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Distant Suns: Eva Peng Part I

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DISTANT SUNS: EVA PENG PART 1

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DISTANT SUNS: EVA PENG PART I

by

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THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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CRITICAL PREFACE

I was trapped behind China's Covid borders, off for the summer, and alone in the apartment most of the day when I envisioned a character—a woman about my age—riding through the frozen desert in a jeep towards a smoldering rocket. She was half-Chinese and was leaving Earth unwillingly as part of the next great human migration. I had been trying to find my back to writing through short stories for about six months, and I thought I could turn this strange image into something interesting. Once I began drafting *Distant Suns*, of which my thesis, *Eva Peng Part I*, is the first section, I soon discovered it was not one story but many, a novel stretching backward and forward in time. Writing Eva's story and the stories of those who came before her helped me establish a daily writing practice that carried me from being a long-time dilettante into a committed practitioner of fiction in the University of Texas at El Paso's online Master of Fine Arts program. I expected to finish *Distant Suns* before the program ended, and in a sense, I achieved that goal: I have an 1800-page boulder of four nested stories, including Eva's, that I have been chiseling away at for the last year, searching for the statue within the stone. My objective is a novel of about 500 pages, and today, I have the anxious pleasure of presenting the first rough carving of my endeavor: *Distant Suns Eva Peng Part 1*.

For many writers, a story may begin with a flash of inspiration that leads to frenzied creation. However, at some point, the creative process requires a deeper dive into the dark waters of that inspiration to understand how the story will continue to take shape. The vision of Eva in the desert and my continued motivation to work on the project after completing the M.F.A. sprang from two sources. First, as an expatriate who has lived abroad

for nearly a decade, worked as a literature teacher with international students, became ever more intimate with nature, and embraced a view of the world beyond my native culture and place of birth, I have become profoundly interested in the past, present, and future of human migration, transnational identities, and what Gayatri Spivak termed literary planetarity. *Eva* is an ecologically minded synthetic biologist because she inhabits a near future when the ecological sins of the past and present will have unleashed devastation on humanity, and her story unfolds on Mars because we live on the cusp of humanity's migration from Earth into the solar system. Like all acts of migration and colonization, the move will bring opportunity, exploitation, and radical transformations in our relationships with nature, Earth, other worlds, and one another. My objective was not to write a hard science fiction novel but to explore one possible future. Second, like many Westerners today, I grew up firmly inculcated in post-Enlightenment historical linearism, Christian eschatology, and materialism. It was not until I became an adult that I began to explore and appreciate alternative worldviews, especially the cyclical and the spiritual. Consequently, *Distant Suns* is my attempt to develop a world governed by a synthesis of historical linearism and cyclicity in which spirituality—the soul of the Universe—is central. The book is, as Eliade puts it, a present-day “[reaction] against historical linearism and a certain revival of interest in the theory of cycles” (Eliade 2005, 126). As a work-in-progress, frame story, and self-contained hero’s journey, *Eva Peng Part 1* is an evolving exploration of destiny driven by history, a representation of my creative poetics, and an interlocutor in an ancient tradition of nested, cyclical, epic, and ecological storytelling.

Project Scope

Distant Suns: Eva Peng Part 1 relates the first half of Eva's physical and spiritual journey from a woman trapped in a faulty perception of the present by her obsessions and failures into an incarnation of the Chinese creator goddess Nüwa and the progenitrix of the next Great Cycle of human history on a revived Mars. To make sense of Eva's story, it helps to understand the book's larger structure. I conceived the novel as four nested stories within a circular prologue and epilogue. Eva's story frames the second story, which frames the third, which frames the central story:

1. Part 1: Prologue
2. Parts 2 and 8: Eva's Story
3. Parts 3 and 7: Eddie's Story
4. Parts 4 and 6: Kieran's Story
5. Part 5: Margaret's Story
6. Part 9: Epilogue

The nested stories provide historical, geographical, familial, and thematic background and resonances to deepen and explain the events of Eva's story, while the prologue and epilogue create a sense of circularity as in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*: "A way a lone a last a loved a long the / riverrun past Eve and Adam's..." (Joyce 1975, 3, 628). I also visualized the structure as the ripples created by dropping a stone in water, with Margaret's story being the stone.

Beyond being an ancestor, Margaret is essentially another incarnation of Eva, and her story mirrors Eva's, including immigrating to the New World, where, unlike Eva, she fails to achieve self-actualization. If Margaret is the stone, she is also a ripple, as the prologue and epilogue suggest, and so Eva, if she is a ripple, is a stone as well.

