



**JAMES S. A.
COREY**

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DOGS**

AN **EXPANSE** NOVELLA

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STRANGE DOGS

The day after the stick moons appeared, Cara killed a bird.

That wasn't exactly right. There had been stick moons—which her parents called platforms—as long as Cara could remember. At night, they'd glowed with reflected sunlight like burnt orange bones, and in the daytime, they'd been lines of white bent behind the blue. In her books, the moon was always a pale disk or a cookie with a bite taken out, but that was Earth's moon, Luna. Laconia was different.

So it wasn't that they had *appeared* the night before she killed the bird. It was only that they lit up red and blue and gold for the first time ever. Her parents had gotten up from the dinner table and gone out into the yard, staring up into the sky, and she and her little brother, Xan, had followed. Her father stood there slack-jawed, looking up. Her mother had frowned.

The next afternoon, lying in the blue clover by the pond with sunlight warming her skin and making her sleepy, Cara watched the newly glittering stick moons swim through the sky. They were as bright in the daytime sky as stars were against nighttime black. The colors shifted on them, rippling like videos of sea creatures. As if they were a little bit alive. They drifted east to west, high lacy clouds passing underneath them, and Cara at the bottom of the gravity well, looking up into the vastness like it had all been put there for her to appreciate.

The pond was one of her favorite places to be alone. The curve of the forest ran along one side. Thick trees with three or four trunks that rose up into a knot before blooming out in green-black fronds longer than her body and so thickly packed that a few steps under them was like walking into a cave. She could find as much shade from Laconia's bright sun as she wanted, whenever she wanted it. The blue clover beside the water was

softer than her bed at home and had a smell like bruised rain when she laid on it. The brook that fed the pond and then flowed back away from it again murmured and bubbled in a gentle, random concert with the chirping of the goat-hair frogs. And there were the animals that came there to drink or hunt or lay their eggs. She could lie there for hours, bringing her own lunch and a handheld to read from or draw on or play games on, away from her parents and Xan. Away from the town and the soldiers and Mari Tennenbaum, who was her best friend when they weren't enemies. The township was five thousand people—the biggest city on Laconia—and the pond was Cara's place away from it.

She was halfway through her tenth year, but this was only her third summer. Her mother had explained to her that Laconia moved around its star more slowly than Earth did, and then talked about axial tilt in a way that Cara pretended to understand so they could talk about something else. It didn't matter. Summer was summer and birthdays were birthdays. The two didn't have any more relationship than her nut-bread sandwiches had with her shoes. Not everything had to be connected.

Cara was half asleep when she heard the soft tramp of paws and the creaking of the underbrush. She thought at first it was just in her imagination, but when she tried to change the sound into music the way she sometimes could when she was dreaming, it didn't respond. She opened eyes she hadn't realized were closed. Bright-blue dots like fireflies fluttered and spun in the air as the first of the doglike things came out of the trees.

Its body was long and low, four legs with joints that were put together just a little wrong—like a drawing by someone who'd only ever had legs described to them. Its jaw seemed too small for its face, and its bulbous brown eyes were set at angles that made it seem apologetic. She'd never seen anything like it before, but that happened fairly often.

“Hey,” she said, stretching. “What are you?”

The dog paused.

“It's okay,” she said. “I'm friendly. See?” And she waved.

It was hard to be sure with the thing's eyes set the way they were, but she thought it was looking at her. She sat up slowly, trying not to startle it. Nothing on Laconia ate people, but sometimes they could get scared, and her mother always told her that frightened things weren't safe to approach.

The dog looked up, staring at the stick moons for a moment, and then

down again at her. She felt a wave of disorientation, like being dizzy but different, and then a twinge of uncertainty. The dog stepped forward, and two more like it came out from the darkness under the trees. Then two more.

On the pond, a sunbird hissed, lifting its leathery wings to make its body look bigger and baring its soft greenish teeth. Its fury-twisted face looked like a cartoon of an old woman, and half a dozen new-hatched babies darted behind her. The first dog turned to look at the momma bird and made three sharp sounds: *ki-ka-ko*. The other four picked up the sound. Momma bird swiveled her head toward each of them, hissing until flecks of saliva foamed at the curves of her mouth. The *ki-ka-ko* cry echoed in a way that didn't match the space around the pond. It made Cara's head ache a little. She levered herself up to her knees, partly out of fear that the dogs might eat sunbirds, and she didn't want to see anything get killed, but mostly because she wanted them to stop making that sound. Her lunch pack and her handheld tumbled to the clover. When she stepped forward, the dogs went quiet and turned their attention toward her, and she had the sense that maybe she was dreaming after all.

She stepped between the dogs and the water's edge. Momma bird hissed again, but it seemed to Cara like the sound came from a great distance. The dogs drifted closer, moving around her like children around a teacher. She knew in a distant way that she should probably be scared. Even if the dogs didn't eat people, they could still attack her for getting between them and their prey. She didn't know why she felt that they wouldn't.

"You can't be here right now," she said.

The lead dog, the one that had come out first, looked past her at the water. Its embarrassed, bulbous eyes shifted back to her.

"Later, maybe," she said. "You can be here later. Right now you have to go. Go on. Shoo."

She pointed at the trees and the darkness underneath them. The dogs went perfectly, eerily still for the space of two long breaths together, then turned and shambled back into the forest on their weirdly built legs.

Cara watched them go with a kind of surprise. It was like shouting at a storm to go away and having the rain stop. Probably the dogs had just decided that dealing with her wasn't worth the trouble. Still, the way it had happened let her feel a little magic. Momma bird was swimming along the

side of the pond now, her back to Cara. When the sunbird reached the far edge and turned, she was grunting to herself, the danger of the dogs and the girl equally forgotten. Sunbirds weren't smart—they weren't even particularly nice—but Cara still felt good that she'd kept them from getting eaten.

She tried lying back down on the blue clover, but her lazy half sleep was gone now. She tried closing her eyes, then watching the stick moons and their shimmer of colors, but she could feel in her body that it wasn't coming back. She waited a few minutes to be sure, then sat up with a sigh and gathered up her handheld and her lunch pack. The sun was high overhead, the heat a little bit oppressive now, and it had been a long time since breakfast. She popped open her lunch pack. The sandwich was simple and exactly the way she liked it: two slices of nut bread, each about as thick as her thumb, with a layer of cinnamon and molasses cream cheese between them. Her mother said that honey was better than molasses, but there weren't any bees on Laconia. Cara had only ever seen pictures of them, and based on those, she didn't like honey at all.

She took a bite, chewed, swallowed, took another. The baby sunbirds were jumping out of the water, running on the ground, and then plopping back into the pond, sputtering and angry. Momma bird ignored their little sighs of distress, and before long they stopped trying to get her attention and devoted themselves to swimming and searching for food. Earth birds didn't look much like anything on Laconia, but Cara remembered something about how to treat them. How to share. When Momma bird turned toward her, Cara broke off a tiny bit of nut bread and tossed it out on the water. Momma bird struck at it like it was a threat and swallowed it greedily. Later on, she'd puke up little bits of it to feed her babies. Cara had watched them at the pond for months. She knew how sunbirds worked maybe better than anyone.

So when Momma bird made a noise—a wheeze with a click in the middle of it—Cara knew it was something new. The babies knew too. They gathered around Momma bird, chittering in agitation and slapping the water with their wings. Momma bird didn't seem to notice them. Her head was wobbling on its long, thin neck. Her unfocused eyes seemed fierce and confused.

Cara put down her sandwich, a knot tightening in her chest. Something

was wrong. Momma bird spun around in the water, then turned and spun the other way with so much violence that the nearest of her babies overturned.

“Hey,” Cara said. “Don’t do that. Don’t hurt your little ones.”

But unlike the dogs, Momma bird didn’t even seem to listen to her. She spread her wings, slapped the water twice, and hauled herself up into the air. Cara had the impression of half-closed eyes and a gaping green-toothed mouth, and then Momma bird sped up into the air, paused, and fell. She didn’t try to catch herself when she landed—just crashed into the clover.

“Momma bird?” Cara said, stepping closer. Her heart was tripping over itself. “Momma bird? What’s the matter?”

The babies were calling out now, one over the other in a wild frenzy. Momma bird lifted her head, trying to find them from their voices, but too disoriented to do more than wave her head around once, twice, and then set it down. Cara reached out, hesitated, then scooped up the bird’s warm, soft body. Momma bird hissed once, halfheartedly, and closed her angry black eyes.

Cara ran.

The pathway leading toward home was barely wider than an animal track, but Cara knew it like the hallway outside her room. It only seemed treacherous because she couldn’t wipe her tears back, since she needed both her hands to hold Momma bird. She was still three hundred meters from home when the bird shifted in her hands, arched its back, and made a deep coughing sound. After that, it was still. The thick sack-and-earth walls of her house came into sight—red and orange, with the rich-green panels of their solar array on top canted toward the sun—and Cara started shouting for her mother. She wanted to believe there was time. That Momma bird wasn’t dead.

She wanted to believe. But she also knew better.

Her house stood out just past the edge of the forest. It had the lumpy snakes-lying-on-top-of-each-other walls that all the first-wave colonial structures had. They curved around the central bulb garden, where they grew food. The windows stood open, screens letting in the air and keeping out the insect analogs. Even the little toolshed, where Dad kept the clippers he used to cut the vinegar weed and the cart to carry the stinking foliage away, had windows in it.

Cara's feet slapped down the stone-paved path, her tears making the house, the sky, the trees blurred and unreal. Xan's voice called out from somewhere nearby, and his friend Santiago answered back. She ignored them. The cool, dry air of the house felt like walking into a different world. Rays of light pressed in from the windows, catching motes of dust. For the first time since the pond, Cara's steps faltered. Her legs burned, and the vast, oceanic sadness and horror stopped up her throat so that when her mother stepped into the room—taller than her father, dark-haired, fixing a necklace of resin and glass around her neck like she was getting ready for a party—all Cara could do was hold up the body of Momma bird. She couldn't even ask for help.

Her mother led her to the kitchen and sat there with her and the dead bird's body while Cara coughed out a version of what had happened between sobs. She knew it was muddled—the bird, the dogs, the babies, the bread—but she just had to get it all out of her and hope that her mother could make sense of it. And then make it make sense to her too.

Xan came in, his eyes wide and scared, and touched her back to comfort her. Her mother smiled him away again. Santiago ghosted into the doorway and out again, curious and trying to seem like he wasn't. Tragedy drew attention.

Eventually, Cara's words ran out and she sat there, feeling empty. Deflated. Defeated. Momma bird's corpse on the table didn't seem to care one way or the other. Death had robbed the bird of her opinions.

"Oh, babygirl," Cara's mother said. "I'm sorry."

"It was me, wasn't it?" Cara said. "I killed her, didn't I?"

"You didn't mean to. It was an accident. That's all."

"But it was in the book," Cara said. "Feeding bread to birds. The lady in the park in the book did that. And they didn't die. They were *fine*."

Her mother took her hand. It was strange, but Cara knew if she'd been just a little younger—Xan's age, even—her mother would have hugged her. But she was getting to be a big girl now, and hugs weren't for big girls. Holding hands was.

"These aren't birds, babygirl. We call them that because they're sort of like birds. But real birds have feathers. And beaks—"

"No bird I've ever seen."

Her mother took a deep breath and smiled through her exhalation.

“When life comes up on a planet, evolution forces a bunch of choices. What kinds of proteins it’s going to use. How it’s going to pass information on from one generation to the next. Life on Earth made those decisions a long time ago, and so everything that comes from Earth has some things in common. The kinds of proteins we use. The ways we get chemical energy out of our foods. The ways our genes work. But other planets made other choices. That’s why we can’t eat the plants that grow on Laconia. We have to grow them special so they’ll be part of our tree of life.”

“But the old lady fed bread to the birds,” Cara said. Her mother wasn’t understanding the problem, and she didn’t know how to say it any more clearly. In the books, the old lady had fed bread to the birds, and the birds hadn’t died. And Momma bird was dead.

“She was on Earth. Or someplace where Earth’s tree of life took over. Laconia doesn’t eat the same things we do. And the food that Laconia makes, we can’t use.”

“That’s not true,” Cara said. “We drink the water.”

Her mother nodded. “Water is very, very simple, though. There aren’t choices for living systems to make with water because it’s more like a mineral or—”

“Dot!” Her father’s voice was like a bark. “We have to go!”

