

Original Earth

Imagine if we were offered a new, uncontaminated planet and a fresh start, how would you wish to see humanity move forward...?

Now, armed with some knowledge of the complex relationships that exist between both fauna and flora - all life with whom we share this incredible planet - what lessons have we learned?

This is a story about a new beginning...

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It has now been one hundred and twenty-six years since the spaceship had departed from a burning Earth in search of a new planetary home. The thousand personnel onboard had simply won a lottery, which produced a crew of mixed ability and race. They'd been scanned for health and fitness, but only because the medical facilities would be limited and, for only six-months before departure, they'd attended intensive training at a base where all the spaceship's operations had been replicated.

The originator and financier of the spaceship project had been billionaire Hugo Denning and he'd also been the ship's first commander.

The last of the original one thousand had died many years ago and the population had now grown to two thousand three hundred and ninety-eight.

One

Anu opened one sleepy eye and saw her parents stood with their arms wrapped around each other as they gazed through the portal at the newly discovered planet revolving in the deep blackness of space.

Onua, a woman of African-Chinese descent, used her free hand to rub the chest of her life partner, a white man whose genetic roots lay in a country that had been called The British Isles. "So beautiful," she whispered.

Emrys inhaled upon Onua's halo of tight, black curls and kissed her forehead. "Oxygen atmosphere, land, water. There must be plenty of natural food down there."

"Yes, and we will be able to grow plants. That's what they did on Original Earth. Crops they were called. But I need to collect so much data and it will take time collating it all."

"Many people are angry," Emrys muttered.

"I know," Onua breathed softly as she lay her head on his shoulder. "They're impatient. But there's so much we need to understand before we go charging down there."

“Penta’s called a meeting tomorrow afternoon. You’ll need to explain what we need to learn about the planet to the people then.” Emrys slipped his arm from her shoulders to her waist and squeezed. “It’s also Anu’s eighth birthday tomorrow. She’s going to want to have a party.”

Anu giggled silently to herself upon hearing that and her father cocked an ear as he detected his daughter stir. He winked at Onua and guided her across to stand beside Anu’s bed and they both looked down at their daughter’s cherubic face as she pretended to be fast asleep. Her thick sponge of tight brown curls almost covered the pillow with sprung spirals of hair falling about her light-brown face. She stirred again and knuckled the sleep from her eyes, then allowed her clenching hands to fall back to her chest and tummy.

Emrys smiled as he hugged Onua closer until their cheeks were crushed together. “She’s so beautiful,” he whispered, kissing Onua on her eyebrow. “So pleased to see she has your stunning looks.”

Onua smiled and kissed his cheek. “She has your blue eyes.”

He half-laughed. “So glad I was able to contribute something.”

Onua stroked and patted his chest again. “I’ve never known anyone who can smile like our little girl. Joy seems to radiate from the very core of her being.”

Emrys indicated with his head at their five-year-old son sleeping in the next bed. “Apart from Tonu having brown eyes and being three years younger, they could be twins. They look so alike.”

Onua chuckled. “You know Anu has a boyfriend now?”

“A boyfriend. She’s eight!” Emrys gasped. “Who?”

“Jac, the blond boy in her class.”

Emrys swallowed. “Talk about growing up fast.”

Shortly after the lights throughout the spaceship went on to announce the arrival of morning, Anu was eating her birthday breakfast, a biscuit block she’d been told tasted like strawberries and cream, but in fact had been made from algae that grew in huge vats in the lower tier. Strawberries and cream was everyone’s favourite birthday treat.

Anu eyed her mother suspiciously. “I know it’s really algae, Mama, and I know strawberries were fruits on Original Earth, but how do we know it tastes like strawberries if no one has ever tasted a real one?”

“It’s not my speciality, *mi amor*.” She looked down and smiled pensively as she considered how best to explain. “You know herbs are grown in the lower tier?”

Anu nodded, her face a picture of concentration.

“Well, when the specialists mix the herbs and algae, the recipes they follow were established before the first ones left Original Earth, so I can only imagine the people who identified those flavours had eaten real strawberries.”

“And cream, Mama?” Anu persisted, catching her mother’s eyes as she twisted her mouth into a rosebud that underlined the question. “What’s cream?”

“On Original Earth it was the fat of cows milk,” Onua stated with a smile as she pinched her daughter’s dimpled cheek.

“Cows milk!” Anu was aghast. “I know cows were alive things on Original Earth, I learned that in school, but why would people drink their milk? Wasn’t it for baby cows?”

Onua laughed. “My mama told me our ancestors used to drink a lot of milk from cows. They had places called farms where cows were milked.”

“But, Mama!” Anu responded, her voice earnest. “If someone else drank your milk, there wouldn’t have been any left for me and Tonu.”

“Questions, questions, Anu. I’ve never known anyone to ask so many questions. Now, come on, mi amor-“ Onua always used the Spanish for *my love* like her mother before her. “-It’s time for school.” She pointed at Tonu who was playing a game on his pad. “Can you help your brother get his slippers on?”

Anu jumped up and grabbed Tonu’s white footwear made from materials that had been recycled hundreds of times. Her five-year-old brother giggled as she tickled his feet before pushing them into the slippers.

“Where’s Papa?” Anu asked.

“He had to go to work. A problem with the bacteria tubes, I think.”

“It’s my birthday,” she grumbled. “Will he be home later?”

“Of course. He wouldn’t miss his favourite daughter’s birthday,” Onua laughed.

“I’m his only daughter!” Anu exclaimed, but with a beaming white-toothed grin. “Promise he’ll be home?”