There are three reasons for submitting only the first part of Eva's story as the thesis. The first has to do with the revision process. Paring down the 1800-page exploratory draft of a structurally complex novel into a manageable manuscript has proven difficult and time-consuming. Indeed, it has involved rewriting most of the material from scratch. I initially hoped to present the entire novel as the thesis, but by the time I reached Thesis I in the Fall of 2023, I knew I would need far more time to deliver a polished and presentable draft. Instead, I chose to submit the first half of Eva's story (Part 2 of the novel), which ends just after the midpoint of Eva's arc with the introduction of Eddie's Story. The second is length. The entirety of Eva's story accounts for about half the book's 500 pages, meaning the thesis represents about a quarter of the novel. I knew I could not submit a respectable draft of her entire story to the thesis committee by the deadline, so I chose to limit myself to a page count I felt was manageable for the committee and me. Finally, my decision to work with Eva first rather than Margaret was predicated on Eva's centrality in developing the novel's themes and structure, the natural appeal of the heroic journey, and the need to understand her character arc completely before revising the rest of the novel's stories. I have approached the revision process the opposite way I approached the drafting process. The draft was sprawling, exploratory, self-indulgent, and built on the sandiest characters and plots. The revision is more like Poe's process in "The Raven," with a clear end goal and effect guiding the rewrite. Without Eva, there can be no Margaret; without both, the nested stories make sense.

Naturally, this begs at least two questions: Why not write Eva's story as a standalone novel, and are the other three stories necessary? The answer to the first question is that Eva's

story is too weak to be anything other than a strange and ultimately forgettable piece of flaccid science fiction. She is not entirely a standalone character but rather the culmination of all the characters and ancestors who preceded her. The first answer leads to the second: Eva's viability as a character and the book's anticipated effects of epic and planetarity rely on the stories that precede hers and the novel's unusual structure. She is not a psychologically sophisticated character and lacks the complexity that attracts many readers. In other words, the novel is a multigenerational and planetary epic built on form as much as content because the form reflects the characters' cyclical reality and the story's world.

An epic requires vastness, as does the sense of planetarity I wanted the novel to evoke. Eva is bicultural, a child of both East and West, but she is also multiracial, descended from a long line of multiethnic forebears. She is the progenitrix of a new world and a new people, the awakened *zhiren*, and she is also the repairer and savior of the old world, just like Nüwa. The Fates guide her, three women whose names, personalities, and characters are a mishmash of traditions. The book makes liberal use of mythological, cultural, and linguistic traditions from around the globe, not as appropriation but as a way of emphasizing the interconnectedness of humanity, life, and reality. The book is necessarily far-reaching because it deliberately aims to dissolve barriers of time, place, culture, and nationality, even if the reach exceeds the grasp.

Despite the enormity of the book, the time it has taken, and the many doubts I still have about its viability as a work of art and serious literature, I remain committed to finishing the book while following Bolaños's advice to work on simultaneous writing projects. Indeed, *Distant Suns: Eva Peng's Story* has become critical to me as a work of art and

a learning tool. As I progressed through the M.F.A. program and undertook other projects, I have used the novel as both a laboratory and a proving ground for the craft skills I have developed. It is like a fistful of *apeiron*, richly pliable and ready to render and reabsorb any shape.

Poetics and Assessment

Distant Suns is my first mature attempt at a novel, although I must use the word mature somewhat ironically. When I began drafting the book, I still thought of writing as a flash of inspiration rather than a sustained, craft-based, learned, and slow-going process. I had no concrete ideas about how form and content work together to create a particular effect, how storytelling is action and not just poetic self-indulgence, or how a work of literature is the product of days, weeks, or even years of revision. My honest expectation when I began writing the book was two drafts, the first one to get the story down and the second to edit and do a little polishing, and my guiding principle was Toni Morrison's exhortation to write the "book that you want to read [if] it hasn't been written yet" (Davies 2022, n.p.). Throughout the M.F.A. program, as I have worked on *Distant Suns*, written short stories, and begun to publish, I discovered that desire and inspiration are only two facets of a complex creative process as rooted in craft and practice as it is in the compulsion to tell stories. Where I once fixated on ideas, lushness of language, and experimentation, I have since become attuned to the centrality of character, narrative structure, and readability in storytelling. The works of Joyce, Guimarães Rosa, Tokarczuk, and Couto may push the boundaries of language and structure, but they remain, at heart, *narratives*. Before embarking on unfettered exploration, the emerging writer must master the fundamentals. I have tried to

approach *Distant Suns* as character- and story-driven writing that is at once lyrical and simple, extends beyond geopolitical boundaries, and tells interesting stories about interesting people. With these effects in mind, the novel has challenged my writing process and poetics, forcing me to reconsider how I approach composition in terms of form, language, character, and the author's role during and after creation.