“I’m in the kitchen,” her mother said. Footsteps. Cara’s father loomed into the doorway, his jaw set, his mouth tight. He’d combed his hair and put on his best shirt. He shifted his gaze from Cara to her mother to Momma bird with an expression that said, *What the hell is this?*

“Cara accidentally poisoned one of the sunbirds,” her mother told him, as though he’d actually asked the question aloud.

“Shit,” her father said, then grimaced at his own language. “I’m sorry to hear that, kid. That’s hard. But, Dot. We have to gather up the kids and get out of here.”

Cara scowled. “Where are you going?”

“The soldiers are hosting a party,” her mother said. “It’s a celebration because the platforms came on.” She didn’t smile.

“We need to be there,” her father said, more to her mother than to Cara. “If they don’t see us, they’ll wonder why we didn’t come.”

Cara’s mother pointed to her necklace. *I’m getting ready.* Her father shifted his weight from one foot to the other, then back. Cara felt the weight

of his anxiety like a hand on her shoulder.

“Do I have to go?”

“No, kid,” her father said. “If you want to stay here and hold down the fort, that’s fine. It’s me and your mom.”

“And Xan,” her mother said. “Unless you want to be responsible for keeping him out of trouble.”

Cara knew that was supposed to be a joke, so she chuckled at it. Not that it felt funny. Her mother squeezed her fingers and then let her go. “I am sorry about the sunbird, babygirl.”

“It’s okay,” Cara said.

“We’ll be back before dinner,” her father said, then retreated back into the depths of the house. A few breaths later, Cara heard him yelling at Xan and Santiago. The focus of the family spotlight had moved past her. Momma bird was over. She couldn’t put her thumb on why that bothered her.

The town was half an hour away, down past a dozen other houses like hers. The older houses all came from the first wave—scientists and researchers like her parents who’d come to Laconia just after the gates opened. The town itself, though, came later, with the soldiers. Even Cara could remember when construction waldoes started laying down the foundations of the barracks and the town square, the military housing and the fusion plant. Most of the soldiers still lived in orbit, but every month, the town grew a little—another building, another street. Xan’s friend Santiago was seven years old. He was the child of soldiers, and had their boldness. He often came all the way out to her house by himself so he could play. Someday, her father said, the town would grow out around all their houses. The pond and the forest would be taken down, paved over, rebuilt. The way he said it, it didn’t sound like a good thing or a bad one. Just a change, like winter moving into spring.

For now, though, her house was her house and the town was the town, and she could sit at her kitchen table while the others got ready to go someplace else. Momma bird didn’t move. The more Cara looked at the bird, the less real it seemed. How could something that clearly dead ever have swum or flown or fed its babies? It was like expecting a rock to sing. The babies would be wondering what had happened by now. Calling for their mother. She wondered if they’d know to go back up to the nest with no

one there to show them when.

“Mom?” Cara said as her father herded Xan and Santiago back out the door again. “I need to use the sampling drone.”

There was a line that appeared between her mother’s brows when she got annoyed, even when she was smiling at the same time. “Babygirl, you know I can’t go out right now. Your father and I—”

“I can do it. I just need to help take care of Momma bird’s babies. Just for a few days, until they’re used to her being gone. I messed things up. I need to fix them.”

The line erased itself, her mother’s gaze softening. For a moment, Cara thought she was going to say yes.

“No, baby. I’m sorry. The sampling drone’s delicate. And if something goes wrong, we can’t get a new one.”

“But—” Cara gestured to Momma bird.

“When I get back, I’ll take it out with you if you still want to,” her mother said, even though that probably wasn’t true. By the time they got back from the town, Xan would be tired and hyperactive and her parents would just be tired. All anyone would want to do was sleep. A few baby sunbirds didn’t really matter much in the big scheme of things.

Santiago’s voice came wafting in from outside with a high near-whining note of young, masculine impatience in it. Her mother shifted her weight toward the doorway.

“Okay, Mom,” Cara said.

“Thank you, babygirl,” her mother said, then walked out. Their voices came, but not distinctly enough for her to make out the words. Xan shouted, Santiago laughed, but from farther away. Another minute, and they were gone. Cara sat alone in the silence of the house.

She walked through the rooms, her hands stuffed deep in her pockets, her scowl so hard it ached a little. She kept trying to find what was wrong. Everything was in place, except that something wasn’t. The walls had the same smudges by the doors where their hands had left marks over the months and years. The white flakes at the corners showed where the laminate that held the house in place was getting old. The house had only been designed to last five years, and they’d been in it for eight so far. Her room, with its raised futon, across the hall from Xan’s, with his. Her window looking out over the dirt road her family had just walked down.

The anger sat under her rib cage, just at her belly, and she couldn't make it go away. It made everything about the house seem crappy and small.

She threw herself onto her futon, staring up at the ceiling and wondering if she was going to cry. But she didn't. She just lay there for a while, feeling bad. And when that got boring, she rolled over and grabbed her books. They were on a thin foil tablet keyed to her. Her parents had loaded it with poems and games and math practice and stories. If they'd been able to get in touch with the networks back on the far side of the gates, they could have updated it. But with the soldiers, that wasn't possible. All the content in it was aimed at a girl younger than Xan, but it was what she had, so she loved it. Or usually she did.

She opened the stories, looking through them for one particular image like she was scratching at a wound. It took a few minutes to find it, but she did. A picture book called *Ashby Allen Akerman in Paris*, about a little girl back on Earth. The image was in watercolors, gray and blue with little bits of gold at the streetlights. Ashby and her monkey friend, TanTan, were dancing in a park with the high, twisting, beautiful shape of the Daniau Tower behind them. But the thing Cara was looking for was on the side. An old woman, sitting on a bench, throwing bits of bread at birds that her mother called pigeons. That was where the rage came from. An old woman being kind to a bird and nobody was dying. No one was hurt. And it wasn't even exactly a lie, because apparently she could do that on Earth. In Paris. Where she'd never been and didn't have any reason to think she'd ever go. But if all the things in her books were about other places with other rules, then none of them could ever really be about her. It was like going to school one morning and finding out that math worked differently for you, so even if you got the same answer as everyone else, yours was wrong.

So no, it wasn't a lie. It went deeper than that.

She made herself a bowl of bean-and-onion soup, sitting at the counter by herself as she ate. She'd half expected that, as upset as she was, she wouldn't be able to keep the food down. Instead, eating seemed to steady her. The quiet of the house was almost pleasant. Something about blood sugar, probably. That was what her father would have said. Momma bird's skin had started shining, like it was growing a layer of oil or wax. It could stay there on the counter. She thought about taking it back in case the babies would understand that they shouldn't wait. That they were on their own.

She hoped they could get back up to the nest. There were things that would eat baby sunbirds if they couldn't get someplace safe.

"Fuck," Cara said to the empty house, then hesitated, shocked by her own daring. Her mother didn't allow profanity, not even her father's, but they weren't here right now. So like she was running a test to see if the rules were still the rules, she said it again. "Fuck."

Nothing happened, because of course no one was watching her. And since no one was watching...

The sampling drone was in a ceramic case next to her mother's futon. The latches were starting to rust at the edges, but they still worked. Just a little scraping feeling when she pulled them open. The drone itself was a complex of vortex thrusters as wide as her thumb connected by a flexible network of articulated sticks able to reconfigure itself into dozens of different shapes. Two dozen attachable sampling waldoes built for everything from cutting stone to drawing blood stood in ranks in the case like soldiers, but Cara only cared about the three grasping ones. And of them, really just the two with pliable silicone grips. She put the waldoes in her pocket, hefted the drone on her hip as if she was carrying a baby, and shoved the case closed again before she headed out to the shed.

Momma bird and the drone fit into her father's cart with plenty of room to spare. She thought about it, then grabbed a little hand spade too. She'd use the drone to put the babies safe in their nest, and then give Momma bird a proper burial. It wasn't enough, but she could do it, so she would.

The sun was starting its long slide down into night. The low mist that came from the east smelled as bright as mint, and the shadows of the trees all had a greenish tint against the reddening light. The cart had one wheel that stuck sometimes, skidding along behind her like a stutter until it broke loose again. Cara put her head down, her mouth set, and marched back toward the pond. The tightness between her shoulder blades felt like resolve.

The forest was mostly hers. Xan played there some, but he liked the other kids more than she did, so he spent more time in town. Her mother and father stayed near the house or working on the community greenhouse—which wasn't really a house or green—to keep the food supplies coming. She knew what the sounds of the forest were, even if she couldn't always figure out what made them. She knew the drape of a hook vine from a

straight one, the call of a red clicker from a green one. Most of the things that lived there didn't have names. Laconia was a whole world, and humans had only been on it for about eight years. Even if she gave names to everything she saw every day for the whole rest of her life, most of the species there would stay nameless. It didn't bother her. They just were what they were. Common things got names so that she and her schoolmates and the grown-ups could talk about them. Sunbirds, rope trees, tooth worms, glass snakes, grunchers. Other things, no one talked about, so they didn't need names, and even if she named them, she'd probably just forget.

That wasn't strange, though. All names were like that. A shorthand so people could talk about things. Laconia was only Laconia because they called it that. Before they'd come, it had been nameless. Or if not, the things that had named it were all dead now, so it didn't matter.

She reached the pond, a few bright-gold streaks in the sky where the last of the sun still lit the high clouds. The baby sunbirds were still in the water, peeping in distress at her arrival. The water was dark already, like it had pulled the shadows under the trees into it. The night-feeding animals would come out soon—scratchers and hangman monkeys and glass snakes. She slaved the drone to her handheld. The control panel was more complicated than she was used to, with half a dozen control modes listed down the side that she didn't understand. She was pretty certain she could do everything she needed with only the basic setup. She just needed to get the babies up out of the water and safe into their nest. And maybe take some food up to them. Do the things Momma bird had done. Then she could bury Momma bird, and things would be...not right. But the least wrong she could make them. She took the waldoes out of her pocket and compared them to the babies, squinting in the deepening gloom to see which of them looked like they'd be able to hold on to the little bodies but not hurt them.

"I'm sorry," she said to the pale, round-mouthed birds as she fit the smallest waldo onto the drone. "I'm new at this."

One of the babies caught sight of Momma bird's body in the cart and tried to haul itself out of the water to waddle toward her. It was as good a place to start as any. Cara sat cross-legged on the clover and started the drone. It whirred as it rose in the air.

The first baby shrieked, hissed, and ran. Cara smiled and shook her head. "It's okay, little one. It's only me," she cooed. "Everything's going to be all

right.”

Only it wasn't.

The babies scattered to the edges of the pond and bit at the drone when it came near. When she was able to get a grip on one, it wriggled out a meter and a half above the ground and fell back into the water. Cara didn't want to hurt them, but the light was fading faster now, and she had to get them up to the nest and then bury Momma and still get back home before her parents and Xan. The time pressure made everything harder. She didn't realize she was clenching her teeth until her jaw already hurt. After nearly an hour she'd only gotten three safely back to the nest. Momma bird lay in the cart, sightless eyes reproachful. Cara's hands ached, and the drone's batteries were half drained.

“Come on,” she said as one of the last two babies skittered away from the waldo and ran into the brush at the edge of the pond. “Stop it. Just...”

She reached the soft rubber claw down, and the little sunbird struck at it, biting and tearing with its soft teeth. It wrenched its head around and darted back off across the water, leaving little ripples in the dark water, and then stopping to bob on the surface and chew at its wings as if nothing was wrong. Cara brought the drone in to land beside her while she thought. The last two babies were the biggest. Faster than their siblings, and they weren't getting tired the same way. Maybe they were big enough to avoid predators without her. Maybe they didn't need to be in the nest.

One of the babies swam near her, chirped, and shook its fleshy, pale wings. Without the whirring of the drone to run from, it seemed placid, in a disgruntled kind of way. Its black eyes shifted around at the night, taking in the forest and the pond, the cart and Cara with the same disinterest. It was so close.

Cara shifted forward slowly so as not to startle it. The little sunbird huffed to itself, ducked its head under water, and Cara lunged. Cold water soaked into her sleeves and sprayed her face, but the little ball of squirming flesh was locked in her hands, hissing and biting. She stood up, grinning.

“There you are, little one,” she said. “Oh, you're a pain, but I've got you safe now.”

