



PART ONE

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EXOGENESIS

*O goddess-born of great Anchises' line,
The gates of hell are open night and day;
Smooth the descent, and easy is the way:
But to return, and view the cheerful skies,
In this the task and mighty labor lies.*

—AENEID 6.126-129

JOHN DRYDEN TRANSLATION

CHAPTER I

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DREAMS

1.

The orange gas giant, Zeus, hung low above the horizon, huge and heavy and glowing with a ruddy half-light. Around it glittered a field of stars, bright against the black of space, while beneath the giant's lidless glare stretched a grey wasteland streaked with stone.

A small huddle of buildings stood in the otherwise desolate expanse. Domes and tunnels and windowed enclosures, a lone place of warmth and life amid the alien environment.

Inside the compound's cramped lab, Kira struggled to extract the gene sequencer from its alcove in the wall. The machine wasn't that large, but it was heavy, and she couldn't get a good grip on it.

"Dammit," she muttered, and readjusted her stance.

Most of their equipment would stay on Adrasteia, the Earth-sized moon they had spent the past four months surveying. Most of their equipment, but not all. The gene sequencer was part of a xenobiologist's basic kit, and where she went, it went. Besides, the colonists who would soon be arriving on the *Shakti-Uma-Sati* would have newer, better models, not the budget, travel-sized one the company had stuck her with.

Kira pulled again. Her fingers slipped, and she sucked in her breath as one of the metal edges sliced her palm. She let go and, upon examining her hand, saw a thin line of blood oozing through the skin.

Her lips curled in a snarl, and she hit the gene sequencer, hard. That didn't help. Keeping her injured hand knotted in a fist, she paced the lab, breathing heavily while she waited for the pain to subside.

Most days the machine's resistance wouldn't bother her. Most days. But today, dread and sadness outran reason. They would be leaving in the morning,

taking off to rejoin their transport, the *Fidanza*, which was already in orbit around Adra. A few days more, and she and everyone else in the ten-person survey team would get into cryo, and when they woke up at 61 Cygni, twenty-six days later, they would each go their separate ways, and that would be the last she would see of Alan for . . . for how long, she didn't know. Months, at least. If they were unlucky, over a year.

Kira closed her eyes, let her head fall back. She sighed, and the sigh turned into a groan. It didn't matter how many times she and Alan had done this dance; it wasn't getting any easier. The opposite in fact, and she hated it, really hated it.

They'd met the previous year on a large asteroid the Lapsang Trading Corp. was planning to mine. Alan had been there to conduct a geological survey. Four days—that was how long they'd spent together on the asteroid. It had been Alan's laugh and his mess of coppery hair that caught her attention, but it was his careful diligence that impressed Kira. He was good at what he did, and he didn't lose his calm in an emergency.

Kira had been alone for so long at that point, she'd been convinced she would never find someone. And yet seemingly by a miracle, Alan had entered her life, and just like that, there had been someone to care for. Someone who cared for her.

They'd continued to talk, sending long holo messages across the stars, and through a combination of luck and bureaucratic maneuvering, they'd managed to get posted together several more times.

It wasn't enough. For either of them.

Two weeks ago, they'd applied to corporate for permission to be assigned to the same missions as a couple, but there was no guarantee their request would be approved. The Lapsang Corp. was expanding in too many areas, with too many projects. Personnel were spread thin.

If their request was denied . . . the only way they'd be able to live together long term would be to change jobs, find ones that didn't require so much travel. Kira was willing—she'd even checked listings on the net the previous week—but she didn't feel as if she could ask Alan to give up his career with the company for her. Not yet.

In the meantime, all they could do was wait for the verdict from corporate. With how long it took for messages to get back to Alpha Centauri and the slowness of the HR Department, the soonest they could expect an answer was the end of next month. And by then, both she and Alan would have been shipped off in different directions.

It was frustrating. Kira's one consolation was Alan himself; he made it all worthwhile. She just wanted to *be* with him, without having to worry about the other nonsense.