Once I decided on the novel's circular and nested structure, the next consideration became genre. Each of the novel's sections uses a different genre, and Eva's story necessarily falls into science fiction. The genre was imposed on me because Eva lives in a future where the technology and resources for corporate planetary colonization exist, climate change has become catastrophic, and powerful synthetic biology is commonplace. It is subtly dystopian but not post-apocalyptic and is the present day fast-forwarded about a century. However, the genre presented a significant problem that I could not resolve based solely on narrative exigencies. I had to decide whether to use hard or soft science fiction, the former requiring extensive research and worldbuilding and the latter requiring, at the very least, verisimilitude. While one of the inspirations for the novel was Kim Stanley Robison's hard science fiction *Mars* trilogy, I ultimately decided on an approach more like Kazuo Ishiguro's in *Klara and the Sun* and *Never Let Me Go* where bits of technology create the sense of futurity without heavy-handed worldbuilding and intrusive technological jargon. The novel emphasizes a more mystical view of the soul's awakening, human migration, and cyclicity rather than the scientifically plausible Martian colonization of, for example, Robison's *Mars* trilogy.

In terms of plot, Eva's story is a hero's journey in three acts. My first objective was to create tension between the three acts by having Eva's fortunes move in opposite directions

during different parts of the story. She begins the story at a low point, watching her life's work destroyed after being fired. Her arc bottoms out when she returns to her parents' home in Shanghai and falls into an unfulfilling routine, job, and relationship while fixating on her failed work and wrestling with the desire to settle. The catalyst comes as a job offer, the chance to continue her work, and though she has misgivings, she cannot refuse the opportunity. The catalyst begins an upward, though still bumpy, trajectory through the rest of the first act and into the second. The reader sees Eva make friends, start a new relationship, find her beliefs challenged, renew her work, partially overcome some of her weaknesses, and ultimately adapt her Earthly work to Mars. However, her success at the midpoint operates as a second catalyst and initiates a downward arc. Eva learns of deaths, the loss of her family's farm, and the presence of people from her past on Mars before she is temporarily imprisoned. The downward arc is interrupted by the nested stories, which she studies with the help of an unexpected and uncertain ally. My secondary objective was to ensure the tightness of the plot, and I took guidance from Brody's beat-oriented *Save the Cat* method. The first act shows Eva's impoverished life, introduces the call to action, and resolves her resistance to accepting with minimal digressions. The second act moves her rapidly along a positive arc until the revelation of her actual situation at the midpoint.

Creating a tighter plot required me to reevaluate my approach to scenes. I have moved away from a free-flowing approach to using well-established rules for scene writing, like those found in Alderson and Rosenfeld's *Writing Deep Scenes*. I endeavored to write active, conflict-driven, non-digressive scenes resulting in consistent character development or transformation. For example, the two opening scenes of Eva's story establish essential

narrative, character, and worldbuilding elements. The first scene sets Eva in motion, and the reader immediately encounters the story's hallucinatory, magical, or supernatural qualities. It also establishes the Dome as a place of death, which resonates with the Martian Dome and draws attention to Eva's damaged leg. The second scene humanizes Eva by introducing her friendship with Moira and her devotion to non-plant life in Kezi, the cat. It also develops her fear of flying, single-minded commitment to her work, and Jungian shadow side, and continues the image of uprootedness. Simultaneously, it introduces the first of the Fates, Moira, at work in Eva's life and the “dark” forces operating on the periphery. The reader sees something sinister in the *zhiren* and Moira's murder, which eventually connects to Mr. Shen's true objectives and resonates with events and characters in the nested stories. Ultimately, every scene in the thesis should advance the *desis*, and I have attempted to keep them free of extraneous information. Unfortunately, character actions and interactions sometimes seem forced or artificial, with the scene serving the plot at the expense of realistic character development.

Eva's story presented various language challenges, some related to issues of style and voice and others related to character and the novel's setting and planetarity. I tend to overwrite when drafting, falling back on repetition, description, and florid prose to capture a particular image or idea. The issue is not ineffability but the drafting frenzy, where my mind churns up crucial yet inchoate images. Such writing often produces Hemmingway's "darlings," and the revision process becomes daunting. Moreover, pompous language and long sentences do not equate to “good” writing, particularly today when subtlety of style and diction is far more effective than gaudy elegance. For Eva's story—and in general—I wanted

to curb the excess and aim for a more straightforward, smoother style, and so I turned to Alice Munro and Kazuo Ishiguro as exemplars of plain prose, J.M. Coetzee as a master of balancing directness with delicate flourishes of lyricism and grandeur, and Couto for virtuosic neologism. Eva's story is an act of mythopoesis, and it was in blending simplicity with almost Biblical stateliness that I felt I could learn from Coetzee. My objective was not to imitate his style or those of Munro, Ishiguro, and Couto but to study how they approached sentence construction, diction, and, most importantly, revision because it is revision that produces authentic elegance through the consideration of every single word.