“I can’t promise if I don’t know what the problem is,” her mother laughed. “I’ve told you before, you only make a promise if you know you can keep it.”

Anu scrunched her face, her nose crinkling on humour whilst her lower lip protruded in feigned sadness. She understood. She recalled her father showing her class around the bacteria tubes and the algae vats during a school visit to the lower tiers.

She remembered the long stainless-steel tubes stretching the length of the deck where her father’s team were looking at big panels with lights blinking a variety of colours.

“They’re technicians monitoring how much algae is fed to the bacteria,” her father had explained to the class.

“They’re fed with the same algae we eat, aren’t they, Papa,” Anu had stated, already knowing the answer because her father had explained it to her at home.

“Quite right, my darling. Unflavoured, of course, as I will explain. Anyway, just to finish-up here, it’s important to understand why we feed the bacteria and the reason is, they produce hydrogen and methane, which make-up our super-fuel when mixed with oxygen.” He’d motioned to the class they should follow him and he’d led them to a hand-rail where they could look down upon the next tier. “So, you see below us the algae vats,” he’d told the class, making hand signals that instructed everyone they should follow him to a metal spiral staircase that led to a lower tier.

Anu could clearly remember the three enormous algae vats with gigantic stainless-steel, cone-shaped hoods and beside each vat were long greenhouses.

Emrys had again waved his hands in indication everyone should gather round. “Okay. So, listen up. Here we grow and harvest the algae for food, both for ourselves and the bacteria. Those large hoods capture the oxygen, which is necessary for us to breathe and the oxygen is also mixed with the hydrogen and methane to create the super-fuel, I mentioned before, and it is that fuel that powers this wonderful spaceship. Our home.”

“My mama works in those greenhouses,” one girl had proudly announced.

“Ah! So, you probably know herbs are grown there,” Emrys had smiled.

“Yes,” the girl had responded. “The herbs are mixed with the algae to create flavours.”

One boy had chimed up, “My papa told me the herbs are grown in our poop!”

Emrys had chuckled. “Your papa is quite right.”

One girl had been thoughtful. “But the herbs flavour our food?”

“It must be different flavours of pooh,” Anu had quickly responded.

Which had caused the class to erupt in gasps of, “Eeeewww! Anuuu!”

Anu had giggled, her face folding into creases and her eyes glistening as she’d clasped her hands together.

Later, when Onua collected her children from school, the birthday-girl immediately asked, “Is Papa home, Mama?”

“No, mi amor, he’s still busy, and later he and I have to attend a meeting.”

“Can me and Tonu come?”

“No, it’s a meeting for adults. The people wish to ask me questions.”

“What about, Mama?”

“As head scientist, I’m responsible for the research needed to be carried out before allowing people to go down to this new planet. Most people are just like you, lots and lots of questions.”

“You’re important, aren’t you, Mama?”

“Well, mi amor, everyone is looking to me to ensure the planet is safe for us to live on.”

For everyone onboard the spaceship, discovery of this new planet was a dream come true.

Excitement had radiated through the spaceship’s hallways and everyone wanted to know when they could go down and experience a real world for the first time.

Rarely did anything happen aboard the spaceship. Years ago, there’d been an event where a meteor storm had threatened their destruction. On that occasion everyone had experienced terror for the first time, but now the new experience was one of overwhelming jubilation. It had been two months since the sensor pod had returned with news of a new planet that offered the hope they’d finally found a new home; a world so like Original Earth. They’d now been in orbit for almost a week and it was Onua’s job to try and keep a lid on the excitement and expectation.

Her science and research department were right now deciphering the data and every individual onboard had one ear zeroed-in for any news.

Commander Penta, a round man with a joyful face, looked at the polished blue-green marble turning slowly in space. During his life-long travel in the vastness of the galaxy, the ship had orbited a few jewels they’d discovered and the scientists had conducted their tests. Each encounter had begun as a mere glint of light the boffins had identified as promising, but on each occasion the hopes had been dashed. But this time it was different, this time the scientists had given the thumbs-up. And it was only now he allowed himself to mentally jump-for-joy behind the veneer of a smile and silently admit, this planet was the most incredible thing he’d ever seen.

He blew hard. His disbelief at finally finding a habitable planet echoing loudly as he sipped the raq – an alcoholic drink someone had likened to wine, which his ancestors had drank on Original Earth, but raq was made from algae rather than grapes.

Meni, a petite woman of Chinese origin, appeared at his side. “Beautiful,” she stated, sipping her own glass of raq.

“Isn’t it,” he nodded.

“A new world we can call our own. I can’t stop looking at it. I’m so excited.”

“Yes. The world for which we’ve searched for so long.”

Meni inhaled and shook her head to express she had no words. Then, “Such intense colours.”

“Onua told me the blue is water, or rather oceans, and the green is terra firma.”

“It’s so shiny.”

Penta laughed and nodded agreement. "In my thoughts, just now, I likened it to a marble." He shrugged. "Not that I've ever seen a real marble, just pictures on my pad I looked at as a child."

"What will we do with this spaceship?"

"Keep it in orbit. We'll need it until we're properly settled."

The mile long spaceship housed seven tiers. The bottom tier was where the tanks of stored oxygen, hydrogen and methane were housed and the next tier up were the algae vats and greenhouses and the tier immediately above that was the bacterial tubes; then there were three decks where the ship's inhabitants lived and the top tier was the control bridge and offices.

Blue algae flowed through vein-like tubes throughout the ship and fluoresced the dark corridors on each tier. The blue-white light seemed to pulse like a heartbeat.