She remembered the first time he'd wrapped his arms around her and how wonderful it felt, how warm and safe. And she thought of the letter he'd written her after their first meeting, of all the vulnerable, heartfelt things he'd said. No one had ever made such an effort with her before. . . . He'd always had time for her. Always shown her kindness in ways large and small, like the custom case he'd made for her chip-lab before her trip up to the Arctic.

The memories would have made Kira smile. But her hand still hurt, and she couldn't forget what the morning would bring.

"Come on, you bastard," she said, and strode over to the gene sequencer and yanked on it with all her strength.

With a screech of protest, it moved.

2.

That night, the team gathered in the mess hall to celebrate the end of the mission. Kira was in no mood for festivities, but tradition was tradition. Whether or not it went well, finishing an expedition was an occasion worth marking.

She'd put on a dress—green, with gold trim—and spent an hour fixing her hair into a pile of curls high on her head. It wasn't much, but she knew Alan would appreciate the effort. He always did.

She was right. The moment he saw her in the corridor outside her cabin, his face lit up, and he swept her into his arms. She buried her forehead into the front of his shirt and said, "You know, we don't *have* to go."

"I know," he said, "but we should put in an appearance." And he kissed her on the forehead.

She forced a smile. "Fine, you win."

"That's my girl." He smiled back and tucked a stray curl behind her left ear.

Kira did the same with one of his locks. It never ceased to amaze her how bright his hair was against his pale skin. Unlike the rest of them, Alan never seemed to tan, no matter how long he spent outside or under a spaceship's full-spectrum lights.

"Alright," she said in a low voice. "Let's do this."

The mess hall was full when they arrived. The other eight members of the

survey team were crammed in around the narrow tables, some of Yugo's beloved scamrock was blasting over the speakers, Marie-Élise was handing out cups filled with punch from the large plastic bowl on the counter, and Jenan was dancing as if he'd had a liter of rotgut. Maybe he had.

Kira tightened her arm around Alan's waist and did her best to put on a cheery expression. Now wasn't the time to dwell on depressing thoughts.

It wasn't . . . but she couldn't help it.

Seppo headed straight for them. The botanist had pulled back his hair into a topknot for the night's event, which only accentuated the angles of his thin-boned face. "Four hours," he said, coming close. The drink slopped out of his cup as he gestured. "Four hours! That's how long it took me to dig my crawler free."

"Sorry, Seppo," said Alan, sounding amused. "I told you, we couldn't get to you before then."

"Bah. I had *sand* in my skinsuit. Do you know how uncomfortable that was? I'm rubbed raw in half a dozen places. Look!" He pulled up the fringe of his ratty shirt to show a red line of skin across his belly where the lower seam of his skinsuit had chafed.

Kira said, "Tell you what, I'll buy you a drink on Vyyborg to make up for it. How about that?"

Seppo lifted a hand and pointed in her general direction. "That . . . would be acceptable compensation. But no more sand!"

"No more sand," she agreed.

"And you," said Seppo, swinging his finger toward Alan. "You . . . know."

As the botanist tottered off, Kira looked up at Alan. "What was that about?"

Alan chuckled. "No idea. But it's sure going to be strange not having him around."

"Yeah."

After a round of drinks and conversation, Kira retreated to the back of the room and leaned against a corner. As much as she didn't want to lose Alan—again—she also didn't want to say farewell to the rest of the team. The four months on Adra had forged them into a family. An odd, misshapen family, but one she cared for all the same. Leaving them would hurt, and the closer that moment came, the more Kira realized just how much it was going to hurt.

She took another long drink of the orange-flavored punch. She'd been through this before—Adra wasn't the first prospective colony the company had posted her to—and after seven years spent jetting around from one blasted

rock to another, Kira had begun to feel a serious need for . . . friends. Family. Companionship.

And now she was about to leave all that behind. *Again.*

Alan felt the same. She could see it in his eyes as he moved around the room, chatting with members of the team. She thought perhaps some of the others were also sad, but they papered over it with drink and dance and laughs that were too shrill to be entirely genuine.

She made a face and downed the rest of the punch. Time for a refill.