Because Eva's story follows mythopoetic and epic traditions, I wanted to create a sense of unreliability and otherworldliness through the narrator's direct reports and the descriptions of Eva's experiences. The way she interacts with the living matrix of the world—plants and, to a lesser extent, animals and people—should sometimes seem hallucinatory. I tried to learn how to create hallucinatory, rather than magical or supernatural, effects by studying Annette von Droste Hülshoff's poem "The Boy on the Moor," Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*, Mo Yan's *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* and *Frogs*, and Rachel Ingalls's novellas. Hallucinatory realism achieves its effect by juxtaposing exaggerated perceptions of physical reality and "detailed [descriptions] of the natural environment" (Krimmer 2001, 132). Managing such contrasts requires exceptional linguistic adroitness, a description based on striking details, and the ability to transition seamlessly from the everyday into the otherworldly. I have made some progress in controlling my language and blending the strange with the quotidian, one of the best examples being the "si si siz̃zle" of Eva's teardrop on the sidewalk. The image is simple and visceral, but it sets the stage for a hallucinatory

experience in the third act by connecting with the deadly fours on Mr. Shen's calling card.¹ That said, much of what should be hallucinatory, especially concerning Eva's "powers," comes off more like magic or fantasy in part because the natural and hallucinatory worlds remain too distant for compelling juxtaposition.

I deemed it essential to reveal Eva's mind primarily through free indirect rather than direct style, blending her thoughts and probable vocabulary with the narrator's. Doing so presented four significant challenges: Eva lives in the future; she is a scientist; she is a bicultural, biracial, and trilingual woman; and she is isolated. I wanted to avoid bogging the story down in technobabble or trying to anticipate the future's slang and jargon, so Eva's vocabulary is essentially that of the present day, and I have used almost no technical language, even when describing her work. It was the correct choice regarding her speech and thought, but the lack of technical language attached to the story's scientific elements enfeebls the verisimilitude. Although I am a long-term expatriate and have advanced reading knowledge of a few languages, I am neither bicultural nor bilingual nor a woman. I found it challenging to capture Eva's interiority and relied on tricks like staying out of her psychological depths and treating dialogue in other languages as if it were English. Finally, her isolation, introversion, and interpersonal failings match my own. While there is ample precedent for characters exhibiting the qualities of their authors (Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, for example), I did not want Eva to become me, and I have struggled to keep my worldview, speech patterns, vocabulary, and interiority separate from hers with middling success.

¹ Like 13 in the West, a widespread Chinese superstition views four (四 sì) as bad luck because it is homophonous with "to die" (死 sǐ).

The novel draws from the language and forms of mythology and cosmogony, borrowing ideas, inspiration, and archetypes like the mythic past from *Beowulf*, *Gilgamesh*, and the *Iliad*; the creatures and acts of creation in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, the *Popol Vuh*, and the *Enūma Eliš*, and the flood myth in the Ark Tablet. Most significant are the Fates, Moira, Dalia, and Morigan (referred to in the thesis as the Golden Woman), whose names are from or suggestive of fate figures in Ancient Greek (μοῖραι), Lithuanian (Dalia/Laima), and Irish Celtic (the Morrigan), and the *zhiren* (纸人). The *zhiren* are paper doll couples burnt as offerings and who serve the gods in Chinese mythology; the men are referred to as *jintong* (金童), golden boys, and the women as *yunü* (玉女), jade maidens. I hoped to create a simultaneous sense of cohesion and strangeness between the various mythological and religious traditions that have influenced the novel. However, such usages arguably border on cultural appropriation and may smack of irreverence instead of suggesting respect for the source cultures. Moreover, such borrowings lead to explanatory and interpretative difficulties in the text. Readers are not polyglots, nor can they be expected to share the same palette of experience and knowledge. Are the names clear enough to provoke curiosity in the reader? How can references to the myths and languages of cultures fit into the text without creating a babel of jargon? At what point does the introduction of such ideas begin to weaken the narrative foundations of the story? The foreign languages and allusions in the novel are nothing compared to those in Joyce or Eliot, but I harbor concerns about how contemporary readers will respond to them. I agree with Ishiguro's concern about authors self-censoring and thus damaging their work, but I also understand the importance of

approaching subjects with respect and sensitivity. The proper approach remains a central question in *Distant Suns* and my writing practice.

Character has been a particularly challenging part of *Distant Suns* and my writing practice in general. In developing characters, I have relied on five principles:

1. Characters desire something. Major characters desire one thing and need another; this leads to conflict and change.
2. Characters must change.
3. Characters are greater than the sum of their appearance in the text.
4. The character, good or bad, casts a shadow and is thus dual.
5. The author is the master of the character's fate, behavior, and trajectory.