Except she wasn't quite sure what made sense to do next. She needed both hands to drive the drone and the waldo, but if she put the sunbird down, it would just run off again. The nest was low enough in the tree, she

might be able to climb up one handed and reach it in. She stepped backward, looking through the foliage for a pathway that would work.

The crunch under her heel was confusing for a moment, and then horrifying. She yelped, dropped the baby sunbird, and danced back. The drone glittered on the clover, two of the vortex thrusters caved in by her weight. She dropped to her knees and reached out, fingers trembling in the air, caught between needing to put it all back together and being afraid to touch it. The drone was broken. Her mother's drone that they couldn't replace because it came from Earth and now nothing came from Earth. The sense of having done something terrible that she couldn't take back washed over her—the broken body of Momma bird and the drone building on each other.

It was too much. She'd hide the drone, just for now. The case for it was still back at the house, and her mother might not need it again for weeks. Months. If Cara kept it here, where she could work on it. If she could keep it safe until there was light, then maybe it would be all right. She lifted up the drone, felt the limp ceramic clicking against itself, the sharp edges where before there had been smooth round cylinders, and knew that there were shards of it still in the clover. With the instinct of a thief, she carried it away from the edge of the pond. She shoved it under a little bush and dragged dead tree fronds over it, hardly aware that she was sobbing while she did it. It would be okay. Somehow, it would be okay.

It wouldn't.

When she turned back around, the dogs were there.

She hadn't heard them shamle out of the darkness, and they stood there as still as stones. Their five faces looked like an apology for intruding.

“What?” Cara shouted, waving at them with one sopping arm. “What is it?”

The dog in front—the same lead dog from when they'd been there before—squatted down, its muzzle toward her. Its legs seemed to have too many joints in them, folding together primly. She stepped toward the dogs, wanting to hit them or shout at them or something. Anything that would distract her from her misery. She grabbed the shovel up from the cart, holding it like a weapon, but the dogs didn't react. They only seemed embarrassed for her. She stood for three long, shaking breaths, wet and cold and raw as a fresh-pulled scab, then sat down on the cart next to Momma

bird's body, hung her head, and wept. The corpse shifted when the cart rocked, its skin glistening with whatever that death wax was.

"I didn't mean to break anything," she said. "I didn't want to break anything. It all just...broke, and I, and I, and I..."

The strange noise began again. *Ki-ka-ko, ki-ka-ko*, but instead of being disorienting, it seemed comforting now. Cara pushed the blade of the shovel into the soft dirt beside the cart and rested her arms on her knees. The dogs came closer. She thought for a moment they were going to console her. She didn't understand what they were really doing until one of them reached its wide muzzle into the cart and took Momma bird's body in its mouth.

"No! Hey! You can't have that! That's not food!" She grabbed at Momma bird's stiff, dead feet, but the dog was already trotting away, the others following it into the dark forest and the mist. "Wait!" Cara shouted, but the *ki-ka-ko, ki-ka-ko* sound faded and then, like flipping a toggle, went silent. Cara stood without remembering when she'd gotten to her feet. The sunset was over, full night fallen and stars scattered across the sky above her. The two baby sunbirds grunted in the pond, little noises of animal distress. Her wrists were cold where her sleeves still dripped. She sank to the ground, lying back on the clover, too wrung out to cry. The sounds of the forest seemed to grow slowly louder around her. A soft knocking call off to her left, answered by two more behind her. A hush of wings. The angry harrumph of the sunbirds that she was still going to have to catch somehow, put into their nest somehow. Feed somehow. Everything was terrible, and she couldn't even stop yet. That made everything worse.

High above, the stick moons wavered and shone, lights rippling along their sides while they did whatever the hell it was they did.

Drunk on her own despair, Cara didn't make the connection between the moons and the dogs. Not until much later, when her brother, Xan, was already dead.

* * *

Laconia was only one of thirteen hundred and some new worlds. Her parents, like all the others in the first wave, had been intended as a survey force. Cara's mother had come as a materials engineer, her father as a geologist. She'd come as a baby.

She'd seen pictures on her mother's handheld of herself in the tight-seal diapers, floating in the family cabin of the *Sagan*. The ship was still in orbit—a pale, fast-moving dot when it caught the sun just right—but she didn't remember it at all. Xan had been born a year after they'd all made landfall, and Cara didn't remember that either. Her earliest memory was of sitting in a chair at home, drawing in an art program on her handheld while her mother sang in the next room.

Her second earliest memory was of the soldiers coming.

Her parents didn't talk about that, so Cara had built the story from bits and pieces of overheard conversation. Something had happened on the other side of the gates. The Earth had blown up, maybe. Or Mars had. Maybe Venus, though she didn't think anyone lived there. Whatever happened meant that the scientific expedition that had only been intended to stay for five years was now permanent. The soldiers had come to be the government. They had ships in orbit and the beginnings of cities already being constructed on the planet's surface. They'd made the town. They'd made the rules for how the town worked. They had a plan.

“You've probably noticed,” Instructor Hannu, her teacher, said, “that the orbital platforms have been activated.”

The schoolroom was the old cafeteria from the first landing. Ten meters by eight, with a vaulted ceiling and reinforcements that let it double as a storm shelter, or would have if there were ever any storms bad enough to shelter from. The inner layer of environmental sealant had started to whiten and flake with age, but the early fears about quarantining themselves from Laconia's ecosphere had gone by the wayside, so no one was in a hurry to repair it. There were no windows, the light entirely from ceramic fixtures set into the walls.

“We've been asked to keep an eye out for anything that changes down here,” he went on, “and report it back to the military.”

Which, Cara thought, was stupid. Everything changed on Laconia all the time. Telling the soldiers whenever a new plant showed up would be a full-time job. *Was* a full-time job. *Was* what all of their parents did, or were supposed to do, anyway. She wondered if the windowless room was like being on a spaceship. Months or years without ever once going outside or hearing the rain tapping into puddles or being able to get away from Xan and her parents. Never being alone. Never feeling the sunlight on her face.

Nothing changing. Nothing new. It sounded awful.

And then circle meeting was over, and the kids scattered around the room to find their tasks for the morning work period. Cara helped Jason Lu with his phonetic-sounds lesson, because she was older and had already mastered it. Then she spent some time on complex multiplication. And then it was recess, and they all piled out to the meadow and the sunlight. Xan and two of the other younger boys ran across the road to skip rocks across the water-treatment reservoir even though they weren't supposed to. Since his best friend, Santiago, went to school in the military's program, Xan had to make do with first-wave children for playmates. So did Cara, but it wasn't as much of a burden for her. She didn't have any friends among the soldiers anyway.

That would change when they set up the lower university and everyone went to the same school, first wave and soldiers both. But that wouldn't be for another two years. There was plenty of time for things to happen between now and then.

Mari Tennenbaum and Teresa Ekandjo came and sat with her, and before long, they'd arranged a zombie-tag game with the other older children. The call for second work period seemed to come too soon, but that was the way time worked. Too fast when you weren't paying attention, and then slow as mud when you watched it. Xan wanted her to teach him phonetic sounds, more because she'd helped Jason with it than because he cared about the lesson, but she did it anyway. When she was done, she did some research of her own.

The classroom had access to the observational data that the survey team had collected since they'd arrived on Laconia. Sunbirds were a common enough species that there might be something there—what they ate, how they matured, when they stopped needing to be cared for—that would help her. Because as soon as school was over, Xan headed out to play with Santiago in the town's center. She was free to get her bicycle, the one her father had printed for her at the beginning of summer, and start back to the pond and the babies.

The buildings in the town were of two different types. The old ones, the ones like her house, lumpy and round, built from the soil of Laconia and constrained by printed polymer sheaths, marked the original township. The other kind, solidly efficient metal and formed concrete, came later with the

soldiers. The roads were new too, and still being built. She and all the other kids loved riding on the smooth, hard surface, feeling the bumps and uncertainty of the land vanish into a steady low hum that traveled up from the wheels through the handlebars and into her bones. They weren't supposed to ride on the roads because the soldiers sometimes had transports and cars come through, but everyone did it anyway.

The sunlight pressed down, warm against her skin. The air had the soft, musty smell it got when rain was coming, the smell her mother called "moldy coffee grounds." A swarm of smoke gnats rose up, swirling into the sky above her in their weird angular patterns, like writing in an alphabet that no one knew. She almost stopped to watch. The road ended at a barracks and construction yard, soldiers in their crisp blue uniforms watching her as she passed. When she waved, one of them waved back. And then she was on the rough trail again and had to keep both hands on the bars.

The effort of riding and the warmth of the afternoon brought her to a kind of trance, comfortable and mindless. In the moment, her body and the world felt like they were all the same thing. As she got near home, she tried to bring her focus back. There hadn't been a lot of study done on sunbird life cycles in particular, but she'd found some notes from one of the early surveys. They said sunbirds ate a lot of things, but they seemed to like the little gray encrustations on water roots the best. She thought that meant Momma bird would have been diving deep into the pond to crack the little gray things free, and then the babies would gobble them as they came up. So she had to find a way to do the same thing. For a few more weeks at least. Until the babies were old enough to leave and make their own nests.

At home, the doors were open, letting the cool air into the house. She pulled the bicycle up beside the door. Her parents' voices came from inside, raised the way they did when they were having a conversation from different rooms. Her mother's words sounded jagged and stretched, like a wire on the edge of breaking. Cara paused to eavesdrop.

"We're bearing the risks. As long as we're here, anything they do can affect us. They don't know what they could wake up."

"I know," her father said. "Look, I'm not saying you're wrong. But we're not in a position to say what those risks are. And...what are the options?"

She knew the rhythm of her parents, how they talked when they knew she and Xan were listening, and how it changed when they thought they were alone. This was alone-grown-up talk.

“I’m not arguing for that,” her mother said, and Cara wondered what “that” was. “But look at Ilus.”

“Ilus was uncontrolled, though. Admiral Duarte seems pretty certain they can at least influence how it behaves here.”

“How did they even get a live sample?” Her mother’s voice had gone peevish and frustrated. “Why would you *want* that?”

“You know this better than I do, honey. The protomolecule was a bridge builder, but it also has an interface aspect. And being able to *talk* to other artifacts is...” His words faded as, somewhere inside, he walked back to her mother.

Cara looked at the shed. She was pretty sure there was a tree-core sampler in there she could use to scrape the roots, but it was heavy. It probably made more sense to just roll her sleeves up and use her fingers. Plus which, she didn’t want to tear the roots.

She walked out toward the pond, thinking about her schoolwork. The phonetics lesson. Part of the background had been about how babies learn the phonemes by listening to their parents even before there are any words involved. The way different places use sound—the difference between a particular diphthong on Ceres and the same one in the North American Shared Interest Zone or Korea or on Titan or Medina Station—was something babies mastered even before they knew that they knew it.

She’d read something once about a man back on Earth who’d tried to figure out how to speak with octopi by raising his baby children with octopi, hoping that the human children would grow up bilingual in octopus and English. It had sounded crazy at the time, but who knew? The way the phoneme thing worked, maybe it made sense after all. Only she was pretty sure no one spoke octopus, so it probably hadn’t ended well...

She walked down the path, her steps following the little scrapes that the cart’s wheels had made. The pond water was going to be cold. She could already imagine how it was going to feel pushing her arm down into it. She wondered if the babies would still be in the nest. They might be old enough to get themselves down and into the water, and she couldn’t decide if that would be a good thing or a bad one.

The smell of coming weather was getting thicker, but the only clouds were light, scudding veils over the sun, not much more than a lighter shade of blue. The breeze was hardly enough to stir the fronds of the trees; they made light tapping sounds when they touched, like dry raindrops. She wondered if anyone had ever studied the little gray things on the water roots to see what they were. Probably they hadn't. Laconia had too many things on it, and there were only so many people there. It would be lifetimes before everything on the planet got discovered and understood. If that ever even happened. She'd had a history-of-science lesson the year before that traced how long it had taken people back on Earth to understand the ecosphere there, and there had been billions of people on Earth for thousands of years. Laconia had a few thousand people for less than a decade.

At the pond, the babies were on the water, splashing pale leathery wings and piping to each other. That was good. They were independent enough to look after themselves that much anyway. With the drone broken, she'd still have to carry them up to the nest. She didn't like thinking about the drone, though.

