

## 2



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Petra . . . ?” He clenches my wrist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

This is the story my mind will keep of them.

Before my parents were chosen, lots of people had already

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What are you doing, Petra?”

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

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

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

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

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

“I think you’re lying.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No,” I answer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dad nods.

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

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

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

"Just like a nap," Mom says.

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