A character's desire arises from a misalignment between their present and ideal worlds. In short, the characters believe it will lead to fulfillment and the lives they dream of. For Eva, engineering a decarbonizing alfalfa species will help "cure" the Earth and fulfill an obligation. Her childhood experience of falling from the tire swing down to Earth and cocooning with the plants and animals has led to a compulsion. Eva fails to understand that she misunderstood her experience and that her work and life are destined for a different world. The Earth is not trying to hold her prisoner; it is trying to prepare her. Throughout the novel, she must learn to accept her role as one of the many engines of Becoming and one of Creation's sensory organs.

Her desire and need are the products of her family history and destiny, which appear in flashbacks and the nested stories she reads during captivity. By reading Margaret's story, she develops a budding insight into the dangers of clinging to desire. In Kieran and Eddie's

stories, she learns about her origins and the interconnectedness of all Creation, a point she failed to grasp in the past because her worldview was muddled. All this information appears in the novel. However, many details of her personality, her small likes and wants, her lesser fears and dreams, and some of the possibilities she envisions with Allen and Marcus are omitted. Still, they inform her behavior and guide the story from behind the scenes, and I have used the backstory accumulated in the first draft to refine her personality and character for the thesis.

Presently, I am revising several issues based on feedback from my thesis advisor. Because of the scope of the changes I hope to make, the thesis reflects only the first few steps. The first is focalization. Although the story primarily follows Eva, the novel is nevertheless written in third-person omniscient and moves into several characters' thoughts to provide background information and create tension through dramatic irony. Second, I have begun de-abstractifying some of the terms, like “reclamator” and “technician” through “showing” rather than “telling.” I have tried to begin showing the machines and people through Eva's eyes, but the process is ongoing. I am using a technique from McCowen's *Wondrium* course on revision that involves marking each instance of “telling” and evaluating whether it should remain or be revised. The third involves updating the technological vocabulary and vision. I relied on existing technologies during the drafting process, making the story feel dated. The changes, notably the addition of neural implants, are the first step in creating futuristic verisimilitude. The next step in this process involves Martianifying the setting to create a stronger sense of otherworldliness. Finally, I continue to agonize over and polish the language, employing Saunders's “twang” method of reading and rereading the

text, marking the places where the language or story “twangs,” and then trying to resolve the problem.

I have also begun exploring new resonances in the text. There are existing resonances in Eva’s story with the events in the rest of the novel, but they remain opaque without the entire novel to hand. I am leaning into the resonance of Eva’s relationship with children in the book’s first half because that relationship mirrors her future relationship with the *zhiren*. Nüwa is not a plant goddess or an earth goddess. She is an earth-and-sky goddess as well as the progenitrix of humankind. Like children, the *zhiren* represent a “next step” in humankind’s saga, and it is Eva’s destiny to awaken them through Mars just as Nüwa fashioned the first humans from clay and filled them with the breath of life. Because the thesis is limited to the first and part of the second acts, it is entirely *desis*, and many of these resonances will not begin to resound until the book’s second half.

Finally, as I draft the rest of the novel in the coming months, I intend to address two specific language problems. First, I intend to de-anglophonize the non-English dialogue. On the one hand, this was expeditious during the drafting process, but it also mellows the tang of tasting the unique flavors of one tongue through another. At my thesis advisor’s suggestion, I plan to study Arguedas’s techniques of flavoring the Spanish of his stories with his native Quechua. I also plan to work with my spouse, a native Chinese speaker, on creating dialogue glistens with Chinesisms. Second, the text is full of clichés, dull imagery, and repeated words, such as continuous focus on the eyes. Crutch language is an issue both Bell and McCowen address and something all writers are prone to use. Going forward, I hope to be more aware of my crutches in drafting and revision.

Writing is a method for thinking, internal and external inquiry, and deep penetration into the human condition. This is especially true of literature because, as Northrop Frye notes, it forms a gateway into possibilities, into the way the world *might* have looked—or might look still. Creating a story is simultaneously a personal act and a public one, even in the case of an unpublished and incomplete text like *Distant Suns: Eva Peng Part 1*. In this way, the novel has invited me to consider the author's role and relationship with the work. Is he godlike or a demiurge working with material that is not his own? Is he ever-present, or, like Eva, is he an absent creator, vanished and leaving behind a garden? I am inclined towards the latter. The author molds the extant materials of reality he shares with the rest of humanity into something that must eventually leave him behind. In turn, that work may become, in some small way and with great luck, part of the compost from which new stories arise, new instants of universal consciousness that flash into being and return, never entirely lost, just like the souls populating *Distant Suns*. I do not think my thesis is ready to venture into the world, but one day it may be.