"Okay, little ones," she said. "Let's see if I can get you some food, okay?"

She knelt at the water's edge, the wet of the mud seeping through the knees of her pants. Deep in the water, she could just make out the pale roots. They looked deeper in than she'd remembered. She was going to wind up soaking her shirt, but she started rolling up her sleeves anyway.

Momma bird hissed.

Cara fell back, scrambling on feet and elbows, as Momma bird swam out of the scrub at the pond's edge. The bird bared her greenish teeth. The tiny wrinkled face deformed in rage as she rushed forward, wings spread. The babies on the pond's surface gathered behind her, clicking in distress. Cara stared, and Momma bird coughed, spat, and turned away. For a moment, Cara tried to make this into some other bird that had happened upon the orphans and taken over the care of them.

But things were wrong. The bird's skin had the same waxy, dead look it had gotten on her counter. The black eyes didn't quite focus the way a normal bird would. There were sunbirds all across the town. Cara had seen dozens, and none of them had the awkward movements this one did. None

of them had the weird stillness between its movements or the hesitation like every muscle had to be reminded how to work. Cara pulled herself up the bank, dragging her heels across the blue clover. Momma bird ignored her, paddled to the center of the pond—paused, still as statue—and dove down. The babies circled, excited, until she bobbed back up. All their little mouths struck at the water, spat out whatever they didn't filter out as food, and then struck again.

Cara's throat felt thick. Her breath came in snatches and gasps, like someone had turned off the planet's air supply, and her heart felt like something that had blundered into her rib cage by accident and was frantic for a way back out.

"Really?" she asked.

Nothing answered. She pulled her legs up under her, not realizing until she'd done it that she was taking what her teacher called prayer position. She tried to be still, as if moving might pop the moment like a soap bubble. Momma bird dove again, reemerged. The babies fed, as calm and pleased as if nothing had ever gone wrong. Momma bird went motionless, then moved again.

Cara's shock began to fade, her heart to resume its usual beat, and a slow, wide grin pulled at her lips. She wrapped her arms around herself in a hug and watched silently as the mother who had been dead now protected and fed and stayed with her children again. Some deep, animal relief turned her bones to water and left her empty of everything but gratitude and wonder.

Something shifted in the darkness under the trees. The dogs stepped into the light, walking toward her with slow, careful steps. The bulbous eyes apologetic.

"Was this you?" Cara breathed. "Did you do this?"

The dogs didn't answer. They only folded their complex legs and rested for a moment, looking toward Cara. She leaned over, stretched out a hand, and pet the closest one on the top of its head, where the ears would have been if it had been the kind of dog they had on Earth. Its skin was hot to the touch, soft with hard underneath, like velvet laid over steel. It made a gentle humming sound, and then all of them rose up together and turned back toward the trees. Cara stood up and walked after them, not sure what she wanted except that there was a sudden urgency in her heart. They couldn't

leave. Not yet.

“Wait,” she said. And the dogs stopped. They waited. “Can you...can you help me?”

They turned toward her again, their movements eerily synchronized. In the distance, something trilled and buzzed and trilled again.

“You fixed Momma bird,” she said, nodding toward the pond. “Can you fix other things too?”

The dogs didn’t move, but they didn’t turn away either. Cara held up a finger in a don’t-go-away gesture, and moved off to the bushes. The sampling drone was just where she’d left it. Something small had scattered the shattered bits a little, but they were all still there, as far as she could tell. She lifted up the broken machine, its limp, deactivated limbs clacking against each other. The shards she plucked up into her palm.

The dogs watched, motionless. Their constant embarrassed expression now seemed to offer some sympathy, as if feeling her shame at having broken the drone. One of the dogs came forward, and she thought it was the lead from before, though she couldn’t be sure. She knelt and held out the drone. She expected the eerie *ki-ka-ko* noise again, but the dog only opened its mouth a little. What she’d taken for teeth, she saw, were really just little nubs, like the gripping surface on a wheel made for off-road travel. It had no tongue. There was no throat at the back of its mouth. It made her think of the dinosaur puppet Xan used to love. It leaned forward, taking the drone in its jaws. The little machine hung limp.

A second dog stepped forward, tapping Cara’s hand with one wide paw. Cara opened her shard-filled hand. The dog leaned forward, wrapping its mouth around her palm. Something in the touch tingled like a mild electrical shock or the first contact of a caustic chemical. The dog’s mouth rippled against her skin, sweeping the shards away. She kept her hand flat until all the bits and pieces were gone and the dog leaned back. Her hand was clean apart from a brief scent of disinfectant, gone almost before she noticed it.

“Thank you,” she said as the dog stepped carefully into the darkness under the trees. The one with the drone in its grip turned back to look at her, as if it was embarrassed by her gratitude but felt obligated to acknowledge it. Then they were gone. She listened to the receding footsteps. They went silent more quickly than she’d expected.

She sat quietly, arms wrapped around her legs, and watched the weird miracle of the dead-but-not-dead sunbird until she felt like she'd given the moment all of the honor and respect it deserved.

Like someone rising from a pew, she stood, peace in her heart, and headed back home. As she walked, she imagined telling her parents about the dogs, about Momma bird. But that would mean telling them about the drone too. After it was fixed, she'd tell them. And anyway, it was still too sweet having it just for herself.

* * *

"I don't know," her mother said. "I don't feel comfortable with it."

Xan's eyes got large. His mouth gaped like she'd just said the worst, most unexpected thing he'd ever heard. "*Mom!*"

It was Sunday, and the walk into town for church was warm, the air thick and sticky. A soft midnight rain had left the track muddy and slick, so Cara kept to the edge where moss and clover made a kind of carpet. The tiny green-black leaves made wet sounds under her feet, but didn't soak her shoes.

"You have responsibilities at home," her mother said, and Xan lifted his hands in exasperation and disbelief, like he was a half-sized copy of their father. Cara had seen the same gesture a thousand times.

"I already told Santiago I'd help him," Xan said. "He's *expecting* me."

"Have you finished all your chores?"

"Yes," Xan said. Cara knew it wasn't true. Her mother did too. That was what made the conversation so interesting.

"Fine," she said. "But be home before dark."

Xan nodded. More to himself, Cara thought, than to their mother. A little victory of persistence over truth. After services, Xan could go off and play with his friends instead of being home the way he was supposed to. Probably she should have been angry at how unfair it was that her brother got to bend the rules and she didn't, but she liked it better when the house and the forest were hers. Maybe her parents did too. It wasn't really such a bad outcome if everyone was tacitly happy with it.

Cara's father walked a dozen meters ahead with Jan Poole, the agricultural specialist. Jan's house was on the way to town, and the older

man joined them for the walk in to church each week. Or anyway, he did now that they went in for services.

Before the soldiers came, Cara remembered church being a much more optional thing. There had been months when Sunday morning hadn't meant anything more strenuous than sleeping in and making breakfast for all of them to eat in their pajamas. Cara still wasn't sure why the arrival of the soldiers and their ships had changed that. It wasn't as though the soldiers made people come. Most of the men and women who'd come down from the ships to live on the planet didn't come to church, and those that did weren't any different from the science teams. When she'd asked, her mother had made an argument about needing to be part of the community that hadn't made any sense. It all came down to: this was the way they did things now. And so they did them. Cara didn't like it but didn't hate it either, and the walk could be nice enough. She already knew—the same way she knew she'd get her period or that she'd move into her own house—that someday she'd push back against the weekly routine. But someday wasn't yet.

Services were held in the same space as school, only with the tables taken out and benches made from local wood analogs hauled into rows for people to sit on. Who gave the sermon varied week by week. Most times, it was someone from the original science teams, but a couple of times one of the soldiers' ministers had taken a turn. It didn't really matter to Cara. Apart from the timbre of their voices, the speeches all sounded pretty much the same. Mostly she let her mind wander and watched the backs of the heads of all the people in front of her. The people from town and the soldiers who'd come to the surface all sitting together but apart, like words in a sentence with the spaces between them.

It wasn't the same for the kids. Xan and little Santiago Singh played together all the time. Maggie Crowther was widely rumored to have kissed Muhammed Serengay. It wasn't that the kids didn't recognize the division so much as that it didn't matter to them. The more soldiers came down the well, the more normal it was to have them there. If that worried her parents, it was only because they were used to it being a different way. For Cara and Xan and all the others in their cohort, it had always been like this. It was their normal.

After the sermon, they trickled out into the street. Some families left

immediately, but others stood around in little clumps, talking the way the adults did after church.

The results of the new xenobotany run looked promising and The soldiers are breaking ground on a new barracks and Daffyd Keller's house needs repair again, and he's thinking of taking the soldiers up on their offer of new accommodations in town. Speculation on the water-purification project and the weather cycles data and the platforms or stick moons or whatever people wanted to call them. And always the question—sometimes spoken, but often not—*Have you heard anything from Earth?* The answer to that was always no, but people asked anyway. Church was all about rituals. Standing with the sunlight pressing against her face trying not to be impatient was as much a part of the day as the sermon.

After what seemed like hours and hadn't been more than half of one, Xan and Santiago ran off with a pack of the other children. Stephen DeCaamp finished his conversation with her parents and wandered off toward his own home. The church crowd scattered, and Cara got to follow her parents back to their house. The road was flat, but the prospect of going back to the pond, of seeing the dogs again, made it feel like she was walking downhill.

"More," her mother said when they were out of earshot of the others. Her tone of voice told Cara it was part of a conversation that was already in progress. One she hadn't been part of. Her father's sigh confirmed that.

"We knew that would happen," he said. "You can't expect them to live in orbit forever. Being in a gravity well will be good for them."

"Not sure what it will be for us."

Her father shrugged and glanced toward Cara, not to include her but to postpone the conversation until she wasn't around. Her mother smiled thinly, but she let it drop. "Why don't you ever go play with the other children?" she asked instead.

"I do when I want to," Cara said.

"Must be nice," her mother replied with a chuckle, but didn't go farther than that.

As soon as they were home, Cara changed out of her good clothes, grabbed a lunch of toasted grains and dried fruit, and ran out the back. She took a jacket, but not because she'd get cold. She figured that if the dogs brought the drone back, she'd be able to wrap it up and sneak it back into

the house that way. Then she could put it in her mother's case later, when no one was watching. A drone had to be easier to fix than a sunbird, after all.

At the pond, Momma bird was sitting at the edge of the water, unmoving and wax-skinned. The tiny, angry black eyes focused on nothing in particular. The babies hissed and spat and chased each other around the pond, diving sometimes, or flapped their pale leathery wings. Cara sat a little way off and ate, watching them. The dogs might not come back today. They might never come back. Maybe they ate drones. Or maybe sunbirds rose from the dead on their own. That was the thing about Laconia: with so much that no one knew, anything was possible.

After a while, she folded the jacket into a pillow, got out her handheld, and read part of a book about a lost boy looking for his family in the overwhelming press of people in the North American Shared Interest Zone. She tried to imagine what it would be like, walking down a single street with a thousand other people on it. It seemed like it was probably an exaggeration.

The afternoon heat drew a line of sweat down her back. A chittering flock of four-legged insectlike things roiled through the sky like a funnel cloud before diving onto the water, covering the pond in a layer of shining blue-and-green brighter than gemstones for five or six minutes before rising again at the same instant and shooting away into the trees. Cara hadn't seen them before. She wondered if they were a migrant species, or something local that hadn't crossed her path before. Or maybe this was the kind of thing she was supposed to tell Instructor Hannu about.

That seemed weird, though. What was there to say except *I saw something I haven't seen before*? As if that wasn't always true. It would be a strange day when that *didn't* happen.

She did feel a little guilty not saying anything about the dogs, though. Something that took dead animals and made them not-dead would be the sort of thing the soldiers wanted to know about. Would want to capture and study. She wondered if the dogs would want to be captured and studied. She thought not, and they'd already done more for her than the soldiers ever had.

The sun slid westward. The fronds of the trees clattered in the breeze like someone dropping a handful of sticks forever. The anticipation and

excitement of the morning mellowed and soured with every hour that the dogs didn't come back. The shadows all lost their edges as thin, high clouds caught the sunlight and softened it. A flash of red and yellow from the stick moons faded and flared and faded again. Artifacts of whatever long-dead species had built the gates.

