. Not exactly profound was it? Nonetheless, it was the only answer I had.

From what I could see, most people seemed to be just like their parents: they were happy following them into the same professions and slotted in nicely with the other aspects of life on the space station. And unlike me they didn't appear to sit around thinking up excuses to avoid talking to their parents at the breakfast table! Yes – from what I could tell, it would seem that that was just me and was another item to add to the list of *Things Not Right with Cassie*. (Needless to say, my other issue was something I'd tried to avoid thinking about altogether over the weekend and so I had no further theories to offer on that...because it was just my imagination).

Now my time had run out. School had been relatively simple compared to where I was going now: everyone had to go to school, that was the only expectation anyone had of you. But the work placement...that was a whole other issue altogether. What would people think if I did not get placed permanently at The Clinic with Father? That only left Mother the astro-engineer and I didn't need to go on a placement with her to know that astro-engineering was not my strong point. It wouldn't take people long to realise that I was a fraud.

Ahead of me The Clinic loomed large and imposing – although I know a building so clean and bright, with its transparent façade can't really *loom* – it was my thoughts tainting its appearance to fit with my wild imaginings of being trapped for the rest of my life as an astro-engineer; or even worse still, being relegated to trying every

other occupation available on the station before the community realised that I had very little to offer.

The Clinic was quite large, compared to the surrounding buildings: rising up twelve storeys and taking up the equivalent frontage of five other properties within the square. Most of the surrounding structures only rose to six floors, whilst blocks in the residential zones were limited to three storeys, housing six families each. This was the main medical facility for this area of the station and served the surrounding Black, Green and Blue Residential Zones, which were on this side of the Family Quarter. A steady flow of pedestrians was passing through the grand entrance of The Clinic and Father steered us towards them to join the queue.

The scanner in the doorway beeped softly as I passed. I barely noticed the familiar sound as it registered the mark on my wrist – a small combination of shapes tattooed in black onto the inside of my right arm, just above the palm of my hand. People crowded into the bustling reception area and the scanner continued beeping almost constantly as it recorded the details of each person crossing from the open space of the square into The Clinic. There were scanners at the entrance and exit of every building on the space station, as well as the recreation spaces and occasionally on the smaller avenues within the residential zones.

The primary function of our marks was to locate people for relaying communications to nearby viewing screens. In the past they had been used in emergencies to determine where different people were within the space station. Of course, nothing interesting had ever happened in my lifetime, but my parents had told me of a terrible accident in one of the farming chambers in the agricultural sector that had happened when they were younger. An irrigation system had broken and flooded the whole area, drowning dozens of people who had been on community work. The marks had been used then to identify those who had perished because the chamber

could not be reopened again for several weeks. An involuntary shudder ran down my back as I thought of this. I was glad the work of the scanners had always been benign in my experience.

“Hello again,” a friendly – and familiar – voice whispered into my ear as I entered the wide reception foyer, happily diverting me from the rather depressing path my thoughts had wandered down.

Something in my chest jumped an inch behind my ribs and I sucked in a breath of air through my nose as his voice registered in my brain. I did not need to turn and look at him to know who it was as my brain very kindly supplied several flashes of images to remind me of his bright, honey brown eyes and easy smile under a halo of thick, wavy hair. The unnecessary closeness of his lips to my ear as he whispered made the skin on my neck tingle and I had to fight off the shiver that would have exposed me.

An excited smile tugged at my lips and I fought my facial muscles to force it into a normal, friendly ‘hi, how are you’ kind of smile instead, before I turned towards the owner of the seductive voice.

“Hi,” I replied, managing to make my tone sound just about normal, even though my throat was eagerly tight. *Well done*, my sarcastic mind congratulated me, *you spend fifty hours trying to get him out of your head, then get jelly legs when he says hello to you. It’s a good job he only just started speaking to you, or else you’d not have got anything done in the last twelve years.*

Shut up! I told the mocking voice firmly and turned my attention to Balik, who had just fallen into step beside me.