Framework

My experiences living abroad, studying languages, and interacting with international students and colleagues have taken me far away from the person I might have become had I remained in small-town East Texas. I now think of myself as a planetary citizen far more than a national one, bound by essentially arbitrary political borders that are divisive and othering. When writing a novel, I wanted to create something transnational, transcultural, and planetary, incorporating worldwide traditions and characters who would eventually transcend their ancient, earthly divisions. In addition to being planetary, I wanted the novel

to participate in the long and rich history of nested and cyclical storytelling extending back at least to Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. Finally, as I drafted the thesis, Eva Peng's story emerged as an interrogation of the roles and realities of science, climate change, the hoarding of wealth, the pursuit of immortality, and the ethics of environmental manipulation, questions that are at the forefront of political, scientific, and socioeconomic discourse today.

From the outset, I knew I could not—and perhaps no longer can—write a United Statesian or even an East Texan novel; I also knew I could not write a Chinese novel (and I did not want to) or an expatriate novel set in China. I knew the novel would have to include Chinese, United Statesian, and Brazilian elements and that the protagonist would be a bicultural and bilingual woman. The novel is planetary in that I am planetary, or, more correctly, planet-minded. Consequently, my novel is arguably most intimately in dialogue with David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*. Like me, Mitchell lived in Asia for many years, and his time there influenced his writing and characters profoundly. Moreover, *Cloud Atlas*, like *Distant Suns*, aspires to be a subspecies of the encyclopedic or systems novel that aims for a “profound effect” and explores the interconnections and intersections of time, place, person, identity, history, science, and art through the reimagining of many cultures as a single tapestry of human experience (LeClair 1989). In other words, they aspire to reflect the universality of the human experience through classic themes like death and love and from a planetary understanding of humanity as a monad, part of nature, and one of the Universe's many organs of sensation and self-awareness. Whether the novel succeeds depends first on finishing it and then on the judgment of future readers.

Eva's story is also in dialogue with Kim Stanley Robinson's astonishing hard science fiction *Mars* trilogy, particularly the first book, *Red Mars*, from which I got the idea of the space elevator. Robinson's book is philosophically significant because of how its factions treat Mars, some as a resource to exploit, others as a place to terraform, and others as a place to preserve. The book's concept of areophany, a reverence for the spirit of the world embraced by some of the characters, influenced Marcus's role as the incarnation of Mars's planetary soul and informs the novel's inquiry into nature, ecology, stewardship, and humanity's difficult place within the ecosystems of Earth and, eventually, the worlds we will visit. While *Distant Suns* is not deliberate eco-fiction, Eva's story undeniably and inextricably intertwines with anthropogenic climate change's present and future realities and humanity's perennial quest to dominate rather than harmonize with nature. Beyond climate change, this includes the search for immortality, the incipient colonization of space, and the dangers posed by our naïve conflation of some scientific and technological achievements with true Becoming. It is a work of fiction operating in the same sphere as Katie Paterson, John Luther Adams, and Alan Hovhaness, whose artwork and music are at once mystical, ecological, and spiritual.

Distant Suns runs the risk of becoming dated even before I have finished writing it, dealing as Eva's story does with the near future and brushing up against both the desires and dangers of the present day. That said, it is a risk worth taking. Very few books survive, as Salman Rushdie puts it, the test of generations, and they fade almost instantly into obscurity even if they are privileged enough to garner a moment of wide recognition. This is truer today than ever with the proliferation of publications; indeed, even the books by authors at

the peak of the literary world are liable to become the stuff only of classrooms, perhaps even in their lifetimes (Cormac McCarthy is a fine example). *Distant Suns* is also a book so much more ambitious than my ability that I may never be able to do it justice, but that, too, is acceptable. I will be satisfied to finish it, and publication, if it ever comes, would be mere icing on the cake. If I publish the book, I hope readers will find within it a vision of humanity as both one and many, a literary experience that is at once strange and comforting, and, above all, at least one moment of spine-tingling pleasure. Whatever else they think belongs to them.

5630 words

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DISTANT SUNS: EVA PENG PART 1

I

Iceland, Wayfinder's SynBio Campus, late 21st Century

Beneath the Dome's frosted glass, Eva Peng squatted amid the flowering alfalfa and wriggled her fingers deep into the soil. Emerald tendrils unfurled from her fingertips, threading through the ground like capillaries, wrapping around roots and stones and beads of frozen water, sucking up life from below until all the dusky loam beat like a heart beneath her bare feet. Around her, the plants began to glow, scattering their seeds like shooting stars.

Medicago sativa evae. She couldn't call it that, of course, but that's what it was. Hers.

They bowed before her, breathing her breath, and the green of fingers, following all the planet's inner meridians, came full circle, returning to her. Tickling her soles. Dissolving the boundaries between her cells and the soil. Piercing her skin, crisscrossing her lungs and her liver, filling her veins until her blood smelled of mud and the leaves of her skin shone like wet jade, one with the earth, her body its murmuring tongue. It was in her and of her, the fever and the flush of life grown wild and ripe right before the end.