She watched the lights flutter and stream like a kite caught in some different, gentle wind. Or a bioluminescent creature like they had on Earth. Something alive, only not alive. Like Momma bird. She wondered if maybe the stick moons were like that too. Something in between. And maybe the dogs...

Something moved in the darkness under the trees, and she sat up. The dogs came out, ambling toward her gracefully on their oddly jointed legs. Cara scrambled to her feet, stepping toward the dogs that weren't dogs. Or if they were, they were what Laconia meant by the word.

The big, apologetic eyes fixed on her, and she grabbed her own hands. She didn't know why, but she felt like she should wave or bow or do something to show them that she was glad they were there.

"Hi," she said. "I didn't think you'd come."

The dogs came around her, making a semicircle with her at the center. The drone hung from the mouth of one at the back, vortex thrusters powered down and clicking against each other like fingernails.

"Were you able...?" Cara said. Then, "Did you fix it?"

The dog with the drone came forward, lifting its head toward her. She took the drone, and the dog let it go. It was her mother's drone, there was no question about that. And the section she'd shattered was intact, but it looked different. The shards and splinters of its carapace were there, but a lattice of silver-white made a tracework where the breaks had been. Like a scar that marked a healed wound. There was no way her mother would fail to notice that. But it wouldn't matter, as long as it worked. She put the drone down on the clover, slaved it to her handheld. The thrusters hummed. The drone rose into the air, solid and balanced as ever. Cara felt the grin in her cheeks.

"This is perfect," she said. "This is everything. Thank you so much."

The dogs looked embarrassed. She powered down the drone and wrapped it carefully in her jacket as they turned and walked back into the dimness under the trees. She wondered where they went when they weren't

at the pond. If there was some cave they slept in or a pod where they curled up at night. She had a hard time picturing that. And it wasn't as if they had real mouths to eat with. Maybe they all went to some kind of alien power jack and filled up whatever they used as batteries.

"Thank you," she shouted again into the shadows. She stood, holding the drone to her chest like it was a baby. "If there's anything I can do for you..."

She didn't finish the sentence.

She walked back home quickly, her steps quickened by the prospect of being home, of sneaking the drone into her room unseen. She'd have to be clever to get it back into its case without her parents knowing she'd taken it. There were two ways into the house—the front that faced the road to town, and the back by the garden and the shed. The question was which would be most likely to get her past her family's watchful eyes and safely into her room. It was getting close to dinnertime, so the front would probably be best, since at least one of them would be in the kitchen. Or she could stow the drone in the shed under the cart and wait until everyone was asleep. That probably made more sense...

She knew something was wrong the moment she stepped in the back door. The air *felt* different, like the moment before a storm. Soft voices she didn't recognize came from the living room. She walked toward them with a sense of entering a nightmare.

Her father was sitting on a chair; his face had literally turned gray. A uniformed soldier stood beside him, head bowed, and Santiago Singh was behind them, looking away. The boy's eyes were puffy and red from crying. No one turned to her. It was like she was invisible.

Her mother walked in from the front door, footsteps hard and percussive. Her mouth was tight and her eyes as hard as rage. She gazed toward Cara without seeming to see her.

"Mom?" Cara said, and her voice seemed to come from a long way away. "What's wrong?"

* * *

It was one of those things. An accident. If any of a thousand details had been just a little different, no one would have even noticed it. The soldier

who'd been driving the transport had indulged in a couple beers with his lunch, so his reaction times were just that much delayed. Xan and Santiago and the other boys had decided to play football instead of tag, so there was a ball that could take a wild kick. Xan had been nearest the road, so he'd been the one to run out to retrieve it. The whole thing was over before anyone understood it had begun. Like that, her little brother was dead, and the drone and Momma bird and the dogs didn't seem important anymore.

Cara sat while the soldier explained it all. Santiago Singh stood at attention, weeping as he retold all he'd seen like the good little soldier he was. Her father lurched out of the room at some point. Her mother dropped her favorite serving bowl, the fragments scattering across the floor. They were like moments out of a dream, connected because they were about the same thing, more or less. But she couldn't have said which happened first. Which one led to the others. Xan was dead, and it shattered time for her. It broke everything.

Admiral Duarte sent his condolences. This was a lapse of discipline that should never have happened. The admiral had already ordered the drunk soldier's execution. Cara's family would be put first on the list for a place in the new housing facilities, and Cara would be guaranteed a place in the academy when it opened. The admiral understood that nothing could compensate for their loss, but the soldiers would do what they could. With the family's permission, the admiral would like to attend the wake. Someone had said, *Of course*, but Cara didn't know if it had been her mother or her father. She might even have said it herself.

The town didn't have a mortuary. In the years they'd been on Laconia, there hadn't been more than a handful of deaths, and none of them had been a child. Not until now. No one seemed to know what to do or how to go about it. Cara had never been to a funeral before. She didn't know what to expect.

They brought Xan home that afternoon, and his body had already been cleaned. Someone had found or made a burial gown for him, white cloth from his throat down to his bare feet. They put him in the front between the door and road on a table. His eyes were closed, his hands folded on his belly. Cara stood at his side, looking down at him and trying to feel. Everything in her seemed to have gone numb.

To her, Xan looked like he was sleeping. Then he looked like he wasn't

really Xan, but only a statue of him. A piece of art. Cara found she could flip her brain between seeing him one way and then the other, like he'd become an optical illusion. Her brother, but only asleep. Something not alive, but also not her brother. Back again. Anything except the two together: Never both *Xan* and *dead*.

People from town came. Edmund Otero. Janet Li. The Stover family, with Julianne Stover carrying her new baby on one hip. They brought food. A couple of times, they tried singing hymns, but the songs died out before they could really take root. At one point, Mari Tennanbaum seemed to well up out of the crowd and grab Cara in an awkward hug, like Cara was supposed to be comforting her instead of the other way around. Then Mari faded back into the swirl of bodies and hushed conversation. Cara went back to looking at her brother's corpse.

There was something. Not a bruise really, but where a bruise would have been if Xan's blood hadn't stopped where it was. A discoloration on his head. Cara couldn't get the idea out of her mind that this was where Death had touched him.

She didn't see the soldiers arrive so much as hear it. A change in the voices around her. When she thought to look up, Admiral Duarte was there, silhouetted by the light spilling out of their doorway as he talked to her parents. It was the first time she'd seen him in person and he wasn't as tall as she expected. A centimeter or two shorter than her father. His uniform was perfectly tailored. His pockmarked cheeks made him look older than he probably was.

He was talking to her parents when she saw him, his head bent forward like he was putting all his attention into listening to them. It was a little bit like having a Greek god or a character out of history show up. It wasn't the only unreal thing about the evening, but it was one among others.

Her mother said something she couldn't hear, and the admiral nodded and touched her arm as he replied. He shook her father's hand, neither man smiling. When he walked in her direction, she thought it was to see Xan. To view the body, if that was the phrase. She was surprised when he stopped in front of her.

"Cara?" The way her name sat in his mouth, it was like he was making sure he had the right person and also talking to someone that was his equal. His eyes were soft brown. She could see the sorrow in them. "My name is

Winston.”

“I know,” she said like she was accepting an apology. Letting him off the hook.

He shifted to look at Xan. They were silent for a few seconds. He sighed. “I wish I could make this better. I’ve lost people I love before. It was very hard.”

“Why?” she asked, and her voice was sharper than she’d expected. It wasn’t a fair thing to ask. She wasn’t ever sure quite what she meant by it other than who the hell was he to come to her brother’s funeral and talk about his own pain. Winston took the question in, pursing his lips like he was sucking on it. Tasting it.

“Because I hate feeling powerless,” he said. “I hate being reminded that the universe is so much bigger than I am. And that I can’t always protect people.” He shifted to look at her directly again. Like he actually cared about her reaction to this explanation. She understood why the soldiers would follow him. Why they all loved him.

“Would you undo it,” she asked, “if you could? If you could bring him back?”

Maybe he heard something in the question. Maybe it was only that he was listening to her so deeply. He paused, thought. “I believe that I would, yes. I need your family to be well. To be part of what I’m doing here.”

“Taking over Laconia?”

“And everything that comes after that. I want to keep people safe. Not just here but everywhere. The people on Laconia, not just the ones who came with me but all of us, are my best chance to do that. And yes, if I could save your brother, I would. For him, and for your parents, and for you. If I could wave a magic wand and go back in time to keep him off that road? I would do it.”

“You killed the soldier who killed him. Didn’t you need him too?”

“Not as much as I needed you and your family to know that your brother mattered to me. I’m the government here. I imposed that. I didn’t ask your permission first. That puts some obligations on me. It means I have to show sincerity and respect for our rules, even when that requires doing something I might not want to do. I don’t have the right to compromise.”

“I think I understand that.”

“We have to be one people,” he said. He sounded sad. “There’s no room

for tribes on Laconia. That's how they do it back in Sol system. Earth and Mars and the Belt. That's what we're here to outgrow."

"Everything is different here," Cara said, and the admiral nodded as though she'd understood him perfectly, then touched her shoulder and walked away.

Behind her, someone was weeping softly. She didn't turn to see who. For the first time since she'd come home, she felt almost clearheaded. When she put her hand on Xan's foot the same way she used to when she woke him up, his body was cold.

"It's going to be okay," she said. "I know how to fix this."

Her parents were in the kitchen with Mari Tennenbaum, each of them with a squat glass of wine. Usually her father would be making jokes about it being vintage fifteen minutes ago, but now he didn't seem to notice it was in his hand. The missing joke made her sad, because it meant he was sad.

"What happens to him tonight?" Cara asked.

Mari blinked and reared back a centimeter as if Cara had shouted something rude. Her father didn't react at all, just turned the fixed, polite smile a degree more toward her. Her mother was the one to answer.

"This isn't the time—"

"I know the funeral's tomorrow," Cara said, "but it's not like there's a place in town that he can stay in until then. Can he be here? It's the last night he can, so he should stay here. With us."

Her voice was louder and shriller than she'd intended. Mari Tennenbaum wasn't looking at her, but other people were. Her mother's eyes were as dead as Momma bird's.

"Sure," her mother said. "If it's important to you, he can stay here until the funeral. That would...that would be nice. To have him here."

Then her mother started crying and didn't stop. Her father put down his wine, still with the same smile, and led her away. For a moment, Cara expected Xan to rush in and ask what was wrong with Mom, and then she remembered again. She went back out to stand guard over the body. To make sure that if anyone came and tried to take him away, she'd be there to tell them her mom said not to.

The memorial ended late, people staying until the darkness felt like it had always been there. Like daytime was some other planet. She was still standing beside Xan when Admiral Duarte and the soldiers left, and when

Stephen DeCaamp and Janet Li came to move Xan's body inside. Probably nothing in the local system would mistake him for food, but they brought him in anyway, still on the table. They left him between the dining area and the kitchen, dressed in his funeral whites. It was like something out of a dream.

Her parents saw everyone out, said their last farewells, and closed the door. None of them spoke, and Cara went to the washroom and pretended to prepare for bed. Brushed teeth, washed face, changed into a nightgown. She kissed her mother on the cheek and went to her bedroom. She left the door open just a crack, though, so the latch wouldn't make noise when she opened it. Then, as quietly as she could, she took the nightgown back off and pulled on work clothes. She tucked her handheld into her sock drawer. If they checked, it would look like she was in her room. She crawled into bed and pulled the covers up to her neck so if her parents did come in, she'd look normal. The trick, she thought, would be waiting until they went to bed without falling asleep herself.

In the darkness, she bit her lip, chewing the soft flesh so the pain would keep her awake. She counted backward from five hundred, one number with each breath, and then counted back up to five hundred again. She was just shifting the blanket aside to get up when she heard the back door open and her parents' voices drift in. She froze, listened.

The strangest thing was how normal they sounded. How much grief sounded like regular life.

"I'll get that cleaned up later," her father said.

"It's fine. I don't care."

"I know, but I'll clean it up anyway."

The ghost of a laugh, gone almost before it started. She could imagine her mother leaning against the counter the way she always did, except that Xan was dead. So maybe they acted different. It seemed like everything ought to have changed.

"I can't believe this is happening," her mother said. "It's just not... plausible?"

"Yeah. I keep feeling like I just had a little seizure or something. Like I was having some kind of hallucination, and now I'm back. Or I'm asleep again. I don't know. I can't...I don't feel like he's gone."