The spaceship's inhabitants were gathering for the meeting where Onua would explain why they couldn't go down to the planet immediately. A mixture of human races from Original Earth, many people wore the uniform related to their occupational status and many dressed casually in clothing that had been recycled too many times and was often referred to as one-piece day suits where choice was limited. Some people had long hair and some short, many men had beards, whilst some preferred to shave. The women also displayed a variety of groomed appearances with some attempting a style and others not.

The social hub was a large round room where there were bars serving drinks of raq and non-alcoholic drinks of various flavours and there was a variety of algae-based food outlets where people met and ate together. This was also the place where the young could date, although, once paired, they could more easily be found in storybook entertainment cubes where they could set the scene for a budding romance; a date in an imaginary park or maybe a concert where a holographic band would play songs from the distant past. Now and then they could attend a real concert where people would sing and play their own musical compositions and there were a few singer songwriters who were very good and many would gather to listen to the latest collection.

The air fizzed with excitement. Since they'd been orbiting this new planet, expectation had grown. Why aren't we going down? was the question at the forefront of everyone's thoughts. Their whole lives had been about finding a habitable planet and, now, here they were, with the dream within their grasp.

The new planet had been named *Earth 2* and it was now a running joke that their new home had been named by someone seriously lacking imagination, but no-one had offered a better idea. For most people it had been a life where they'd been told what to do and think and not question the occupational and social structures. However, some did question and many did secretly imagine themselves climbing the ladders of rank and status, but, for most, the job they were assigned was the job they'd spend their whole life doing. Many did work hard hoping one day to become a team leader, but the best jobs were closed doors if your father or mother wasn't a commander, a head of department or a scientist, because those people ensured their own children had the best opportunities. It was just the way it was. And, due to living on a vessel where there wasn't any other option but to live together peacefully, they'd kept their aspirations to themselves.

And when Onua had issued a statement requesting everyone be patient, hearts had sunk. In the statement she'd asked everyone aboard to give the scientists the time needed to study the planet in detail.

Onua had expected her request would receive objections, they were to be expected, but many people were venting anger and she felt that to be unreasonable; after all, it was her job to ensure the planet was safe.

The room bristled with chatter and movement as many people found seats and others remained standing and gathered in groups.

As head of the research and exploration department, Onua walked onto the stage with Emrys, her life partner, beside her.

One man, a maintenance worker with a small yellow badge informing everyone he was also a team leader, demanded angrily that they had to be allowed to visit the planet before Onua and Emrys had reached their seats.

“None of us here have never set foot on soil! This sterile environment aboard ship is all we’ve ever known. It’s our right to experience real fresh air and real sunlight on our cheeks!”

The meeting room echoed with loud cheers.

Onua, a serenely beautiful woman with refined features, smiled and calmly asked the questioner’s name.

In a gruff and aggressive voice, the man replied, “Juno!”

Onua nodded and continued to smile as she explained, “Of course I understand, Juno.” She inhaled deeply. “But *you* must understand we have to be given time to study the planet first.” She turned her head from Juno to address the whole audience. “There is so much we need to learn: the general planetary ecology and more specific regional changes. We have to understand the balance of life there, as well as properly investigate data that is vital to our survival. For instance, data with regard what is edible and what is not? It is far too soon for us to trample through that alien world. On Original Earth we understood too late how delicate the relationships between life forms had been, both fauna and flora. On Original Earth it was we humans who destroyed the balance in so many ways and we need to understand that and accept it was a lesson to us all. *We*, together, as one, have to ensure we have learned from the mistakes made by our ancestors. We must understand fully this planet we are currently calling *Earth 2* before we allow anyone to disembark this spaceship.”

“Prison, you mean!” Juno snapped back.

In a calm voice, Alea, the head of education, asked, “And how long will you need, Onua?”

“Five years,” the head scientist stated bluntly and paused as she listened to the loud gasps echo through the crowd “You must all understand there is so much data we need to collect and collate,” she finished, forced to raise her voice.

Emrys reached out with his hands spread wide, motioning downwards in an effort to calm everyone. Many were shouting in outrage, but slowly they settled back down. He raked a hand through his sandy brown hair and his blue eyes appealed for the people to listen. He wore the plain blue uniform of an engineer with shoulder insignia that told everyone he was the head of his department. “As Juno pointed out, we, as well as our parents and their parents before them, have spent our entire lives living on this spaceship; is five more years so terrible?”

“And I promise,” Onua added. “Once my department is happy, we will disembark sooner. Five years is just a guess at the moment.”

The murmurings of discontent continued to grow louder with Juno heckling the loudest. Security personnel appeared beside Onua and Emrys forming a ring around the couple as they exited the stage.

Jen, the head of security, a tall, slender, attractive woman with her auburn hair cropped short, whispered in Onua’s ear. “Commander Penta has asked to see you.”

On the Bridge, Penta welcomed his senior crew with a compressed smile that spoke volumes he was not a happy man. “I don’t think it was wise to state five years, Onua. It is, perhaps, an unreasonable expectation.”

“Well, I did clarify it could well be a lot sooner,” she muttered.

“Yes,” Emrys nodded, placing an arm around Onua’s shoulders. “She said it was just a guess.”

Penta inhaled deeply and looked out to space and the planet that represented the hopes, dreams and aspirations of everyone aboard the ship. “Understood. Okay,” he stated with authority. “This is what we’ll do.” He turned to the couple as Meni entered the Bridge. He met Onua’s eyes. “You’ll establish a safe zone where people can visit the planet for a couple of days, maybe a week. We’ll get a schedule plan in motion and then I’ll announce it. That should calm everyone.”