“You need to go through the doors over there,” Father pointed across me forcing an immediate halt to my steps. My attention was so focused on not appearing focused on Balik, I had completely forgotten that Father was there until he spoke. “There’s a

registration point in the orientation reception there where they'll get you sorted for your first day; probably a lot of walking around I would expect.”

“OK,” I replied, tearing my gaze from Balik’s face and turning back towards my Father. The expression on Father’s face was unreadable as I looked at him. His eyes flitted between Balik – who had also stopped and was waiting – and me a couple of times before he spoke again.

I think this is it.

I heard my Father’s voice clearly in my head. Five words, tinged with a feeling of...what was it...excitement...relief...? I blinked quickly and tilted my head to the side, as though it would help me to hear better even though I was simultaneously doubtful and certain that I had heard him speak without any assistance from my ears.

Had he just spoken as I was looking at Balik? I wondered as confusion clouded my mind. I didn’t think so – I was sure I had been looking at Father when I heard his voice and his lips hadn’t moved.

“Sorry Father, did you just say something?”

“Yes,” Father appraised me thoughtfully, his eyes probing mine, probably checking that I was not losing my mind. “I told you the registration point was through there,” he pointed towards the doors across the foyer again.

“No, I mean after that,” I pressed on, my cheeks flushed bright red as I realised that I was probably making myself look pretty foolish in front of Balik, just to satisfy my own curiosity.

“Yes...that you’ll probably be walking around a lot today.” He said this slowly now: he definitely thought I was losing my mind. There was nothing else for me to say.

“Sorry, I thought you said something after that,” I mumbled, dropping my gaze to examine the shiny floor and my light grey pumps, my cheeks flaming even hotter. I sounded stupid and I knew it. “I’m still a bit sleepy I guess.”

“Sure,” Father replied, although his voice sounded anything but sure.

“I’ll see you later, OK?” I replied looking up briefly. Father barely moved.

“I’ll meet you outside after five.” Father agreed finally. I turned away from his scrutinising eyes.

I really need to get some sleep I reprimanded myself as I headed in the direction Father had indicated. *I think I’m actually going crazy.* Balik fell back into step beside me as I stalked away and I could sense that his face was turned towards me – probably with the same probing, is-she-mentally-stable-look, Father had just appraised me with – I couldn’t look at him again, I was too embarrassed.

“Are you OK?” Balik asked finally, when I didn’t speak or look at him.

“Fine,” I replied, my lips tight, not listening hard enough to be able to analyse whether his tone was concerned or confused. All of the butterflies I had felt in my stomach a few moments before when he arrived were like stones now, weighing me down as I walked. “Just ignore me – I’m hearing things because I haven’t been sleeping well.” My voice was flat and sarcastic as I tried to close down the conversation. It worked.

“Oh,” he replied inaudibly and dropped a pace behind me as we passed through the doors, putting a tentative distance between us.

Yes, probably best that you don’t associate with the crazy person, there’s bound to be some more interesting people here for you to talk to anyway, so you won’t need to bother with me again and we can go back to our normal, silent selves, I thought bitterly.

* * *

The door hissed softly shut behind us as we passed through – blocking out the general noise of voices and feet from the large entrance hall – the silence was worse for me. It made my embarrassment feel even more obvious; my heart thumped erratically in

my chest and the air trapped in my throat between my lungs and tightly closed lips almost ached as I moved rigidly forwards. Even though Balik remained close to me I couldn't look at him again – *probably being polite and waiting for a chance to escape* – and so I twisted my head so that my hair fell over my face slightly and hid whatever expression was written there.

Three other nervous-looking people stood awkwardly in the centre of the new room – it was an easy guess that they were the other members of our orientation unit. This room was a smaller office, with a desk and organised looking woman sitting behind it, who was about my parents' age.