At the edge of her awareness, a foreign heat glittered against the green, a bleating alarm, and the vision crumbled like calving ice.

Eva stood, the serpent tattoo on her ruined left leg stiff from the stillness. She licked the earth from her fingers and sighed. Men and woman wearing hardhats and suits of

funereal white milled near the Dome's airlock, communing through the chips in their skulls with the beasts slumbering beside them. Their metal was blue, like the faces of Yama's demons, and when their many arms awakened, they assumed the aspect of a profane goddess. Reclamators, here to rip her life's work from the ground and prepare the soil for someone else. Death as an act of Creation.

Eva glanced up through the glass at the midnight sun, shrouded in the smoke from Fagradalsfjall's latest eruption. She'd tried to tell them. Begged them to listen, to see what she saw, to understand this would be an unconquerable death. But of course they hadn't.

There was barely a star to be seen in the Icelandic summer and none at all with the smoke. She'd miss that small mercy almost as much as her plants. Fat beads of moisture jiggled on the panes threatening to fall as the technicians warmed the air. No longer her world—if it ever had been.

When she looked down again, one of the demons rumbled before her accompanied by its white-robed handler. A sickly green glow shone beneath the skin near his right ear as he sent commands to the Reclamator's arms. Was that a flutter of eagerness making them tremble above her?

"Time's up, Dr. Peng," he said without looking up.

And so it was. She still had packing to do and Moira to meet before catching the ship back to Shanghai, and she really didn't want to be here when it started.

The technician gave a thumbs up over his shoulder and the roar of rotors shattered the air. The first of them bit into the ground with a sound like tearing silk, and Eva wiped away something wet and warm from her cheek, leaving a smudge of dirt beneath her eye.

The monster beside her had splattered her with icy mud and crushed leaves, and the rain had shaken itself loose from the rattling glass, turning the tillers' carnage to slime.

Left leg throbbing, Eva limped along the service path toward the exit. Fingers of mud and bloody pulped sucked at her soles, threatening to pull her under. Did the earth cling to her in fear or was it trying to drown her, punishment for her broken promise? She'd followed the only path she could find through the mire and now it was ended, far from the salvation she'd promised the world all those years ago in her postlapsarian *dumnu*, curled up like a fetus among the hot weeds and the cool soil, the frogs and the snakes and the crickets whispering to her from the long grass, welcoming her home and shielding her from the roar of the wrathful blue sky, asking in return only that she do the same for them. With a twist and pop like the sound of a molar cracking loose under the torque of a dentist's pliers, she tore herself free and stepped across the threshold. She had tried, given everything she had, and now it was over. Was this how a wildebeest felt with its throat in the lion's jaws, all the fight gone out and its eyes grown wide and black with oblivion?

Whether it was the monsters or the plants screeching, she dared not guess as the doors slid shut behind her.

The lights in Eva's apartment shone like sulfur on the bare walls and a cairn of boxes stood heaped in the middle of the living room. In the kitchen, the cleaning drone cleared away the

red-stained glass of a smashed wine bottle. Besides the boxes, a pair of houseplants, the aftermath of Eva's temper, and Kezi the cat, everything else was gone.

Motionless, Eva stared out the window. Half the summer sky was sooty with ash and volcanic lightning crackled among the clouds. Beneath it all, the Dome glowed scablike and raw.

The door chimed.

For a minute, she couldn't move, and when the doorbell rang again, lifting her leg felt like tearing a tree up by the roots. The second step was worse, and she nearly fell, dizzy, a fixed thing thrust suddenly into motion.

"What took you so long?" Moira asked, shaking ash from her umbrella and stepping inside. Behind her, a purple brume filled the other half of the sky, turning the day dark, a sweltering summer storm rolling in from the western Atlantic to make war with the smoking volcano.

"I couldn't move," Eva said, taking the umbrella while Moira bent down to pet the cat.

"Seems like you're moving fine," Moira said. "Better than I'd've thought."

"Not really, but they want me out yesterday."

Despite the summer dress, Moira still let her beard grow, elegant and close-cut, and the many threads and ornaments in her ghost-gray dreads shimmered as she settled onto the floor. Eva sat beside her.

"I brought coffee," she said, pulling a thermos from her purse and filling the lid.

Eva took the lid and said, "What about the other thing?"

Moira pulled out a tiny chip and handed it over.

“Wasn’t easy, you know. I had to get Tom to hack in.”

“I owe you one,” Eva said, pressing it against the neuronet behind her ear where her research began to upload below the threshold of consciousness.

“Why didn’t you download it yourself?”

“Admin locked me out before they fired me.”

They sat in silence, Eva running one long finger around the rim of the lip while Moira twisted a half-finished dread.