Meni smiled at Onua. “I agree with your having been honest. They’re the ones being unreasonable. It’s crazy to think we can just charge down there. So many dangers we don’t understand or can even anticipate. Crazy.”

“There’s many who are disappointed,” Emrys nodded. “Onua and myself understand that. Our daughter Anu is pleading with her mother to take her to the surface when she goes down to do research.”

Penta nodded, his face serious. “Let’s first focus on an area where we can begin to establish a community. We need to offer the people a place to visit whilst you conduct your research on the planet as a whole?”

Onua sighed and smiled. “Of course. I’ll organise a team to go down in the next couple of days. Priority will be plant samples, to check what’s poisonous etcetera, and any life forms that offer a threat.”

“Okay,” Emrys added. “The place we choose will need to have access to water and land that will...” He looked at Onua. “Did you mention something called crops?”

Onua nodded enthusiastically. “We’ll need to establish ourselves on land where we can grow crops. Crops are different edible plants that will be sustainable food.”

Penta smacked his lips and asked the spaceship’s computer, “Control, have you enough data to advise us on a suitable location to establish a community.” He glanced at his colleagues. “If memory serves, I think they were called townships on Original Earth.”

Two

The next morning, friends of Anu and Jac were sniggering as they watched their classmates walking to school hand-in-hand. Tonu was clutching Anu’s free hand when a loud explosion shook the spaceship.

Then a piercing wailing noise hurt Anu’s ears, causing her to pull her hand away from Jac as she used it to cover one ear whilst gripping Tonu’s hand more tightly.

The children ran to school in wide-eyed terror.

The teachers were also panicking, but tried to insist the children remained calm. One teacher took Tonu’s hand and led him toward the infants class.

“I have to stay with Tonu,” Anu yelled above the noise to Jac.

One teacher demanded Anu should sit down, but she didn’t listen and ran after her little brother.

The wailing sound suddenly stopped and Anu’s mother found both her children hugging each other whilst bedlam ensued around them. Anu looked up at her mother and saw fear and panic etched deeply upon her beautiful face. Anu had never seen her mother look so terrified and immediately tears leaked from her eyes and dripped onto her cheeks.

“Por favor, no ahora, mi amor.” – then she switched to English. – “We need to get to our cube and wait for your papa.”

They ran.

Everyone was running.

Panic.

Onua carried Tonu whilst dragging her daughter by the arm. Her grip was so tight it hurt and Anu yelped loudly when she kept falling into people, but her mother continued to drag her until she managed to find her feet again.

The cube was their home. It could be one big room or five separate rooms if need be; Anu’s father would simply organise panels that folded up or down and became part of the walls or ceiling. And the cube also acted as an escape pod and would detach itself from the main body of the ship in an emergency.

Once inside their cube, Onua released her daughter’s arm and Anu vigorously rubbed away the purple marks left by her mother’s grip.

“I’m sorry, mi amor. With everyone running around like that, I couldn’t risk losing you in the crush. I love you too much.”

Anu grimaced, then squigged her mouth thoughtfully. “What was the loud bang, Mama?”

“I don’t know. I’m hoping your papa can tell us.”

Tonu began to cry. His mother hugged him close. His hair was just like Anu’s, a chocolate-brown corkscrewed sponge of sprung curls that flattened against his mama’s face. “I know, this is frightening for you, mi amor.” She pulled Anu into the embrace. “For you both. Everything will be okay, I’m sure.”

And then Anu’s father burst into the cube. He gushed a deep sigh of relief. His sandy brown hair was wet with sweat that bubbled on the creamy skin of his forehead.

“You’re all here!” he muttered. “Thank goodness. Comms are down and I need to go back, because we’re in a state of chaos down there. You must all stay here until I return.”

“Papa,” Anu yelped, pulling away from her mama and running to him. “What was the loud bang and that wailing noise?”

Her father knelt down and hugged her. “It was an explosion, darling. The wailing noise was a siren to warn us of danger.”

“It hurt my head,” Anu muttered, snuggling her face against her father’s chest.

Emrys looked up at Onua. “I need to go back and assess the damage. As I said, comms are down and I needed to ensure you are all okay first.”

“Anyone hurt?” Anu’s mother asked.

Emrys rose to his feet with Anu still in his arms.

He embraced his beautiful partner and put Anu down as he sighed heavily. He held Onua’s intense gaze. His pale blue eyes cracked upon deep sadness as he replied, “Beki’s team, so far as I know at the moment.”

“What! Tengi was in Beki’s team! Will they be okay?” Onua asked.

“No,” he stated, with a terse shake of his head, his lips compressed.

“Tengi...” Onua sighed softly. “He was your best friend. Does Antia know?”

“I think it will be me who has to tell her, but first we must establish the extent of the damage.”

“I want to be with you when you tell her. She’ll need me,” Onua insisted, her brown eyes filling with tears.

“I understand, but I must assess and then report the damage to Penta. He’s called an emergency meeting.”

“I need to be there,” Onua muttered.

“Better to stay with the children at the moment, don’t you think? I’ll explain.”

Anu clung to her father’s waist as her parents kissed and her father had to gently push her away.

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On the top tier, inside the spaceship’s control bridge, Commander Penta gazed around the circular dome room that not only housed the spaceship’s bridge, but also doubled as a boardroom. He watched the head of every department file in and take their place.

Emrys, the head of engineering, was placed at the far end of the fluorescent table where virtual documents were being passed around. The documents seemed to slide below the table’s glowing surface.

One head of department’s seat was empty.

Penta called down to Emrys. “Where’s Onua?”

“With our children, Anu and Tonu. At the moment there is no one to take care of them, Commander.”