The group was made up of two boys and one other girl and as we entered, they turned to look at us. I squirmed internally as they appraised the newcomers. The look in the girl's eyes when she saw Balik was unmistakably one of interest and she smiled brightly at him. I didn't turn to observe his reaction – there was no need – she was very pretty. *Great*, I muttered to myself, although really there was no reason for this – what claim did I have on Balik anyway? And he clearly thought I was not altogether right in the head, which I would agree was not far from the truth at the moment.

Beside the girl, the two boys were very different: one was tall – taller than Balik – with a light build and the very dark skin of the African descendents on the station. His eyes were almost black, which might have been intimidating if the dark colour was not so warm, and his rounded face was bright with an open expression. The dark brown-black hair on his head was cropped close to his scalp, however, you could still see the tight curls it would wind itself into as it grew. Quite different from the softer waves of Balik's hair, I mused before checking myself, stopping that train of thought going any further. I smiled at the boy automatically in greeting, which he immediately returned with a dazzlingly bright smile of his own. It was infectious and I felt my own lips widen in response.

The other boy was shorter, closer to my height with pale skin and golden-red hair. He appeared much younger than the rest of us. Perhaps it was the rash of freckles that filled his nose and cheeks that gave him a more childlike appearance? His blue eyes looked nervous and I immediately saw my own knotted stomach reflected in his face – I just hoped I was doing a better job of hiding it than he was!

Finally, after a few moments of silence as the group of five evaluated one another, I allowed myself a side-long glance at Balik. He stood close beside me – closer than I had thought, when I'd been studiously ignoring his existence as we entered the room – and looked...comfortable...which was surprising.

As we waited, the taller boy approached us with the other two following closely behind. Of course, I realised, safety in numbers.

“Hello,” he said, as he came to a stop in front of me. His face was friendly and when he smiled I relaxed somewhat.

“Hi,” I replied and felt a big gush of air exit my lungs as I spoke – I had forgotten I had been holding my breath since we came in the door and it felt good to be able to breathe again. “I’m Cassie and this is Balik,” I gestured towards Balik on my left in a quick introduction; filling the space with normal chatter helped ease my nerves further, so I rambled on. “We’re from the Green Zone, where are you all from?”

The more confident boy spoke again to introduce himself and the girl. “My name’s Joel and this is Olivia – we’re both from the Blue Zone.”

“And I’m Karl,” the other boy chipped in, his voice a little squeaky, “I’m from the Black Zone.”

Balik stood quietly at my side as I chatted. A cursory glance in his direction reassured me that he still seemed to be OK, although he did not speak. His attention seemed to be more closely drawn to Joel and his eyes looked a little tighter around the edges than they had before. The expression on his face had not changed at all, but I

could *feel* that something was different: he seemed unhappy, or disappointed, or something...I just couldn't put my finger on it. My heartbeat bounced a little harder, when I realised I was just glad he was not looking at the blonde girl Olivia, who was blatantly staring at him. Even the light green colour of her suit accentuated the lovely colour of her aqua eyes, I observed with irritation.

“...Father's a Medic, works specifically in emergency medicine here, how about yours?” Joel's voice drew me back into the conversation from my wandering thoughts as I realised he was addressing me and would need an answer to prevent me looking like an idiot.

“It's also my Father who's a Medic – my Mother is an Engineer – his work is focused on research I think, mainly in the labs or something.” I managed a half-decent answer although my thoughts were still preoccupied. Balik still hadn't spoken, but I reminded myself that that really was not so unusual.

The doors behind me slid open as someone entered; a burst of noise filling the room before they closed again and the group fell silent. I knew without turning that it would be our mentor for the duration of the placement. I shifted across and watched as a small woman, with short light brown hair that skimmed the bottom of her earlobes went past. She wore the dark blue suit of the Medics who worked at The Clinic, which looked severe against the tiny, delicate features of her face. Like most of the people I had seen at The Clinic so far, she was around the same age as my parents. Walking to the desk at the front of the room, she scooped up a mobile viewing screen held out for her by the organised looking woman and rapidly tapped her fingers across the surface, manipulating whatever information was displayed there.