Cara felt a little smile tugging at her mouth. For a second, she was

tempted to run out and tell them. To have them help. Then they could all do it together.

“I don’t want to be here anymore,” her mother said. “We weren’t supposed to be here anymore. Not us. Not—” Her voice thickened and stopped, like the words had gotten too gooey to get out. Her father was making noises. Like little cooing sounds Cara might have heard from paper bugs. She shifted a little, thinking that maybe she could peek through the crack in her door. See what they were doing. The tightness in her gut was the seconds of nighttime slipping away, and she had to find the dogs.

“He should have been back in Paris,” her mother said. “He should have been with his cousins, not on this fucking nightmare of a planet.”

“I know,” her father said.

“I *hate* it here. I want to go home.”

“I know, Dot. I want to go home too.”

Cara felt the words like a punch. Home? They wanted to go home? They *were* home. *This* was home. What they meant was Earth, where she’d never been, where she didn’t belong. Where Xan didn’t belong.

She must have made a noise, because her mother called out in her tear-thickened voice. “Babygirl?”

Cara froze, then inched back toward her bed. She couldn’t be found now. Not dressed like this.

“Babygirl?” her mother said again, and Cara jumped back into the bed, hauled the blanket up to her neck, and turned her face to the wall. If they saw her face, they’d know she was only pretending to sleep...

Her door opened. She fought to keep her breath slow and deep. What would she say if they touched her? Should she pretend to wake up? What did she look like when she was just waking up? She didn’t know.

“I love you, babygirl,” her mother whispered, and the door closed, the latch clicking home. Cara let out a long, stuttering breath. Her pulse was going fast enough for two people, which struck her as funny, because it was sort of true. Her heartbeat and Xan’s too. For a while at least.

Her parents’ voices were less clear now, but she heard the door to their bedroom close. She waited, counted to five hundred and down again, waited some more. No more noises. No more voices.

The latch was louder than she wanted it to be, no matter how gently she opened it. It felt like it was echoing in the empty house, but she’d spent too

much time waiting already. She walked carefully, rolling her weight from carefully placed heel to her toe. Xan lay still on his table. She opened the back door, stepped out to the shed. When she pulled the cart out, she was almost surprised to see that the sampling drone was still in the shed. It seemed like an artifact from some other life, like it had been hidden there for years and not hours. Funny how time worked like that. She ran her fingertips over the repaired shell with its new veins.

Xan's body was heavier than she expected. She'd carried him before sometimes, but he'd always been helping her, at least a little. He wasn't stiff anymore, and she staggered a little getting him through the back doorway. It got easier when she stopped trying to carry him less like a boy and more like a sack of soil. When she dropped him into the cart, his head hit the side with a thump.

"Sorry," she whispered as if he had felt anything. "But really, this is your fault. When this is done, you're going to have to do my chores for me from now on."

Xan's eyes had opened a little. Tiny wet slits hidden behind his eyelashes, catching the starlight. His arms had folded under him when she put him down, twisted and bent at angles that made her own shoulder ache to look at. There wasn't time to make him comfortable, though. She fumbled with the cart's handle and started down the path, then paused and snuck back into the house. She pulled a bag of fruit and some rice bars out of the pantry, and a bottle of filtered water from the refrigerator. She tucked them beside her brother's corpse, took up the cart handle, and started out.

Night on Earth was bright. That's what they said. Their moon shone like a kind of second, crappy sun. Cities were big enough to drown out the stars with their extra glow. She'd seen pictures of it all, but that wasn't what it had been like for her. On Laconia, day was bright and night was dark. The wide, smeary glow of the galactic disk was the brightest thing in the sky, and she could only navigate by it roughly. Enough to know which direction she was going. Two stick moons floated against the stars, shimmering and shifting, swimming toward each other in the darkness above the sky.

Cara put her head down and pulled. She'd been down this path so many times at so many times of day and in such different weathers that her body knew the way even when she couldn't exactly see it. She knew the sound of the grass and the water, the places where the breeze changed shape, the

smell of broken soil and the pattering of bug honey on the lower fronds of the trees. She could have made the trip with her eyes closed, and with the darkness, she very nearly did.

At the pond, a rock deer lifted its head at her approach, its scales shifting and reflecting starlight like a little slice of sky that had come down for a drink. It was too dark to see its eyes.

“Shoo,” Cara said, and the animal turned and launched itself into the darkness, tramping through the underbrush and then running away faster than a soldier’s truck, even though there were no roads. Cara stopped. A film of sweat covered her forehead, and her armpits felt swampy. She was here, though. She’d made it.

“Hello?” she shouted. “Are you there?”

The darkness didn’t answer back. Even the night animals and bugs went quiet, like they were listening with her. Now that she was here, the plan that had seemed so simple was showing its holes. For her to take Xan to the dogs, the dogs had to be there. If they weren’t...

“Hello?” Her voice sounded thin, even to her. Stretched and desperate. “Please, are you there?”

She parked the cart in the soft ground at the water’s edge and stepped toward the trees. The already black night grew darker. There wasn’t even starlight here. Only an absence, like looking straight into the pupil of an eye as big as the world. She put her arms out, fingertips waving for the fronds and scrub that she knew was there but couldn’t see. Her eyes ached from trying to see anything. Her ears rang with the silence.

“Please? I need help.”

Nothing answered. Despair she hadn’t known she was fighting washed into her. If the dogs weren’t there, then Xan was gone. And gone forever. And he couldn’t be. Grief shifted in her belly, shook her legs and hands. The dogs had been there for Momma bird. They couldn’t leave her brother dead, and just save a fucking sunbird.

Her parents would wake up. They’d see the body was gone, and her with it. They’d be angry, and what would she tell them? What would she say to make them understand that the rules they knew weren’t her rules, that Xan didn’t have to be dead. They’d stop her. She balled her hands into tight, aching fists. She couldn’t let them stop her.

“Hey!” she shouted. And then again, loud enough for the air to scrape at

her throat. “*Hey! I need you! I need help! It’s important!*”

The silence was absolute.

And then it wasn’t.

She couldn’t tell how far away it was. With nothing to see, sound could deceive her, but somewhere ahead of her, a hiss and crackle of scrub being pushed aside. The rock deer maybe. Or a shambler. Or any of the thousands of uncategorized animals of Laconia that were still waiting to be named.

Or the dogs.

Uncertainty came over her in a wave. It was too big and too strange. Like she’d waved at the sun and it had waved back. Maybe this had been a bad idea, but it was too late now. She steeled herself to face whatever came from the black. The tramping drew nearer, louder. It multiplied and spread. They were coming.

Something touched her hand. A gentle pressure that tingled like a mild electric shock.

Cara dropped to her knees and threw her arms around the dog, hugging the strange, too-solid flesh close to her. It was warm against her cheek, and rough. It smelled like cardamom and soil. It went still, like it wasn’t sure what do with her affection and joy, and it stayed still until she released it.

“Over here,” she said, stumbling back to the pond. She gestured in the darkness. And maybe the dogs could see her, because they followed. Starlight glimmered in their bulging eyes.

Xan’s funeral whites glowed in the darkness, a paler shadow. The dogs gathered around him, and it was like watching what was left of Xan dissolve. Darkness consuming darkness.

“He’s my brother,” Cara said. “A truck hit him. It killed him, like with Momma bird. But I need him back. And you brought her back, so you can bring him back too, can’t you? I mean you can, can’t you?”

She was babbling, and the dogs didn’t respond. Mostly blind, she stepped in close, her hands on their backs. The dogs were still and quiet as statues. And then one began making its *ki-ka-ko* call, and the others picked it up until it felt like a choir around her. Until her head spun with it. She sank to her knees to keep from losing her balance. In the sky, the stick moons glittered green and white and blue. The stars looked warmer than their lights.

Xan bobbed up to the surface of the darkness. The dogs were carrying

him, one under him bearing his weight on its back. Others holding his arms and legs to steady him as they walked.

“You can, can’t you? You can fix him?”

The dogs didn’t answer. Xan floated out to the trees, and then behind them. And then there was only the sound of the dogs walking. Then not even that.

Cara sat by the water, hugging her knees. Slowly, the natural sounds of the night came back: the trill of insects, the trill of birds. A high, fluting call from something a long way off, and an answering call from even farther. The stillness cooled her, but not badly. All she had to do now was wait.

* * *

Voices woke her. They were calling her name, and she couldn’t remember where she was. It wasn’t her bed or her room or her house, because there was a dawn-stained sky overhead. Her clothes were wet with dew.

“Cara!”

She was on the edge of calling back, when the last forgetfulness of sleep slid off her mind. She clamped a hand over her mouth as if her arm didn’t trust her throat to stay quiet. She scrambled to her feet. Momma bird and the little ones were already on the pond. The dead, black eyes didn’t take Cara in. The cart squatted where she’d let it. She snatched the little bag of food out of it, took two steps toward the voices, and then two away. Her mind felt like it was buzzing.

If she told them now, they’d call the soldiers. They’d come and they’d track down the dogs. She didn’t think they’d wait for Xan to come back, and he had to come back. But there were only so many paths. They’d find her at the pond, and soon. She’d have to say something, wouldn’t she? And what if they didn’t let her come back?

She felt like she was still struggling with the dilemma even as she trotted out toward the forest, and the darkness under the fronds. She pushed through the underbrush, twigs and the stick-hard fingers of the scrub sliding off her. A rough break in the plants showed where the animal path led away to the south, and she followed it.

She’d never gone past the pond before. There were probably surveys of the land somewhere. Or maybe not. A decade was a long time to live

somewhere, but a planet was larger than the best intentions. She might be going places humans had never been before. Or no one except for Xan, anyway.

The voices grew more distant, but still clear. Her legs ached, but the work of moving fought back the cold. The voices went silent. She thought maybe they'd given up looking for her, but when they started again, there were more. Voices she recognized. Instructor Hannu, Stephen DeCaamp. Mari Tennanbaum.

Her father.

"Babygirl!" he cried. His voice sounded raw. Like he was hurting himself by shouting. "Babygirl, if you're out there, we're right *here!* Baby!"

She wanted to go back to him, to tell him everything was all right. That she was and that Xan was too. Tears rose up in her eyes, blurring the world.

"Sorry," she said softly, pushing forward. "I'm so sorry."

She didn't stop until the sound of the voices was gone. The search would keep going, though. There would be drones. There would be thermal scanning. If the soldiers helped, there would be visuals taken from orbit. She stayed under the canopy of fronds. There were plenty of large animals in the forest. It wouldn't be easy to tell which heat came from them and which came from her. At least she hoped it wouldn't.

The sun tracked through the sky, changing the angle of the few, thin dapples that pushed down into the permanent twilight of the forest. Cara felt herself getting tired. She'd have to rest. She'd have to eat. And at some point she'd have to find her way back to the pond. She had to be there when the dogs came back with Xan. After that, everything would be better.

She found a place where a long brown stone pushed up out of the land. It was too round to be a real bench, and whatever the blue moss was growing on, it felt slick and oily. She sat there anyway. The fruit and rice tasted better than it ever had at home, and the water was sweet. She hadn't realized how dry her throat had become until she drank. Her muscles twitched with fatigue. It wasn't a bad feeling.

The forest around her was hushed, but not silent. Little things the size of her thumb ticked at her from the trees. They had big wet eyes and tiny mandibles that looked like they were frozen in permanent comic alarm. A bird fluttered by on wide leathery wings, landed on a frond across the way from her, and muttered to itself like a bored child in school. The soft breeze

smelled like burnt coffee and fresh grass and rubbing alcohol. An insect buzzed past on bright wings that left a little rainbow afterimage on her eyes.

A sense of peace crept over her, and it felt like the world had sat beside her, opened its own lunch bag, and was just being with her. Everything about the little space was beautiful and calm and rich with a million things that no one had ever seen before. And every place was like this. A whole planet and a solar system beyond it. There would be caves somewhere, with fishlike things living in the waters. There would be ocean coves with tide pools filled with living systems that weren't animals and weren't plants. That didn't have names or an idea of names. She tried to imagine what it would be like going back to Earth, where everything was already known and there weren't any miracles left. It seemed sad.

She pinched the last grain of rice between her fingertips and dropped it on her tongue. She didn't know if the adults were still searching for her. She didn't know how long it would take the dogs to bring back Xan. She'd have to go back home eventually for fresh water and food. But just then, just for that moment, she could let herself feel at peace.