“We need her here. Alea, you’re head of education, can you get a member of your staff to go to Onua’s cube and take over care of the children?”

Control had now re-established communications and Alea immediately asked the computer to locate and contact Beca.

Beca answered immediately. “Alea?”

“Beca, can you go to Onua’s cube and care for her children whilst she attends an emergency meeting?”

“I’m alone with my own children at the moment.”

“Can you take them with you?”

“Uh, okay, yes. I’m heading to Onua now.”

“Thank you,” Alea stated.

“Okay, so Onua will be with us shortly,” Commander Penta nodded, his hand scratching his neck. “We can begin and she can catch up. Right, what is the damage, Emrys?”

“Extensive,” the head of engineering stated bluntly. “There’s two big holes in tiers two and three. Over a hundred and twenty-six years of bacterial and algae maintenance ruined. In my opinion we’ll need to abandon ship. I’ve airlocked both tiers, but this spaceship relies on the algae vats and bacterial tubes, we can’t replenish food nor fuel without them.”

Commander Penta sighed deeply. “We still have solar sails with which to orbit, so food is the big issue?”

Emrys shrugged. “And oxygen, of course.”

Commander Penta burred his lips. “Any idea what caused it, Emrys?”

“Sabotage,” Emrys stated matter-of-factly. “We know there are groups who were seriously unhappy about the five years Onua requested.”

Commander Penta nodded thoughtfully. “Okay, we’ll need to investigate who did this and bring them to account but it would seem Onua isn’t going to get five years ... Okay,” he repeated, “everyone aboard must prepare to disembark.” He nodded at Jen, the head of security. “Jen, we’ll need all the recorded footage for the past two days and I’ll need you to begin an investigation.”

“Understood, Commander.”

“Mali, how long will our food supply last, now we can’t produce anymore?”

“A month, possibly more with rationing,” Mali responded.

“Okay, we’ll need a good supply of food whilst we organise ourselves down there. So, let’s say, everyone disembarks in two-days and gather at a location we’ll agree upon within the next few hours.” He paused and forced a smile. “Mali, you together with Onua and her team, will assess what’s edible down there as a matter of priority. I’m sorry you don’t have much time.”

He turned to Meni. “Can you ask Juno to come to the bridge? Now we’ve lost Beki’s team, It’ll have to be his team that steps up and begins construction of the base. And did you find out what’s in those two containers? They’re supposed to be full of materials and equipment necessary to build a base with stocks for all sorts of things. Possibly there’s food in them as well?”

Meni shook her head. “We don’t know what’s happened to the original documents. Control is scanning the database, but so far nothing...”

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They met in Juno’s personal cube.

Hessi, Juno’s life partner, a round woman with ample breasts, poured the three men a cup of raq each.

“Soon we’ll be able to grow grapes and make proper wine,” Juno, a short, rotund man, muttered, taking a sip. “I’ve read about wine. On Original Earth people would pay a fortune for it.”

Cristo, a tall, slightly built man, laughed. “Be great to try anything that isn’t algae! Raq is okay, but it’s all we’ve ever known.”

“Precisely why I had no intention of waiting five years for that Onua woman to waste my time with her science stuff!” Juno agreed.

“So, what’s *pay* mean, boss?” Dendin, a solidly built six-footer, asked.

Juno smiled sourly. “On Original Earth people bought everything for a thing called money. They exchanged their time for this money. From what I’ve read, the more you worked the more money you were given.”

“Oh,” Dendin muttered, his forehead furrowed in a deep frown.

Cristo nodded thoughtfully. “Sounds fair enough.”

“Fair’s not a word I’d use. From what I’ve read, seems to me the people at the top paid themselves huge amounts whilst paying their workers next to nothing in comparison. But if you’re the boss, it’s great, isn’t it.” Juno chuckled to himself. “And it’s something we’ll introduce down there.” He laughed loudly. “They think they’re better than us, so it’ll be a shock having to work for their food and water.”

Dendin and Chun, a big bear-like man, half-laughed without really understanding what it was they were laughing at.

“So, what’s next, boss?” Chun asked.

Juno sat up. “The plan was a big success. We’ve taken out the algae vats and a bit of luck fell our way and we blew a hole in the floor and the blast has put the bacterial tubes out of action. They’ll have to abandon ship.”

“Did you plan to take out Beki’s team, boss?” Dendin asked.

Juno glared at him. “Yes. I planned it. It was necessary. It was key to my plan. Because I’m next in line to Beki. It was critical I was put in charge of building this base camp or town as I heard Penta call it. It had to be done. I detonated when I knew Beki’s team were in place.” He shrugged. “Never liked Beki anyway. I told you before, once on the ground, we’ll take control of the water, which means we’ll be in control full stop.”

Cristo laughed again, this time awkwardly. “I think Penta will have something to say about that.”

“I already have a plan to deal with Penta. I told you, I’ve been planning this for years. It’s why I started the Christian group, so we’ll have plenty of support on the ground.” He met each man’s eyes in turn. “But, Cristo’s right, Penta will have the loyalty of his security people, so he can’t survive for my plan to work. We’ll take him out first thing in the morning after we’ve set off in the first shuttle with the two containers holding the equipment to build this base. So, you, Cristo, will once again hack into Bridge control and alter the calibration of the security cameras and we’ll set the device.”

Dendin shifted uneasily. “Isn’t there another way, boss? Penta’s been okay to us.”

“Don’t question me! If you’re not with me, you’re against me!” Juno snapped.

Dendin put his hand up defensively. “No, no, I’m with you all the way, boss,” he whimpered.