“I'm Medic Karlina and I'll be your mentor for the next few weeks as you get settled in to your placement here.” She addressed us brusquely without raising her eyes from the screen. “I know all of your parents well and so I know that they have high

hopes for at least some of you finding your future roles here with us at The Clinic – but there’s no need to worry too much if it is not the path for you, there are plenty of other options in the station.”

No need to worry? That’s easy for you to say! I grumbled to myself. I just hoped Father would not be disappointed with me, because I really could not see me following in Mother’s footsteps. A brief glimpse of Balik told me that he was fully engaged with what the Medic was saying and probably not worrying too much about whether he would fit in anywhere on the station. Why would he need to? I grumbled mildly before turning my attention back to the Medic.

“First of all we’ll be splitting you into pairs for the orientation tours and then we can get start-”

The doors *whooshed* open and a girl with curly brown hair bounded into the room, nearly knocking me over.

“Sorry I’m late!” She garbled, her face flushed pink, whether from embarrassment or exertion I could not tell. “I thought I was going for my Father’s placement today at the farms and I got confused, because it wasn’t there I was supposed to be but here, but then it’s across the other side of the zone and so I had to run back and...” Her voice trailed off abruptly and the colour of her cheeks accelerated from pink to scarlet as she gazed around at the six pairs of eyes fixed on her (the organised woman behind the desk seemed unaware of her boisterous entrance, focused entirely on the work at her desk still).

I looked away from the girl, feeling bad for her and knowing that I would have wanted to melt into the floor if I had been her at this point in time.

Medic Karlina’s expression was unreadable as my eyes swept her face: she appraised the new arrival slowly. The rest of the group turned away from the girl,

probably feeling as uncomfortable as I did as we waited for something to happen. Finally the Medic spoke.

“You would be Rachel from the Black Zone I take it?” She glanced at the screen in front of her and tapped it.

“Yes,” Rachel replied breathlessly, still red.

“Well...now you know where you’re going to be the rest of the week you won’t be late again I take it.”

“No,” Rachel replied again, her voice small as her scarlet cheeks deepened in colour.

“Good...let’s get started then. You’ll be working in pairs for the time being...Balik, you can go with Olivia, Karl with Rachel and Joel with Cassie.” She divided us up without bothering to look at which of us was which.

Olivia turned to smile in my direction, but I knew she was looking past me towards Balik – girls did not normally smile at me like *that* – an angry burning in my chest irritated me. But instead of turning to look at Balik I glanced across at my partner for the morning, Joel, who grinned as he caught my eye. At least this might be fun with someone like him around, I thought. No uncomfortable silences.

“You’ll get your clean clinic-suits through that door,” Medic Karlina pointed towards the back of the room, “once you’re changed come back in here and we’ll get you off on your orientation tours.”

I collected my new, fresh smelling white clinic-suit as instructed and dressed with the other girls as quickly as I could in the tiny female changing room. It did not help my self-esteem much when I caught a glance of Olivia combing her hair with her fingers to tidy it after pulling on her suit. Even in the plain clinic-whites she looked perfect.

My fingers stuck slightly in the little knots my hair had made as I got changed when I tried the same trick and I had the feeling that my straight-ish brown hair would still be left fluffy no matter what I did...certainly it would not resemble the golden waterfall of hair that fell down Olivia's back. I gave up – not wanting to be the last out – and left the changing room appearing in the small reception before the other two girls.

Balik was stood there alone, obviously faster than the other boys too and he smiled at me as I came back into the room. My heart sank. He looked just as gorgeous as Olivia did in the clinic-whites – his dark skin glowing next to the brightness of the suit – whilst I knew that it would do nothing for my pale skin and dark hair, except make me look more pallid than usual.

“Are you actually looking forward to this?” I asked him, a little grumpy as I walk over, forgetting that I'm not speaking to him because of my earlier embarrassment.