She pushed the empty water bottle back in her pocket, folded the empty bag and shoved it in too. She didn't want to hurry for fear of hearing her name called in a familiar voice. She couldn't stay for fear of missing the dogs. There wasn't a perfect answer, but she didn't need a perfect one. Good enough was good enough.

Making her way home was harder than leaving had been, which made some sense to her. Going away from a point, there were any number of paths, and all of them were right. Going back to the point, most paths were wrong. The rock-deer trail wasn't as clear, now that she was walking back along it. Branches and turns she hadn't noticed on the way out confused her now. And as the sunlight changed its angle and warmth, the colors under the forest canopy changed. Twice, she backtracked to a place she was almost sure was part of the right way and tried again, making other decisions.

The sunlight had started to shift into gray and orange, the air to grow cool, when she came around a stand of trees and the dogs were scattered there, legs tucked primly beneath their bodies. Their embarrassed, apologetic eyes shifted toward her as she came forward. Excitement or fear or both raced through Cara's body like an electrical shock. And then Xan sat up, his head turning toward her.

He was changed, that was obvious. He was still wearing his funeral whites, but a long black stain ran from his left shoulder down to his belly. His skin had a grayness where the red of blood should have been. His eyes had gone pure black. When he moved, it had the same utter stillness broken by considered action as Momma bird, like every muscle that fired had been thought about for a fraction of a second first. But his hair still stood out in all directions the way it did when he'd just gotten up in the morning. His mouth was the same gentle curve that he'd inherited from their dad.

"Xan?" she whispered.

He was still as stone for a moment, then he shifted his head. "I feel weird," he said, and his voice was his own.

Her grin was so wide it hurt her face. She rushed the last meter between them and hugged him, lifting him up in her arms. For a moment, it was like lifting the dead weight of his corpse. Then his arms were around her too, his head against her neck.

"I was scared," he said. "There was something wrong. And someone was talking to me, only they weren't talking to me."

"There was an accident," Cara said. "You got hurt. Really hurt. *Killed-hurt.*"

A hesitation. "Oh," Xan said. She stepped back, but she kept hold of his hand. She didn't want to let go of him. He blinked. "I feel pretty good for killed."

"I brought you to the dogs. They fix things."

"Like me," Xan said. And then, "There's something wrong with how things look."

"I guess they had to change you some," she said. The nearest dog shifted and looked away, as if chagrined by the limits of their powers. Cara shook her head. "It's okay. This is wonderful. Thank you."

"There are things I didn't see before," Xan said. The words sounded faint. Like he was speaking them from farther off than right here in front of her. "There are other things here. I don't know what they are."

Cara tugged on his hand, pulling him along with her the way she used to sometimes before.

"Come on. It's getting late. We should get home."

"What does it mean to be in a substrate?"

"I don't know," Cara said, tugging him again. "Let's go ask Mom. If I

can figure out how to get there from here.” She turned to the nearest dog and bowed. She didn’t know why that seemed like the thing to do, but it did. “Thank you so much for bringing my brother back to us. If there’s anything I can do to help you, just let me know and I’ll do it. Really.”

The dog made a chirping noise, and then they all rose as one, walking away through the forest on their strangely jointed legs. She half expected them to start their *ki-ka-ko* song, but they didn’t. They only faded into the forest again, as if it was the place where they most belonged. Cara started out for what she was pretty sure was the south, and Xan followed along behind, his cool gray hand still in hers.

She didn’t find the pond, but a break in the trees opened up on the road to her house. The charcoal sky of twilight glittered with stars and the stick moons. At least now she knew where she was and how to get where she wanted to be. She just hoped no one would see them along the way. She wanted her parents to be the first to see what she’d accomplished.

A soft breeze came from the north and set the fronds of the trees clacking against each other. They walked the same way they came home from school every day, all of it familiar even through the changes. Cara was already imagining a bowl of barley soup and her bed and waking up in the morning to the amazement and wonder of the town. Xan asked how he’d died, and she spent the walk telling the story of his death, his funeral, everyone who’d come, how she’d made sure his body had stayed there for her to steal. He listened more intensely than he ever had before and hardly interrupted at all.

“The head of the soldiers really came to see me?” Xan asked when she was done.

“He did.”

“Do you think he’ll want to see us again now that I’m back? I don’t want to get them in trouble.”

Them. He meant the dogs. Cara felt a moment’s unease. The soldiers would want to know about the dogs, about Momma bird and the drone and Xan. Especially with the dogs showing up after the stick moons came alive. She’d have to talk to her parents about what to tell the soldiers and how to tell it to them.

She thought of Winston. The way he listened. *I need your family to be well.*

“The admiral understands,” she said. “He knows that Laconia’s not like other places.”

Xan thought about that a beat too long, then nodded more to himself than to her.

The house glowed from every window. Every light in every room had to be burning. It wasn’t like her parents to run the power down like that. And they were there too, framed in the window like it was the screen of her handheld. Her mother standing in the kitchen, hands on the counter. Her father sitting at the table. They looked as tired as Cara felt. She wondered if they’d been searching for her all day. If there were still people out there looking.

Xan stopped, staring at the house with his newly black eyes. His face was all stunned amazement, as if he was seeing it all for the first time. In a way, he was. Cara squeezed his fingers gently. He didn’t follow her right away when she walked toward the front door. Cara stopped and waved him forward.

“It’s going to be okay,” she said.

When she opened the door, her mother startled as if Cara had fired a gun, then rushed at her and grabbed her by the arms hard enough to hurt.

“What did you do?” her mother growled through rage-bared teeth. “What the *fuck* did you do?”

And then she pulled Cara close in a hug so tight, it felt like drowning. Her mother’s sobs shook them both. Cara put her arms around her mother and found she was crying a little too. Guilt and joy and the echoing sorrow of Xan’s death and the triumph of his return all washed together in the moment, and she held on to her mother’s body like she hadn’t since she was a baby.

“It’s okay, Momma,” she said through her tears. “It’s all okay now.”

Her father said her mother’s name. *Dot*. One low syllable, but with alarm in it louder than a shout.

Xan stood just outside the open door in the space where he wasn’t exactly in the darkness or in the light. His funeral whites carried so much dirt and stain they were like camouflage. His bare feet were filthy. The angle of his eyebrows over his black wet eyes reminded Cara of the dogs—uncertain, embarrassed, apologetic. He stepped through the doorway into the house and went still. Then, in a flicker, lifted his hands toward them all

like a baby reaching for an embrace. His fingernails were dirty. The grayness of his skin made his face seem smudged even where it wasn't.

Cara felt her mother gasp, a sharp, sudden inhalation, and didn't breathe out. Her arms went stiff around Cara, grabbing her in so much it hurt. Xan tried a smile. His gaze clicked from Cara to their father to their mother and back to Cara, as fast as an insect leg twitching. He spread his fingers wider, took another step forward.

"It's okay," Cara said. "I got him back."

Her mother yanked her back, grabbing Cara up and away with a violence that hurt her neck. Cara was back behind the counter, her feet off the floor, her mother's arms pressing the air out of her almost before she realized they were moving. Her father pushed them both behind him. She didn't understand why he had a knife in his hand.

"Gary?" her mother said. "What the fuck is that?"

"I see it," her father said. "It's real."

Cara couldn't speak. She didn't have the air. She wriggled against her mother's grip. She had to explain, to tell them what was going on. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen.

"I want a hug too," Xan said.

Xan took another awkward step forward, still and then the flicker of motion, then still again. Her father yelled, a deep, ragged sound too big for the man she knew. He lunged toward Xan, knife shining in his fist, and terror flooded Cara's blood. She kicked at her mother hard, and felt the blow connect. The grip around her released a little.

"Stop it!" Cara screamed. "What are you doing?"

Xan blocked the knife with his hand, the gray skin opening and black blood pouring from his palm. Xan's eyes went wide with shock. Her father barreled forward, still shouting wordlessly. He grabbed Xan's funeral whites and lifted the little boy off the floor. Cara pushed against her mother's neck hard, and stumbled to the floor. Her mother was keening now, a high, tight sound of panic. Her father had the pantry door open. He threw Xan into it and slammed the door shut, still yelling. There were words in it now. He was shouting, *Leave my family alone*.

"What is the *matter* with you?" Cara shouted. She punched her father's back and then froze. She'd never hit him before. She'd never hit anyone before. He didn't even notice. He grabbed one of the kitchen stools and

used it to jam the pantry door closed. Xan banged against the door harder than Cara would have thought he could. Her mother yelped and started cursing fast and low, almost under her breath. It sounded like praying.

Tears were streaming down Cara's cheeks, but she wasn't sad. All she felt was a powerful, growing outrage.

"I brought him back!" she yelled. "He was dead and I took him to the dogs, and they *fixed* him!"

"Dogs?" her father said. "What dogs?"

"The dogs that came after the stick moons turned on," Cara said. There was so much they didn't understand, and the words were like trying to drink through too thin a straw. The meaning wouldn't all fit. "They fixed Momma bird and the drone and they fixed Xan because I asked them to, and he's back. I brought him *back* and you *hurt* him!"

She heard her mother somewhere behind her, talking into her handheld. *I need the military liaison. It's an emergency.* Cara's outrage and impatience felt like venom in her blood. She pushed at the stool, trying to get the pantry door open again. Her father grabbed her shoulders, pulled her close until his face was the whole world.

"That's not your brother," her father said, biting off each word. "That's. Not. Xan."

"It is."

"The dead don't come back," her father said.

"They do *here*," Cara said.

"His eyes," he said, shaking her as he spoke. "The way he moves. That's not a human, babygirl. That's something else wearing my little boy's skin."

"So *what*?" Cara said. "He's knows everything Xan knows. He loves everything Xan loves. That *makes* him Xan. How can you do this to him just because he's not perfect!"

Her mother's voice came, hard as stone. "They're sending a force from town."

"The soldiers?" Cara said, pulling away from her father's grip. "You called the *soldiers* on him? You *hate* the soldiers!"

She grabbed at the stool again, but her mother lifted her from behind, hauled her feet off the floor and carried her back toward her room. Xan was calling from the pantry, his voice muted and rough with tears and confusion. Cara tried to twist back toward him. Tried to reach for him.

Her mother pushed her into her room and blocked the door with her body. When she looked down at Cara, her expression was blank and hard. “It’s going to be all right,” her mother said. “But you have to stay here until I get this under control.”

A rush of thoughts fought for Cara’s voice—*It was under control* and *Why are you making this a bad thing?* and *You let Daddy cut Xan*—and left her sputtering and incoherent. The door closed. Cara balled her hands, screamed, and pounded the wall. Her parents’ voices came from the house in clipped, hard syllables that she couldn’t make out. She sat on the edge of her futon, bent double, and put her head in her tingling hands. Her blood felt bright with rage, but she had to think.

The soldiers were coming. Her parents were going to let them take Xan away. *Make* them take Xan away. They’d say the dogs were bad. Dangerous. They might hurt them.

All because it didn’t work like this on *Earth*.

The room was filled with her things. Her clothes—clean and folded in the dresser and worn and scattered on the floor by the hamper. The picture over her bed of dinosaurs running from a man in a big pink hat. The picture she’d made when she was seven from Laconian grass and paste, with Instructor Hannu’s note—*Good work!*—beside it. The tablet with her book on it. She scooped it up, turned it on. It was still open to the page of *Ashby Allen Akerman in Paris*. The old woman feeding bread to the birds. She put her fingertips on the picture. It wasn’t a real woman. It wasn’t even a real painting. It was just the idea of an idea. It didn’t have anything to do with her life, and she didn’t lose anything by letting it go.

She closed the book and opened the recording function. She felt the time slipping past, but she took a long look around the room all the same. Her whole life was here, written in little notes and objects that added up to a story that only she would understand.

Or else no one would.

The window was easy to open, but the screen was harder to rip than she’d expected. Once she’d gotten a hole big enough for a couple of fingers, it got easier to pull it apart, but it still hurt her fingertips. A little puff of dust came off the fibers when she ripped the hole big enough that she could squeeze through it. The empty water bottle slipped out of her pocket as she climbed out, clattering onto the paving outside her window. She didn’t go

back for it. She ran across the road to where the underbrush started getting thick. High clouds interrupted the stars in streaks, as if giant claws had ripped strips out of the sky.