“Good,” Juno growled. “Those with me will be handsomely rewarded. We’ve been subjugated to this unfair system, where the privileged rule, our whole lives. That has to change. My father before me planned the change in power and had explained to me what we needed to do when we did find a new planet to call home. He used what he’d called a metaphor: ‘Son,’ he’d said to me on many occasions. ‘You don’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs.’”

Juno’s three guests scratched their heads, puzzled.

It was Chun who spoke up. “Boss,” he grimaced his upper lip curling upon the question, “What’s an omelette and eggs?”

*

Anu listened to her parents talking. She was always being told not to listen to adult conversations, but she sensed everything that was happening now was very serious, so she pricked her ears and tuned into their whispering voices.

“Juno is at the heart of this, I just know it. He’s a trouble maker,” she heard her father mutter.

“You mustn’t accuse anyone without proof,” her mother responded firmly.

“I know, I know,” her father sighed.

“Wait to see if Jen has visual footage of anyone acting suspiciously around the decks shortly before the explosion.”

“She must have something! Whatever device was used did not find its way there on its own. Someone had to have done something; probably placed a bomb or something like that. Call it what you want; whatever it was didn’t just appear there.”

“No, but you’re too upset about this and quite rightly, but leave it to Jen to investigate.”

“Niska told me about a rumour he’d heard: apparently Juno is head of some religious cult who meet in secret.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” Anu heard her mother reply. “Those sort of rumours are always circulating.”

“I know, but we know how destructive religious doctrines are. Just look at Original Earth’s history. One religion forcing its doctrine on the rest of the world caused so many wars. It’s divisive, which is why it was banned aboard this spaceship right from the start by Hugo Denning.”

“Yes, I agree with it being banned, but it was always unrealistic to expect we could stamp it out altogether. It’s too ingrained in human psyche.”

Emrys felt a hand brush his leg. He looked down to see Anu standing beside him. “My dearest,” he muttered. “You should be in bed fast asleep.”

“What’s religion, Papa?” she asked, rubbing her eyes tiredly.

Onua frowned at her partner. “See? We shouldn’t talk about this stuff.” She picked Anu up and kissed her cheek. “It’s nothing for you to worry your funny little head over, mi amor. Come on, I’ll tuck you back into bed.”

Anu giggled and wrapped her arms around her mother’s shoulder as she snuggled her face into her neck. “My head isn’t funny, is it?”

Three

Juno pressed his short, rotund body tightly against the wall. He and his colleague Chun had entered the top deck via the elevator shaft. They hadn’t used the elevator itself, but climbed the maintenance ladders within the shaft. There were cameras monitoring activity, but they had been easy for Cristo to hack into and change the movement alert calibration. Now they only activated with ridiculously fast movement. He’d done the same calibration to the cameras on the helm deck, but Juno wasn’t taking any chances and kept himself pressed against the wall.

Commander Penta was on the bridge talking with Meni.

“I think we need to begin to finish-up here,” Penta muttered disconsolately as he wrapped an arm around his number two. They’d kept their relationship secret, but had decided, once settled in the base community, they’d announce their union to everyone. “As we planned, I want you to go down with the second landing party and supervise. I’ll stay aboard until the last shuttle leaves.”

“It’s strange,” Meni stated flatly, leaning into his embrace. “It’s been home for generations.” She paused as she considered the fact, they really were leaving the spaceship. She looked at Penta and chewed her lower lip, her eyebrows raised to emphasise her sadness. “I’m thinking of my ancestors, way back. They landed in a country called the United States of America at a place called Ellis Island. It must have been like landing on an alien planet for them ... It’s going to feel very strange ...”

Juno didn’t stop to listen to anymore. He and his crew were the first landing party and he didn’t plan on being supervised by anyone, especially that Meni woman.

The blue algae tubes fluoresced along the walls of the deck as they did on all the decks. The walls were opaque, but there were controls that could clear the opaqueness on certain panels for viewing the galaxy through which they travelled. The panels had been in constant use since the spaceship had begun orbiting the new planet, but since the explosion everyone was staying in the safety of their cubes and now the decks were vacant during this sleep period.

The blue algae tubes had oxygen release monitors so the inhabitants weren’t breathing in pure oxygen. The monitors automatically diverted excess oxygen to the storage tanks. Cristo had hacked the controls and at a quarter to seven the release valve would open to max and flood the Bridge with oxygen. Below the valve Juno placed a small handmade device that would create a spark. The plan was to blow-up the whole deck. The device was remotely triggered by a code that Juno would send when the shuttle-craft, he, his family and team were aboard, was at a safe distance. Juno was leaving with the first landing party on the dot of seven. The second landing party, which would include Meni, was scheduled to leave at eight.

Juno and Chun made their way back to the elevator shaft, satisfied the job was done. Juno was going to be in control at the base on this new planet and control meant the power to make the decisions. He’d planned for this.

The original inhabitants aboard the spaceship had continued to live to the twenty-four-hour Original Earth clock in an attempt to retain some sort of normality and during the one hundred and twenty-six years no one had seen any reason to change it.

*

The first landing party left the ship on schedule. It carried fifty people and the two massive containers full of the equipment necessary to build a base. Juno’s father had told his son that the containers would have to be holding weapons of some sort, because the people would have to be able to defend themselves against any dangers they may encounter and he’d drummed into his son how important it was to get their hands on the weapons before anyone else had a chance.

The shuttle had travelled for a good three minutes before Juno sent the code to the device.

The explosion lit up the blackness of space and most of the people aboard cried out in horror, whilst the faces of individuals in the know remained deadpan and a few squeezed their eyes closed.