“A little – why – aren't you?” He smiled again, as though he could tell from my voice that I wasn't, although his expression was puzzled.

I shook my head, but did not reply. I didn't want to get into a discussion on the subject of why I thought I had no future at the station right now. Anyway, why did it surprise me that he would be looking forward to spending the morning with Olivia as his partner?

Just then Joel appeared from the changing room, his wide smile filling his face as he came over to me. “You looking forward to this morning, partner?” He grinned when he reached us.

“Sure,” I nodded a little and smiled back.

I noticed Balik's expression change as I answered, a small frown creasing his forehead before he pushed it away to replace it with a more thoughtful look. If I had blinked I would have missed it. No doubt he was thinking something critical about how

I *lie* to people, instead of telling them the truth after what I had just told him a few seconds earlier about not really wanting to be there.

Does that mean that Balik isn't "people" then? Because you didn't lie to him, did you?

No I hadn't lied, I agreed with the nagging little voice in my mind, answering its second question. Unable to think of an answer to the first one I ignored it until it went away.

Within another minute the rest of the group had gathered in the small reception room – all dressed in their new, white suits – and Medic Karlina had allocated each one of us a guide from the three Medics that had entered the room in the meantime. Joel and I were to go with Medic Rico and once we were ready – having each been provided with a small portable viewing screen – he headed swiftly out of the door with us trotting closely behind.

As the doors slid shut I couldn't resist turning back for one last look at Balik – *how desperate is that?* I berated myself, but looked anyway, although I tried to make it appear as casual as possible. I expected him to be engrossed in conversation with his new partner Olivia, as from my recent experience with him it would seem that he was much better in a one-to-one situation than in a group. I was surprised when I turned and saw that he was watching Joel and I leave the room, almost as though he was oblivious to the pretty blonde talking next to him. Instinctively I raised my hand to wave at him, a small farewell. He did not wave back, or smile, he just turned away to face the Medic that was now talking to him and Olivia. Then the doors slid shut and he disappeared from view.

The orientation morning flew by quickly. Joel was great company – he reminded me a lot of Patrick, Ami’s boyfriend – and I actually found myself enjoying the tour of The Clinic facilities, even though the Medic we were with was as serious as everyone else we met that actually worked there. Joel was certainly *not* serious.

It was something I had never noticed before, perhaps to do with the type of work they were involved in, I supposed, but the faces of all the Medics were subdued as they went about their duties and they barely seemed to speak to one another making me wonder how nice a place it would be to work after all.

We visited the Emergency Wards and saw Joel’s Father – he waved at us mechanically as we passed through the ward, obviously caught up with what he was doing. As we went through the labs on one of the upper floors of The Clinic I saw Father, busy at work between the numerous testing machines, viewing screen in hand and deep in concentration. I was just about to call out to him to say hello, when he looked up from his screen as though realising I was there and stared right at me. For a moment or two there was no change to his expression, then he smiled slightly and waved his hand before turning his attention back to his work. *Serious*, I thought again. The people at The Clinic were a world away from my relaxed friends at school and I was glad again for Joel’s company. Something that at least felt familiar even if we barely knew each other.

Our guide had a lot of work to do and remained on site whilst Joel and I went off to grab lunch from the nearby canteen. I wolfed down my bland tasting balanced plate of protein and carbohydrates and swallowed the calcium-rich juice I had been given to accompany it, realising once we started eating how hungry I was. Most of the people around us were school leavers, presumably on placements in the area, or parents with younger children. The Medics and staff at The Clinic must eat on site, I mused, not

seeing anyone in clinic blues, although I couldn't recall seeing a canteen facility during the tour that morning.

Aside from a brief disagreement about the correct way to assess upper arm injuries, which Joel insisted on demonstrating on me, he kept up a busy conversation for most of our meal and I managed to remain fairly quiet without drawing attention to my silence. It was just like being with my friend's from school: no difficult questions to answer...no requests for personal opinions...easy.

