

PROLOGUE

It's been fourteen years since we've heard from Earth. Near two hundred and eighty for them: distance will do that to time, make it flexible as a reed of grass until it snaps in two. Meaningless as knowing how to say *dog* in your language on a planet that has no such thing.

We can't contact them unless they contact us first; every unmanned shipment that travels those millions of miles comes packed tight as a jigsaw, each element in its place. News, an updated Auden English/Earth English dictionary, a few pieces of their ecosystem to be curated by people like me. And at the bottom of the box, helium-3. Enough to power a return message, with some left over to keep our power plants running.

Used to be we'd get a shipment every two years, give or take a few weeks. Even that lag is enough to matter; lot changes in forty years, at least on Earth, and if we can't keep understanding each other then there'd be no point, would there, of us being here at all.

We're Earthlings too. Or, our mothers and fathers, back ten generations or so, at least they were. One ship brought us here, packed with a few of our very own Adam and Eves, to make a new Eden. An eighty-year trip. It worked, if your version of Eden is built with limestone and metal, tunnel life and three hours of sunlight. But it's a bigger planet, one we aren't powerful enough to destroy. At least not yet.

Doesn't make sense anymore, economically, to keep sending people here. There's enough already. They send us helium-3, we send cobalt, both go on living. Long as there's a shipment back and forth every twenty years, our time, we can thrive on both planets. We're trying to figure out how to survive without that shipment; we've got six more years until it becomes a real problem.

But: my phone's ringing. Probably Martin needs some help. Excuse me.

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Douglas lowers the phone from his ear. It's here: fourteen years of waiting, and it's here. Martin must sense something's wrong; he's hovering, trying to act like he's available but not overstepping. Douglas imagines he looks pale, realizes he's been frozen for some time, remembers to take a deep breath.

"I'm needed on the dock," he says, and Martin's eyes light up. He knows he has to stay back, he does, but *God* if Douglas can't feel the urgency seeping off him.

"Clear the old specimens, get the displays locked up. It'll take at least a few hours, you know it will, so try to get some rest."

Martin looks ill. Probably not just from excitement; just two days ago he'd spilled coffee on their good sequencer, they'll have to use the older model that takes twice as long to map a genome. But Douglas can't blame him, not when he looked ready to faint when the mug rattled over.

"Sleep," he says again, because if he doesn't make it an order Martin will fidget for the rest of the day. He grabs his jacket and is gone.

The dock is one of the few buildings on the surface of Auden. It's not that the atmosphere isn't adequate; they can breathe well enough, though it takes a bit more effort from their lungs. But space debris hits often enough that it's not worth the risk of building society above ground. He's heard, too, that more stars are visible in the night sky than on Earth, that even though none of them have ever stepped foot on their own planet their bodies are still oriented to its poles, that gazing up for too long is disorienting. Douglas still likes to look.

He is herded through several security checkpoints before finding Mindrew.

"Well?"

Mindrew passes over a clipboard. "There are survivors. It was a solar flare. Wiped out Earth's electrical grid, communication systems, everything. They've only just gotten back to the point of interstellar contact."

"And the helium-3?"

"About half of what we're used to. It's good we're already looking into local alternatives. Your load's over there, be sure to sign for it."

Douglas looks at the two containers, no bigger than the boxes he'd used to move house. A usual shipment was ten, eleven times as big. Still. The fact that they'd sent anything at all. He picks up the containers without a response. Turns to find his debriefing room.

Martin is fast asleep on the office's couch when Douglas comes back several hours later. The clunk of a box placed on the floor startles him.

"That's it?" He can't hide the disappointment in his voice.

"Fraid so."

He rubs his eyes, straightens the tie he doesn't have to be wearing. "Are they alright? The radio said something about solar flares."

News travels fast. Can't hide a spacecraft when everyone's been waiting over a decade for it. "Down to about ten percent of the last population count."

Martin doesn't ask about the full report. Douglas has clearance as head curator; it will be weeks until it's released. Still:

"They indicated they'd send another. If they're able to stick to their schedule, we'll get it in about a year." He hands Martin a catalogue of everything sent.

OFFICIAL REPORT, CLASSIFIED

OFFICIAL REPORT, PUBLIC

SEEDS, HELIANTHUS (1000)

DANAUS PLEXIPPUS

HELIUM-3 (AMOUNT: CLASSIFIED)

RADIO, IONIZED

CLASSIFIED

NEWSPAPER CLIPPINGS (371)

BRASSICA OLERACEA VAR. SABELLICA

CLASSIFIED

CLASSIFIED

CLASSIFIED

COUNTRY LIST, CIRCA 2827

AE/EE DICTIONARY, 25th EDITION

TRITICUM

ELECTRONICS, VARIED (17)

TO OUR PARTNER CURATORS: BERRIES, COFFEE, GROUND.

REQUESTED: COBALT, IODINE, SODIUM BICARBONATE, CLASSIFIED, CLASSIFIED.

Martin frowns. "Why didn't they list out the electronics?"

"There are separate notes for each one." Douglas reminds himself that this is Martin's first shipment; he'd been seventeen or eighteen when the last scheduled package arrived. The past four years, he's helped Douglas re-catalogue what's been sent over the last few hundred years.