*

Anu awoke to a loud bang and the same wailing noise she'd heard before. Her papa had told her it was a siren and the awful noise felt like it was trying to force its way into her head. She clamped her hands over her ears. The deafening sound caused her eyes to widen and her mouth to gape. Her mother suddenly appeared by her side.

"Mi amor, we must leave the ship now. There's an emergency."

"That noise hurts," Anu whimpered.

Her mother hefted her up into her arms. Anu was only wearing her night suit. The day suit she had been wearing the day before, her mother grabbed from the table beside her bed where she'd neatly folded it before tucking the single sheet around her daughter.

On a second thought, Onua grabbed the single sheet as well. "I'll wrap this around you after strapping you securely into the travel seat," she soothed.

The main living area of the cube Anu had always known as home had changed. The settee, as her mother called it – her father always referred to the long comfy seat as a sofa – had moved position and was now more central, and, as Anu watched, a frame emerged from the back of the settee with straps attached and the screen, where she and Tonu had played games, now displayed some sort of control panel. Anu and Tonu had had to share the screen with their mother, who, it seemed, was constantly chatting to someone as she'd watched them play.

Her mother sat her down and placed straps around her and clicked them locked, whilst her father did the same to Tonu. With the children secure, Onua and Emrys sat themselves either side of their children and strapped themselves in.

A face Anu vaguely recognised came on a square of the screen. It was a security woman. Anu could tell that because of the grey uniform. She had short, auburn hair, cropped close and the style suited her bright, sparkling eyes.

"I think I know her," Anu muttered.

"Her name's Jen. She's in charge of security," her father informed her.

"This is an announcement to everyone," Jen stated. "The Bridge has gone. It has to be assumed Commander Penta was at the helm and we've lost him because I can't get a reply from his comm. I can't get a response from Meni either. I assume she was with Penta at the time of the explosion. We are on our own and must perform an emergency evacuation. This is new to all of us and we have never used the equipment that has altered our personal cubes. Due to overcrowding, many haven't got personal cubes and they are being ushered by security personnel to awaiting shuttles as I speak. I have sent everyone the coordinates for the target area of the base that will shortly be under construction by Juno and his team. Input that data to your cube's control. Each cube has two days of fuel and oxygen and there is also, hopefully, a ration supply of algae and water. Good luck to you all. See you down there. Take care of each other and be safe."

Anu saw her parents look at each other, fear emitting loudly in their eyes.

"Here goes," her father muttered and he tapped a series of numbers onto the screen and then pressed another button that was green and he stated a command, "Activate ejection sequence."

"Processing... Activating," the cube Control responded.

The window they were facing suddenly cleared from the opaqueness and they could see the stars and part of the planet that would now be home regardless of any data so far collated.

Suddenly, Anu felt a force pin her to her seat as the cube propelled into space. Anu couldn't move the force was so strong. She felt her mother's hand grip hers and tried to turn her head to look at her, but couldn't move.

Slowly the force eased and she was finally able to look up at her mother, who smiled and squeezed her hand and reached over with her free hand to stroke the springs of tresses from her daughter's forehead.

"You're a brave girl, mi amor."

Anu looked over to her brother who was sat as if frozen, his eyes wide open, staring straight ahead. Anu shook his shoulder and he looked at her and burst into tears.

Anu watched her father hug her brother and kiss the top of his head. "Now, now, son. Be brave like your big sister."

The planet they were approaching was getting bigger and bigger. It was deep blue and deep green. The thought appeared in Anu's head that she'd never seen anything more beautiful. She'd never experienced such intense colours. She felt frightened and excited both at the same time and she found that confusing.

"Open comms to all cubes," her father ordered Control.

Suddenly the screen was full of anxious faces. Emrys saw Jen and addressed her directly.

"Jen, can you confirm Commander Penta didn't make it?"

Jen nodded her head, compressing her lips sadly. "He was on the Bridge Deck with Meni giving her final instructions. I waited at the elevator for as long as I could. No one came down. The security systems automatically sealed the deck. I think the Bridge has completely gone."

In the window Anu watched one cube suddenly light up with flames. "Papa, that cube is on fire!"

Her father looked at the window. "It's okay, darling. It's just entered the planet's atmosphere and friction occurs."

"The cubes are designed to withstand the very high temperatures the friction creates," her mama added.

"Yes, hopefully these cubes haven't deteriorated with age," her father half-laughed, although not finding it at all funny.

"Mi amor!" her mother berated. "The children didn't need to hear that."

Soon it was their turn to enter the atmosphere. Anu covered her eyes when flames seemed to burn across the clear window. She squeezed her fingers open and peeked through. The window was now just a deep red. She watched the flames slowly recede and the window clear. Then all she could see was bright blue all around with the ocean below starting to come into view. At least she thought it was an ocean; she'd learned at school the difference between a lake and an ocean, but those lessons had been about Original Earth and she knew this planet might be different. The sea seemed to be approaching very quickly. She noticed in the corner of her eye, her father looking panicked. He flayed his hands at her mother.

"Control has switched off!" he gasped. "We're heading straight down."

"Call for help!" her mother screamed.

"Control, where are you!?" her father yelled at the now blank screen. "Can anyone hear me?"

Anu watched her father bite his lip and rub his fingers vigorously through his hair.

He tried again. "Hello. Can anyone hear me?"

Again, there was no response.

"Control? Answer me?" Emrys demanded, his eyes blinking in wild panic. "We've lost comms and flight control," he muttered to his family. "I'm going to turn the engine off and restart. Hopefully it will re-boot Control?"

The sea was very close now. Anu could see the waves. She'd played on a beach in the storybook cubes, but that had all been an illusion and not real. This was real.