Not like being with Balik? I ignored the voice in my head that asked the rhetorical question, but it refused to leave and hung around niggling at me as I tried to focus on what Joel was saying about one of his school friends.

Fine, I finally acknowledged irritably, Balik makes me feel uncomfortable with all his questions and cryptic answers! Are you happy?

No, the voice replied, because that's not true.

Yes it is, I snapped back, before I paused to reconsider my answer. I realised that it wasn't true. One of the main things that had been troubling me that weekend, repeatedly dragging my thoughts back to the time I had spent with Balik after the exam, dropped into place. His questions didn't make me uncomfortable – in fact it was just the opposite – they interested me and made me think. And right now with Joel, and again with my friends was *easy*; but it wasn't better.

And you like silence when you're with Balik, the voice prompted, but it didn't bother me this time because I knew it was right.

Yes, I answered the unasked question in my statement. I like the silence with Balik – it felt more comfortable than any time I've ever spent with anyone else on the station. Ever.

This realisation was timed perfectly to ruin my lunch, as just at that moment I saw Olivia and Balik enter the canteen. She was talking animatedly just as she had been

in the reception room that morning, her hair flicking gracefully around her lovely face as she spoke, all of her attention turned on him. I couldn't see Balik properly as he was facing towards her as she spoke. *No doubt captivated by her charm* I grumbled to myself, feeling very sour. Karl and Rachel followed them in a few seconds later and I could see that Karl was just as distracted by Olivia as several other young men she walked past on the way to the delivery hatches. *Ugh.*

“Are you OK?” Joel's voice called me back to reality with an unwelcome bump.

“Yeah,” I said, attempting brightness and failing miserably as I tried to pull my features into something approaching a smile from the scowl I could feel had taken control of my face. “I just realised that I forgot to get my vitamins with lunch,” I lied. Although it was a truthful lie if there is such a thing, as I *had* forgotten my vitamin pill.

Joel did not seem to find anything wrong with my smile. He jumped up from his seat and was headed towards the hatches before I could scrape my chair away from the table.

“No problem,” he called over his shoulder as he went, “I'll grab that for you, I want some more juice anyway.”

Joel's voice carried loudly in the small canteen, even above the general noise and chatter of the others and I saw Balik turn towards him in recognition as he approached.

“Hey!” I heard Joel's loud voice greet Balik as he drew closer and I saw, rather than heard, Balik's quieter response. A second later Joel pointed in my direction and Balik began to wind his way towards me through the tables, with Olivia following close behind. If I was not mistaken the look on his face said he was pleased to see me. While the look on Olivia's face said that *she* was not. I perked up a little when I saw this and managed to smile at both of them as they grabbed seats around our table.

“How’s your morning been?” Balik asked, settling his plate, glass and vitamin tablet onto the circular table in one swift movement, taking a seat opposite me. Olivia carefully seated herself next to him a moment later. I might have been mistaken but it looked as though she pulled her chair in closer to Balik than was really necessary at the half-empty table.

“Great,” I replied, ignoring my cynical observations on chair/table spatial relationships and focusing on the conversation. “Better than I thought it might be actually.”

“Oh good.”

Balik glanced up at Joel who was settling back into the chair next to me. He watched closely as Joel handed me my forgotten vitamin and I smiled my thanks back. I thought Balik’s face dropped a little when he saw this but it was probably wishful thinking on my part. Balik half-opened his mouth as though he wanted to say something else but didn’t in the end and turned his attention to lunch instead.

“How’s your day been so far?” I prompted after a long pause.

Balik looked up about to reply, when Olivia jumped in to answer for him. “It’s been wonderful,” she gushed enthusiastically. “We’ve been all through The Clinic and seen our parents – they work on the same ward funnily enough – ”

“Funny,” I smiled back briefly, hoping my negativity wasn’t too obvious. If it was she didn’t show that she noticed and carried on babbling for another few minutes, barely pausing to eat her food in between sentences and not even stopping when Karl and Rachel joined us.