The scramrock was pounding louder than before. Something by Todash and the Boys, and their lead singer was howling, “—to fleeee. And there’s nothing at the door. Hey, there’s nothing at the door. Babe, what’s that knocking at the door?” and her voice was climbing to a wavering, saw-blade crescendo that sounded as if her vocal cords were about to snap.

Kira pushed herself away from the wall and was about to start for the punch bowl when she saw Mendoza, the expedition boss, clearing a path toward her. Easy for him; he was built like a barrel. She’d often wondered if he’d grown up on a high-g colony like Shin-Zar, but Mendoza denied it when she asked, claimed he was from a hab-ring somewhere around Alpha Centauri. She wasn’t entirely sure she believed him.

“Kira, need to talk with you,” he said, coming near.

“What?”

“We have a problem.”

She snorted. “There’s *always* a problem.”

Mendoza shrugged and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief he pulled from the back pocket of his pants. His forehead reflected bright spots from the strings of colored lights draped across the ceiling, and there were blotches under his arms. “Can’t say you’re wrong, but this needs fixing. One of the drones down south went dead. Looks like a storm took it out.”

“So? Send another one.”

“They’re too far away, and we don’t have time to print a replacement. Last thing the drone detected was some organic material along the coastline. Needs to be checked before we leave.”

“Oh come on. You really want me to head out *tomorrow*? I’ve already cataloged every microbe on Adra.” A trip like that would cost her the morning with Alan, and Kira was damned if she was going to give up any of their remaining time together.

Mendoza gave her a steady, *are you bullshitting me* look from under his

brows. “Regs are regs, Kira. We can’t risk the colonists running into something nasty. Something like the Scourge. You don’t want that on your conscience. You really don’t.”

She went to take another drink and realized her cup was still empty. “Jesus. Send Ivanova. The drones are hers, and she can run a chip-lab as well as I can. There’s—”

“You’re going,” said Mendoza, steel in his voice. “Oh six hundred, and I don’t want to hear any more about it.” Then his expression softened somewhat. “I’m sorry, but you’re our xenobiologist, and regs—”

“And regs are regs,” said Kira. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll do it. But I’m telling you, it’s not worth it.”

Mendoza patted her on the shoulder. “Good. I hope it isn’t.”

As he left, a text popped up in the corner of Kira’s vision: *<Hey, babe, everything okay? – Alan>*

Subvocalizing her answer, she wrote: *<Yeah, all good. Just some extra work. Tell you about it later. – Kira>*

From across the room, he gave her a goofy thumbs-up, and her lips quirked despite herself. Then she fixed her gaze on the punch bowl and made a beeline for it. She really needed another drink.

Marie-Élise intercepted her at the bowl, moving with the studied grace of an ex-dancer. As always, her mouth was pulled off-center, as if she were about to break into a crooked smile . . . or deliver a scathing witticism (and Kira had heard more than a few from her). She was tall to begin with, and with the shiny black heels she’d printed for the party, she was a whole head taller than Kira.

“I’m going to miss you, *chérie*,” said Marie-Élise. She bent down and gave Kira a kiss on each cheek.

“Same here,” said Kira, feeling herself getting misty. Along with Alan, Marie-Élise had become her closest friend on the team. They’d spent long days together in the field—Kira studying the microbes of *Adrasteia* while Marie-Élise studied the lakes and rivers and the deposits of water hidden deep underground.

“Ah, cheer up now. You will message me, yes? I want to hear everything about you and Alan. And I will message you. Okay?”

“Yes. I promise.”

For the rest of the evening, Kira worked to forget the future. She danced with Marie-Élise. She swapped jokes with Jenan and barbs with Fizel. For the thousandth time, she complimented Yugo on his cooking. She arm-wrestled

Mendoza—and lost—and sang a horribly off-key duet with Ivanova. And whenever possible, she kept her arm around Alan. Even when they weren't talking or looking at each other, she could feel him, and his touch was a comfort.

Once she'd had enough punch, Kira allowed the others to talk her into pulling out her concertina. Then the canned music was put on hold and everyone gathered round—Alan by her side, Marie-Élise by her knee—while Kira played a collection of spacer's reels. And they laughed and they danced and they drank, and for a time all was good.