"It's too late to restart the engine. Brace for impact!" Emrys yelled.

"Oh, no," her mother whimpered and hugged Anu.

Anu met her mother's eyes and smiled.

Her mother noticed a steely glint twinkle in the corner of her daughter's eye as Anu whispered, "I'm not afraid, Mama."

The cube hit the sea with a loud thud that shuddered through Anu's bones and suddenly everything was topsy turvy.

Anu had heard her mother scream upon impact. She and Tonu were dangling upside down, held by the straps. Her mother wasn't moving. Her father groaned and released himself and Anu watched him fall to the ceiling below.

"Mama's not moving, Papa," she told him.

Her father quickly got to his feet and hefted Onua up a bit so he could release her strap and then gently lowered her to the ceiling. Anu and Tonu watched whilst still upside down.

Her father opened one eye and then felt for a pulse and then Onua came back to consciousness with a gasp and a cry of pain.

"Are the children okay?" she managed to splutter and then saw them both, dangling above, staring at her. "Oh, mis amores. Don't worry, Mama's okay."

"Where does it hurt, darling?" Emrys asked.

"My chest. It's painful to even breathe," Onua moaned and tried to sit up. She screamed as pain stabbed into her.

"Stay still, my love," Emrys soothed. "I need to try and get the cube upright, but right now you're lying on the ceiling."

"Papa, can you get me and Tonu down?" Anu asked.

Emrys rubbed a hand over his face. "No, I need you both to hold tight whilst I try to get the cube turned over by starting the engine... If it will start." He looked down at Onua. "Darling, I'm going to slide you close to that wall and as the cube turns, we'll try and slide down together as gently as we can, okay?"

Anu watched her mother nod her head and bite her lip against the pain she knew would come.

Emrys pushed his partner against the wall and Onua only flinched twice.

Next Emrys looked at the upside-down data screen and crossed his fingers as he clung to the hope Tonu would recover. It was the only hope they had.

Tense with nerves, he breathed in deeply then said, "Control? Respond, Control?"

The screen began to flicker frantically, then came to life, but the screens were blank.

"Control, can you hear me? Can anyone hear me?" Emrys pleaded at the blank screen.

Nothing.

"Please answer," Emrys persisted, his tone cracking on his desperation.

No response.

Emrys sighed heavily. "Please talk to me, Control?" He'd heard the whimper in his own voice. He tried to swallow down the panic he felt. His thoughts were jumbled, struggling to make sense of his families alarming predicament.

Anu could see her papa was terribly afraid. "Papa? Can I do anything, Papa?"

“Darling, please give me a moment to think,” Emrys implored, hearing his own words echo on the hopelessness he now felt.

Control’s voice crackled ... At first it was unintelligible, then became more comprehensible. “Control functioning,” the cube AI finally stated.

His voice flooded with overwhelming relief, Emrys demanded, “What happened?”

“Processing ... Insufficient data,” Control responded.

Emrys rubbed his hand vigorously over his head and then blew hard, puffing his cheeks. They were still in a terrible situation, but it was no longer hopeless. “Okay, at least we have you back, Control. Now prepare to reboot and start the engine upon my command.” Then he lay down beside Onua and prepared to take her weight when or rather if the engine started.

“Control, reboot and re-start the engine,” he commanded.

“Processing... Rebooting... Starting the engine...”

All Anu could hear was a sort of bubbling noise as the cube began to right itself. It turned slowly at first and then flipped over with a loud slap. Emrys managed to take Onua’s weight, but it was still with a jarring thud his feet hit the floor and Onua screamed into his ear.

After laying his life partner down, Emrys looked over to the children. “You two okay?” he asked.

“Yes, Papa,” Anu stated, still strapped into her seat, but upright now.

“They’re light, so didn’t suffer on impact. It was our weight that did the damage. My ribs are hurting as well.”

“I think I’ve broken some ribs and maybe punctured a lung,” Onua groaned and squeezed her eyes shut.

Emrys made Onua as comfortable as possible and grabbed a cushion for her head. Then he released Anu and Tonu from their straps and asked Anu to hold her mother’s head still, explaining, she may have suffered a neck injury.

Anu hurried to kneel at Onua’s head and clasped two hands firmly over each ear, squashing the sponge halo of her mother’s hair.

Tonu jumped onto his mother and hugged her.

“Tonu, no!” Anu shouted and her father quickly lifted his son off.

Onua gasped, her face scrunched on excruciating agony.

“Tonu,” Emrys berated his son. “Can’t you see your mama is badly hurt?”

Tonu began to cry. “I wanted to give her a hug to make her better like she does to me.”

Emrys sat Tonu down beside his mother and Onua took her son’s hand.

“It’s alright, mi amor,” she soothed, her voice shaky.

Anu watched her father look through the window, his face etched with anxiety. “Where are we, Papa?”

“That’s just what I was going to ask,” he replied, forcing a smile. “Control, what is our current location and can you tell me how far we are from land and the base location?”

“Processing ... Indeterminate,” was the unhelpful response.

“Come on,” Emrys insisted. “We’ve been scanning this planet for a little over a week now. You must have some idea?”

“Upon atmospheric entry, co-ordinates were lost along with the most recently collated data.”

Anu’s father clicked his tongue and huffed. “Are you able to scan for the nearest land?”

Control was silent for a moment. “Processing ... Scanning ...” More silence. “Land has been detected approximately twenty kilometres away.”

“How long to get us there?”

“Processing ... Not enough data was saved to determine wind and tide, so time of arrival indeterminate.”

“Okay, can you head there as quickly as you can?”

“Processing ... Setting course ... On course.”