I studied the faces of my placement group as Olivia maintained a constant hum of background noise. Rachel seemed to have gotten over her embarrassment at going to the wrong placement that morning and was listening to Olivia’s chatter with some interest; her curly brown hair bouncing as her head bobbed up and down in response to

Olivia's words. Karl was barely eating his food as he stared moon-eyed at Olivia, although I'm not convinced he actually heard much of what she was saying. Joel lounged back in his chair, surveying the surrounding tables and seeming to tune in and out of the one-sided conversation at ours. He appeared completely relaxed and neither irritated by nor interested in what Olivia was saying. I suppose he was probably used to this as they had been at school together. In fact if I had brought Ami to the table it would have been exactly the same thing as with Olivia if I'm honest. *I'd bet anything they wouldn't get along either – too alike.*

Joel suddenly looked over and caught me staring at him. I dropped my eyes to the table top feeling guilty for no reason other than it being rude to stare; he might have smiled but I didn't look back to check. Instead I turned my attention – without choice – back to Olivia and saw Balik watching me out of the corner of his eye as he ate quietly. Seeing that I was looking at him, Balik tilted his head to the side to stare directly at me – it wasn't unkind, but it wasn't a friendly look either – I felt as though he were considering me like a specimen under his microscope, the look on his face one that I recalled from our numerous biochemistry classes together. I focused on Olivia feeling slightly uncomfortable.

After a few more minutes of listening to her and nodding in appropriate places I picked up my plate to leave. Olivia's enthusiasm was not uplifting – like I found Joel's to be – it was downright exhausting and I had to make a move before my brain was overloaded by meaningless twitter. I take it back, I thought, Ami's not like *that*.

"I'm heading back to The Clinic now, I'll see you later." I was speaking mainly to Balik and Joel as I stood up, but I included a glance at Olivia and the others too as I didn't want to be rude.

"Hang on a minute, I'll come with you," Balik said. Dropping the fork onto his half-empty plate, he swept up his beaker as well as mine and followed me as I walked

over to the disposal area. “See you later,” he nodded to the other four at the table as we left.

“You didn’t have to join me,” I said lightly after we dumped our plates and headed out of the canteen into the unchanging daylight. I didn’t want *sympathy company*, I’d rather be on my own than have that.

“I know,” Balik shrugged. “I just wanted to talk to you.”

I nodded my head but didn’t say anything. If he wanted to talk to me I’d let him start, as I seemed too prone to making myself look foolish every time I filled in the gaps when he was around.

“So,” he said finally, “how’ve you *really* found it this morning?”

“Good – like I said before – better than I expected.”

“Why’s that?”

“Well, for one thing Joel’s pretty good company and so the time has gone quickly; but there’s also more happening here than I realised before.”

Balik didn’t say anything for a while as we walked and I grew impatient waiting. “Is it what you expected today?” I asked, hoping to draw him back into the conversation that he had started.

“Mostly,” he replied then sighed “although I could do without the running commentary from Olivia.”

I stifled the grin that threatened to erupt on my face at his words and settled for a harmless question instead: “Has it been a bit hard work?”

Balik looked at me scathingly, seeing straight through my poor attempt at innocence, although there was humour in his eyes as he did so. “I think you know *exactly* what it’s been like for me this morning.”

We wandered into the large entrance hall of The Clinic to wait for the next part of our orientation, the scanners beeping inconspicuously as we passed by. I allowed the

grin that had been twitching on my lips to break free, “I don’t suppose it suited your quieter side then?” I chuckled.

“You suppose right,” he smiled in agreement and I felt my heart clench in my chest involuntarily under his gaze. “She seems very nice and everything,” he said, not wanting to sound mean I thought. I hoped. “But definitely not for me.”

My heart tightened again harder this time as I thought, just for a split second, that his gaze softened as it met mine. I allowed myself to wonder: *perhaps...*

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

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