3.

It was well past midnight and the party was still in full swing when Alan signaled to her with a motion of his chin. Kira understood, and without a word, they slipped out of the mess hall.

They leaned on each other as they made their way through the compound, careful to keep their cups of punch from spilling. Kira wasn't used to the bare look of the corridors. Normally overlays covered them, and stacks of samples, supplies, and spare equipment sat along the walls. But all that was gone now. Over the past week, she and the rest of the team had stripped the place in preparation for leaving. . . . If not for the music echoing behind them and the dim emergency lights along the floor, the base would have seemed abandoned.

Kira shivered and hugged Alan closer. Outside the wind was howling—an eerie rushing that made the roof and walls creak.

When they arrived at the door to the hydroponics bay, Alan didn't hit the release button but looked down at her, a smile dancing about his lips.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing. Just grateful to be with you." And he gave her a quick peck on the lips.

She went for a peck of her own—the punch had put her in a *mood*—but he laughed, pulled his head away, and hit the button.

The door slid open with a solid *thunk*.

Warm air wafted over them, along with the sound of dripping water and the gentle perfume of flowering plants. The hydroponics bay was Kira's favorite place in the compound. It reminded her of home, of the long rows of hothouse gardens she'd spent time in as a kid on the colony planet of Weyland. During

long-haul expeditions like the one to Adra, it was standard procedure to grow some of their own food. Partly so they could test the viability of the native soil. Partly to reduce the amount of supplies they had to bring with them. But mostly to break the deadly monotony of the freeze-dried meal packs the company supplied them with.

Tomorrow, Seppo would rip out the plants and stuff them into the incinerator. None of them would survive until the colonists arrived, and it was bad practice to leave piles of biological material sitting around where they could—if the compound were breached—enter the environment in an uncontrolled manner. But for tonight, the hydroponics bay was still full of lettuce, radishes, parsley, tomatoes, clusters of zucchini stems, and the numerous other crops Seppo had been experimenting with on Adra.

But that wasn't all. Amid the dim racks, Kira saw seven pots laid out in an arc. In each pot stood a tall, thin stem topped with a delicate purple flower that drooped under its own weight. A cluster of pollen-tipped stamens extended from within each blossom—like bursts of fireworks—while white speckles adorned their velvety inner throats.

Midnight Constellations! Her favorite flower. Her father had raised them, and even with his horticultural talent, they had given him no end of trouble. They were temperamental, prone to scab and blight, and intolerant of the slightest imbalance of nutrients.

“Alan,” she said, overcome.

“I remembered you mentioned how much you liked them,” he said.

“But . . . how did you manage to—”

“To grow them?” He smiled at her, clearly pleased by her reaction. “Seppo helped. He had the seeds on file. We printed them out and then spent the last three weeks trying to keep the damned things from dying.”

“They're wonderful,” Kira said, not even trying to hide the emotion in her voice.

He hugged her close. “Good,” he said, his voice half-muffled in her hair. “I wanted to do something special for you before . . .”

Before. The word burned in her mind. “Thank you,” she said. She separated from him just long enough to examine the flowers; their spicy, overly sweet scent struck her with the full, staggering force of childhood nostalgia. “Thank you,” she repeated, coming back to Alan. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.” She pressed her lips against his, and for a long while, they kissed.

“Here,” said Alan when they broke for air. He pulled an insulated blanket

from under one of the racks of potato plants and spread it out within the arc of Midnight Constellations.

They settled there, cuddling and sipping their punch.

Outside, the baleful immensity of Zeus still hung overhead, visible through the clear pressure dome of the hydroponics bay. When they'd first arrived on Adra, the sight of the gas giant had filled Kira with apprehension. Every instinct in her screamed that Zeus was going to fall out of the sky and crush them. It seemed impossible anything so large could remain suspended overhead without support. In time, though, she'd grown accustomed to the sight, and now she admired the magnificence of the gas giant. It needed no overlays to catch the eye.

Before . . . Kira shivered. Before they left. Before she and Alan had to part. They'd already used up their vacation days, and the company wouldn't give them more than a few days of downtime back at 61 Cygni.