The light in the house and the darkness of the world let her see her mother and father in the main room perfectly. Her father had a length of metal as long as his arm held in both hands like a club. He was crying, but he didn't wipe the tears away. He wouldn't put the weapon down long enough for that. Her mother stood at the door, ready to usher the soldiers in when they came. It would be soon. Town wasn't far away when you had military-transport vehicles.

Cara started the tablet recording. She took a deep, slow breath, waited fifteen seconds, and screamed.

"Momma!"

Her mother's head came up sharply as she looked out into the darkness of the night. Cara tapped the playback and loop, threw the volume to max, and then flung the tablet as hard as she could into the brush. Her mother came out the front door, scanning but blind from the light. From the brush, Cara's voice came again. *Momma!*

"Cara?" her mother said. "Where are you?"

Her father came to the door. She heard him say, "What is it?"

Cara started running. She heard her own voice again, behind her, and her mother screaming for her. And her father now too. She didn't have much time. She looped around the back of the house and in the back door, opening it carefully to keep from making noise. Both her parents had gone out the front to find her. To save her. Their voices reminded her of the search party that she'd avoided. All the ways they wanted to help her, but never asked how she wanted to be helped.

She kicked the stool away and hauled open the pantry door. Xan was kneeling in the darkness, his legs folded under him just like the dogs. Wet tracks of tears marked his cheeks. His black eyes took her in. She held out her hand.

"Come on," she said. "We have to warn the dogs."

The front door stood open. Across the road, the brush crackled and hushed as her parents crashed through it, calling her name. They sounded frightened. Cara felt sorry for them, but they'd made their choices. She'd made hers. Xan took her hand with his uninjured one, and she hauled him

up.

Then they were running out the back, into the night, toward the dogs, wherever they were. Xan matched her stride for stride, never letting go of her hand. Her parents' voices faded behind her. She didn't know if they'd found her tablet or if she'd just gotten far enough away that the sound wouldn't reach her.

It didn't matter.

Xan laughed, and the sound was just like the joy he'd had playing a game with his friends. She felt herself smiling. The feeling of freedom lifted her up. Even with the knowledge of the soldiers following behind her. Even with the grief just starting in her heart that she'd never go home. The night was hers, and Laconia was hers, and that was joyous.

Her legs burned and she felt light-headed from hunger. She hadn't had anything to eat since the fruit and rice in the forest. And there wouldn't be anything for her out in the world. All the plants that Laconia grew were indigestible for her at best. Poison at worst. The sunbirds, the blue clover, the grunchers, the glass snakes, everything alive knew, at a chemical level, that she wasn't one of them. But that didn't matter either.

The worst that could happen was she'd die.

The dogs would fix her.

Meet the Author

James S. A. Corey is the pen name of authors Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck. They both live in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

CHAPTER ONE

JACKALS AT BAY

I collapsed into the cot, panting hard, trying to catch my breath. A sheen of hot, musky sweat—already cooling—had formed across my skin.

“Third time’s a charm, eh?” Riggs said.

“You’re getting better at it, is all I’ll say.”

Riggs tried to hug me from behind as though we were actual lovers. His body was warm and muscled, but I shrugged him off. We were just letting off steam before a drop, doing what needed to be done. There was no point in dressing it up

“Watch yourself,” I said. “You need to be out of here in ten minutes.”

“How do you handle *this*?” Riggs asked. He spoke Standard with an accented twang, being from Tau Ceti V, a descendant of North American colonists who had, generations back, claimed the planet as their own. “The waiting feels worse than the mission.”

“It’s your first combat operation,” I said. “You’re bound to feel a little nervous.”

“Do you remember your first mission?”

“Yeah,” I said, “but only just. It was a long time ago.”

He paused, as though thinking this through, then asked, “Does it get any easier?”

“The hours before the drop are always the worst,” I said. “It’s best just not to think about it.”

The waiting was well recognised as the worst part of any mission. I didn’t want to go into it with Riggs, but believe me when I say that I’ve tried almost every technique in the book.

It basically boils down to two options.

Option One: Find a dark corner somewhere and sit it out. Even the smaller strikeships that the Alliance relies upon have private areas, away from prying eyes, away from the rest of your squad or the ship's crew. If you're determined, you'll find somewhere private enough and quiet enough to sit it out alone. But few troopers that I've known take this approach, because it rarely works. The Gaia-lovers seem to prefer this method; but then again, they're often fond of self-introspection, and that isn't me. Option One leads to anxiety, depression and mental breakdown. There aren't many soldiers who want to fill the hours before death—even if it is only simulated—with soul-searching. Time slows to a trickle. Psychological time-dilation, or something like it. There's no drug that can touch that anxiety.

Riggs was a Gaia Cultist, for his sins, but I didn't think that explaining Option One was going to help him. No, Riggs wasn't an Option One sort of guy.

Option Two: Find something to fill the time. Exactly what you do is your choice; pretty much anything that'll take your mind off the job will suffice. This is what most troopers do. My personal preference—and I accept that it isn't for everyone—is hard physical labour. Anything that really gets the blood flowing is rigorous enough to shut down the neural pathways.

Which led to my current circumstances. An old friend once taught me that the best exercise in the universe is that which you get between the sheets. So, in the hours before we made the drop to Daktar Outpost, I screwed Corporal Daneb Riggs' brains out. Not literally, you understand, because we were in our own bodies. I'm screwed up, or so the psychtechs tell me, but I'm not *that* twisted.

"Where'd you get that?" Riggs asked me, probing the flesh of my left flank. His voice was still dopey as a result of post-coital hormones. "The scar, I mean."

I laid on my back, beside Riggs, and looked down at the white welt to the left of my stomach. Although the flesh-graft had taken well enough, the injury was still obvious: unless I paid a skintech for a patch, it always would. There seemed little point in bothering with cosmetics while I was still a line trooper. Well-healed scars lined my stomach and chest; nothing to complain about, but reminders nonetheless. My body was a roadmap of my military service.

“Never you mind,” I said. “It happened a long time ago.” I pushed Riggs’ hand away, irritated. “And I thought I made it clear that there would be no talking afterwards. That term of the arrangement is non-negotiable.”

Riggs got like this after a session. He got chatty, and he got annoying. But as far as I was concerned, his job was done, and I was already feeling detachment from him. Almost as soon as the act was over, I started to feel jumpy again; felt my eyes unconsciously darting to my wrist-comp. The tiny cabin—stinking of sweat and sex—had started to press in around me.

I untangled myself from the bedsheets that were pooled at the foot of the cot. Pulled on a tanktop and walked to the view-port in the bulkhead. There was nothing to see out there except another anonymous sector of deep-space. We were in what had once been known as the Quarantine Zone; that vast ranch of deep-space that was the divide between us and the Krell Empire. A holo-display above the port read 1:57:03 UNTIL DROP. Less than two hours until we reached the assault point. Right now, the UAS *Bainbridge* was slowing down—her enormous sublight engines ensuring that when we reached the appointed coordinates, we would be travelling at just the right velocity. The starship’s inertial damper field meant that I would never be able to physically feel the deceleration, but the mental weight was another matter.

“Get dressed,” I said, matter-of-factly. “We’ve got work to do.”

I tugged on the rest of my duty fatigues, pressed down the various holo-tabs on my uniform tunic. The identifier there read ‘210’. Those numbers made me a long-termer of the Simulant Operations Programme—sufferer of an effective two hundred and ten simulated deaths.

“I want you down on the prep deck, overseeing simulant loading,” I said, dropping into command-mode.

“The Jackals are primed and ready to drop,” Riggs said. “The lifer is marking the suits, and I ordered Private Feng to check on the ammunition loads—”

“Feng’s no good at that,” I said. “You know that he can’t be trusted.”

“‘Trusted’?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” I corrected. “Just get dressed.”

Riggs detected the change in my voice; he’d be an idiot not to. While he wasn’t exactly the sharpest tool in the box, neither was he a fool.

“Affirmative,” he said.

I watched as he put on his uniform. Riggs was tall and well-built; his chest a wall of muscle, neck almost as wide as my waist. Hair dark and short, nicely messy in a way that skirted military protocol. The tattoo of a winged planet on his left bicep indicated that he was a former Off-World Marine aviator, while the blue-and-green globe on his right marked him as a paid-up Gaia Cultist. The data-ports on his chest, shoulders and neck stood out against his tanned skin, the flesh around them still raised. He looked new, and he looked young. Riggs hadn't yet been spat out by the war machine.

“So we're being deployed against the Black Spiral?” he asked, velcroing his tunic in place. The holo-identifier on his chest flashed “10”; and sickeningly enough, Riggs was the most experienced trooper on my team. “That's the scuttlebutt.”

“Maybe,” I said. “That's likely.” I knew very little about the next operation, because that was how Captain Heinrich—the *Bainbridge's* senior officer—liked to keep things. “It's need to know.”

“And you don't need to know,” Riggs said, nodding to himself. “Heinrich is such an asshole.”

“Talk like that'll get you reprimanded, Corporal.” I snapped my wrist-computer into place, the vambrace closing around my left wrist. “Same arrangement as before. Don't let the rest of the team know.”

Riggs grinned. “So long as you don't either—”

The cabin lights dipped. Something clunked inside the ship. At about the same time, my wrist-comp chimed with an incoming priority communication: an officers-only alert.

EARLY DROP, it said.

The wrist-comp's small screen activated, and a head-and-shoulders image appeared there. A young woman with ginger hair pulled back from a heavily freckled face. Early twenties, with anxiety-filled eyes. She leaned close into the camera at her end of the connection. Sergeant Zoe Campbell, more commonly known as Zero.

“Lieutenant, ma'am,” she babbled. “Do you copy?”

“I copy,” I said.

“Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for the last thirty minutes. Your communicator was off. I tried your cube, but that was set to private. I guess that I could've sent someone down there, but I know how

you get before a drop and—”

“Whoa, whoa. Calm down, Zero. What’s happening?”

Zero grimaced. “Captain Heinrich has authorised immediate military action on Daktar Outpost.”

Zero was the squad’s handler. She was already in the Sim Ops bay, and the image behind her showed a bank of operational simulator-tanks, assorted science officers tending them. It looked like the op was well underway rather than just commencing.

“Is Heinrich calling a briefing?” I asked, hustling Riggs to finish getting dressed, trying to keep him out of view of the wrist-comp’s cam. I needed him gone from the room, pronto.

Zero shook her head. “Captain Heinrich says there isn’t time. He’s distributed a mission plan instead. I really should’ve sent someone down to fetch you ...”

“Never mind about that now,” I said. Talking over her was often the only way to deal with Zero’s constant state of anxiety. “What’s our tactical situation? Why the early drop?”

At that moment, a nasal siren sounded throughout the *Bainbridge*’s decks. Somewhere in the bowels of the ship, the engines were cutting, the gravity field fluctuating just a little to compensate.

The ship’s AI began a looped message: “This is a general alert. All operators must immediately report to the Simulant Operations Centre. This is a general alert ...”

I could already hear boots on deck around me, as the sixty qualified operators made haste to the Science Deck. My data-ports—those bio-mechanical connections that would allow me to make transition into my simulant—were beginning to throb.

“You’d better get down here and skin up,” Zero said, nodding at the simulator behind her. “Don’t want to be late.” Added: “Again ...”

“I’m on it,” I said, planting my feet in my boots. “Hold the fort.”

Zero started to say something else, but before she could question me any further I terminated the communication.

“Game time, Corporal,” I said to Riggs. “Look alive.”

Dressed now, Riggs nodded and made for the hatch. We had this down to a T: if we left my quarters separately, it minimised the prospect of anyone realising what was happening between us.

“You’re beautiful,” he said. “You do know that, right?”

“You know that was the last time,” I said, firmly.

“You said that *last* time ...”

“Well this time I mean it, kemo sabe.”

Riggs nodded, but that idiot grin remained plastered across his face. “See you down there, Jenkins,” he said.

Here we go again, I thought. New team. New threat. Same shit.

By James S. A. Corey

THE EXPANSE

Leviathan Wakes

Caliban's War

Abaddon's Gate

Cibola Burn

Nemesis Games

Babylon's Ashes

THE EXPANSE SHORT FICTION

The Butcher of Anderson Station

Gods of Risk

The Churn

Drive

The Vital Abyss

Strange Dogs

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