It isn't a secret that Douglas hadn't liked Martin at first. He was, in most people's opinion, too young to work as a curator. He seemed to think he could make up what he lacked in experience by being hellbent on protocol, to an insufferable degree, and rewrote manuals if they were too general.

But no one entered the profession unless they had a deep desire to catalogue what they could of their first home, to recover information. Frustrating as Martin could be, stumbling over words and tripping over his own feet, Douglas has come to believe no one is better suited for the job. Martin spends most of his working hours with his nose stuck in a book, looking for just another morsel of information about life on Earth. While Douglas chooses to believe that they should catalogue as a way to respect their heritage, Martin seems convinced that something irreplaceable—maybe even ephemeral—was lost when the world split in two.

Martin eyes the boxes like he expects an animal to pop out.

"Treat it like anything else you've been working with and you'll be fine. What do you want to start with?"

"I'll read the public report first, then move on to the sunflower seeds."

"Good answer."

The public report is about a third of the size as the original. Nothing nefarious missing; it was just parceled down, understandable to the masses, short enough to fit conveniently on the first page of tomorrow's newspaper. Martin scribbles a few bullets into the margins of his copy: *Still unable to predict solar flares, research help requested; secondary shipment scheduled to make up for lost time; urgent request to hear updates of Auden as advancement on Earth is delayed.*

His mouth quirks and Douglas hums a question.

"Well, they always advance faster than us. I mean, faster, it's relative, but you know what I mean. They've had the resources of, of a headquarters, whereas we're just a branch."

"They share all advances with us, Martin. Even if they can't send us whatever they've developed, instructions are always included."

"I know. It's just strange to think that...that our civilization might be ahead. Not that it's a race. Just that, I've always believed in another place, out there, that's beyond ours. Now we might be the most advanced planet. The ones sharing something other than raw material. I don't like that thought."

"Get started on those seeds," he says, which means he agrees. Martin accepts it as an answer and places the bags on his desk with reverence. "You've got a thousand there, and each

sequence'll take you two minutes with that old model. You're looking at thirty-plus hours of scanning."

Martin doesn't need reminding of his mistake, but he also doesn't seem to mind. Checking seeds, making sure they are what is expected and contain no bacteria or chemicals, conjuring up the long strands of DNA: nothing boring about it.

Douglas disagrees, but lets him have at it.

Martin cricks his neck about an hour later, clears his throat, the only way his damn pride lets him ask "Douglas, can you come look at this?"

Douglas is deep in his own work, reading manuals for the new machinery, but he swallows his sigh. Martin only ever calls him over for three reasons: he's made a mistake and is panicking, he's stuck on a problem, or he needs Douglas' eyes to confirm visual characteristics. So he crosses over to Martin's corner of the lab, knowing work can't continue until he's done so, and lets his eyes follow Martin's pointing finger. Martin's a good six inches shorter than him, and nearly a decade younger, so his spine straightens as Douglas bends over the paper.

COLOR: MIXTURE OF BROWN/YELLOW/GREY. CODE: 1321H4

Douglas types the code into his computer, and the color pops up. He checks the records of its genome against the one Martin just ran. He's never seen a sunflower seed before and realized he'd imagined them as bright yellow, matching the petals. But they look like any other seed.

He runs his eyes over the few hundred Martin has already sequenced. "All fine. They're edible, you know. Not just used for oil and looks and such."

Martin huffs, rolls his eyes like he's not that gullible.

"I'm not messing with you," Douglas says, though he can't blame Martin's suspicion. Martin is a man who is easy to tease, but his colorblindness is, by unspoken agreement, off limits. The problem could likely be solved if he invested in a pair of assistive glasses, but he refuses, and when Douglas pressures him on it he says only that he wishes to see the world for how it really is. When Douglas argues that the world, in reality, has color, Martin only offers a shrug that he takes to mean who's to say.

But the main reason he doesn't bring it up because he's not supposed to know. He'd trudged into the office one Saturday afternoon, cursing himself for leaving the symphony tickets in his desk, and found Martin desperately printing off sheets filled with blocks of color, holding them up against various specimens: a lizard whose name was hard to pronounce, an orchid whose petals had dried into the shade of burlap, a seed that looked like an orange pip but produced something closer to a pomegranate.

"That's quite a bit of our grant money being spent on toner," Douglas had growled, glad he'd waited until Martin had placed down the flower. He'd jumped a foot in the air.

"Douglas—"

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

No one was allowed in Douglas' office without him.

"I, I just," Martin started, and Douglas couldn't catch what he said next: some jumble of phrases, trying to catch up on work, double checking something, excuses made incomprehensible as they were rolled into one.

"Try again," he said gently, and Martin held out a handful of papers.

"They all look the same to me."

Douglas made coffee, black, and listened to Martin's stumbling explanation. He'd been born colorblind, and properly, too, only able to see varying degrees of grey. But he'd always wanted to be a curator.

"Then how on earth did you get this job?"

Martin looked at the mug in his hand, still full. He couldn't stand coffee without sugar, though Douglas hadn't learned that yet.

"It's not in my files."

"But surely your genome—"

Another shake of the head. "It doesn't show."