"Hey, what's wrong?" said Alan, his voice soft with sympathy.

"You know."

". . . Yeah."

"This isn't getting any easier. I thought it would, but—" She sniffed and shook her head. Adra was their fourth time shipping together, and it was by far their longest shared posting. "I don't know when I'm going to see you next, and . . . I love you, Alan, and having to say goodbye every few months really sucks."

He stared at her, serious. His hazel eyes gleamed in the light from Zeus. "So then let's not."

Her heart lurched, and for a moment, time seemed to stop. She'd been dreading that exact response for months now. When her voice started working again, she said, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, let's not do this bouncing around anymore. I can't take it either." His expression was so open, so earnest, she couldn't help but feel a flicker of hope. Surely he wasn't . . . ?

"What would—"

"Let's apply for berths on the *Shakti-Uma-Sati*."

She blinked. "As colonists."

He nodded, eager. "As colonists. Company employees are pretty much guaranteed slots, and Adra is going to need all the xenobiologists and geologists they can get."

Kira laughed and then caught his expression. "You're serious."

“Serious as a pressure breach.”

“That’s just the drink talking.”

He put a hand on her cheek. “No, Kira. It’s not. I know this would be a huge change, for both of us, but I also know you’re sick of jetting around from one rock to another, and I don’t want to wait another six months to see you. I *really* don’t.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. “I don’t want that either.”

He cocked his head. “So then let’s not.”

Kira half laughed and looked up at Zeus while she tried to process her emotions. What he was suggesting was everything she’d hoped for, everything she’d dreamed of. She just hadn’t expected it to happen so fast. But she loved Alan, and if this meant they could be together, then she wanted it. She wanted *him*.

The meteor-bright spark that was the *Fidanza* sailed past overhead, in low orbit between Adra and the gas giant.

She wiped her eyes. “I don’t think the odds are as good as you say. Colonies only really want pair-bonded couples. You know that.”

“Yes, I do,” said Alan.

A sense of unreality caused Kira to grip the floor as he knelt in front of her and, from his front pocket, produced a small wooden box. He opened it. Nestled inside was a ring of grey metal set with a bluish-purple gem, startling in its brilliancy.

The lump in Alan’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “Kira Navárez . . . you asked me once what I saw among the stars. I told you I saw questions. Now, I see you. I see *us*.” He took a breath. “Kira, will you do me the honor of joining your life with mine? Will you be my wife, as I will be your husband? Will—”

“Yes,” she said, all worries lost in the flush of warmth that suffused her. She put her hands around the back of his neck and kissed him, tenderly at first and then with increasing passion. “Yes, Alan J. Barnes. Yes, I’ll marry you. Yes. A thousand times yes.”

She watched as he took her hand and slid the ring onto her finger. The band was cold and heavy, but the heaviness was a comforting one.

“The ring is iron,” he said softly. “I had Jenan smelt it from ore I brought him. Iron because it represents the bones of Adrasteia. The stone is tesserite. Wasn’t easy to find, but I know how much you like it.”

Kira nodded without meaning to. Tesserite was unique to Adrasteia; it was similar to benitoite, with a greater tendency toward purple. It was by far

her favorite rock on the planet. But it was exceedingly rare; Alan must have searched long and hard to locate such a large, high-quality piece.

She brushed one of his coppery locks away from his forehead, and she stared into his beautiful soft eyes, wondering how she had gotten so lucky. How either of them had managed to find the other in the whole damn galaxy.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“I love you too,” he said.

Then Kira laughed, feeling almost hysterical, and wiped her eyes. The ring scraped her eyebrow; it was going to take time to get used to its presence. “Shit. Are we really going to do this?”

“Yeah,” said Alan, with his comforting self-confidence. “We sure are.”

“Good.”

He pulled her closer then, his body hot against hers. Kira responded with equal need, equal desire, clinging to him as if she were trying to press herself through his skin and into his flesh until the two of them became one.

Together, they moved with frantic urgency within the arc of potted flowers, matching the rhythms of their bodies, oblivious to the orange gas giant that hung high overhead, huge and glaring.