“You’re still set on going home?”

“Nowhere else to go.”

“What will you do?”

“Nothing. I have some money saved.” Seek forgiveness, she wanted to say, surrender what’s left of me to the Earth. Become plant food.

Suddenly, Moira let the loc go and grabbed Eva’s arm, black beams bursting from her eyes.

“You don’t have to go, you know.”

Eva stared at Moira, transfixed, the light pinning her to the naked floorboards.

“You can come work in my department. Rick’s sure he can get it approved. Same salary, no break in tenure, no loss of face. He’s got ins up top.”

“And my work?” Eva asked.

The black beams flickered like a slowly dying flashlight.

“You’d have to sign on to one of our projects.”

They vanished.

Eva pulled her arm loose and shook her head. “I appreciate it, Moira, but you know I can’t. It wouldn’t be the same. My plants, my Dome. It’s the only work I ever cared about.” The only thing she was meant for. Having to leave was bad enough, but staying behind to drag her plow over the bones of the dead? What worse sacrilege could she commit? What worse betrayal? Better to go home and wither away.

She scooped up Kezi and wrestled him into the carrier. Moira started twisting the loose loc again.

“Anyway, maybe I can get new funding back in China.”

Neither of them believed it. There was no money for her sort of work. Mitigation, not Rectification, was the official policy now. That’s what they told her when they fired her. There’s no going backward, no undoing the damage. She tried to explain what was happening, what she felt when her fingers bit into the soil, what she’d sworn to do, but they cut her off. Just look! The planet’s thriving despite the heat.

The dying thrived to, she wanted to tell them, before the end. An entire planet in terminal agitation, like Grandpa Simon, standing stark naked before the window, IV pulled loose, glittering with sweat. Like her, right now, on the cusp of her katabasis. She was supposed to have brought the world back up from the dead. Instead she was preparing to join it.

Kezi hissed and she snapped the cage door shut. Moira was still twisting her hair, the dread unspooling like spirit thread from her fingers.

“You know,” she said, “that green third eye of yours? It’s blinded you.”

“What?”

“You’ve taken root, gotten lost in whatever inner hedge maze you’ve made for yourself.”

“There’s more to it than that.” Moira could do extraordinary things. Her work was unparalleled, but Eva knew something more.

Moira regarded her for a moment. “Well? What is it? You walk around moony, muttering like a madwoman, obsessed with this one thing, and you’ve never told me why.”

“It’s hard to explain.”

“Try me.”

“I...Something happened once. I fell.”

“You fell?”

“And the planet caught me.”

“What does that have to do with your work, Eva?”

“It wanted something in return. My work was payment of a debt.”

“Saviors don’t demand payments.”

“Not a payment then. Something I wanted to give.”

“Do you ever think you misunderstood the terms of the contract?”

“It’s more like a covenant.”

“Covenants can change.”

“What’s your point, Moira?”

“Maybe you’ve mistaken a detour for a dead end.”

“There’s no such thing as a detour on a one-way road.”

“So that’s it? Home and a life of quiet desperation? If that’s all that’s left, why’d you have me steal back your research notes?”

A litany for the dead. Eva shrugged and the chip implanted behind her ear sent an alert skittering into her awareness.

“Moving van’s nearly here,” she said.

“Better get going then.”

They stood and Moira embraced Eva.

“Gonna miss you,” she said.

“You’ll come visit me, right?”

“I’ll be around, somewhere or other.”

The Movers hovered into the room, unfurling their octopus arms and loaded her boxes into the back of the truck with brutal efficiency. Eva climbed into the passenger’s cabin. Beside her, hidden in the van’s silicon veins, the ghostly chauffeur engaged the engine.

“Don’t forget for the plants,” Eva said as Moira handed her the cat carrier and the door slid closed. They waved to one another until the van vanished around the corner at the end of the street.

Moira dropped her hand and two shapes moved across the street, a man and a woman as thin and fine as paper dolls, straight-backed beneath black umbrellas. They stopped in front of the apartment.

“A terrible risk,” said the man.

“Offering her a job,” said the woman.

“Had she agreed—”

“She was never going to accept,” Moira said, cutting the man off.

“Then why offer?” said the woman.

Moira looked up at the sky and fiddled with the unfinished dread. The storm was nearly here, devouring the last sliver of light still separating it from the volcanic cloud.

“You don’t yank a fish straight into the boat,” she said. “The weave of Fate’s a supple thing. I gave her a little slack, sending her backward to send her forward.”

“Then she will come?” said the man.

“When she is summoned?” said the woman.

Moira shrugged, her hair ornaments tinkling like scissor snips. “I’ve set the line to humming. The rest is up to her.”

“Were you always so fickle?” said the man, closing his umbrella and stepping past Moira into the house.

“So capricious, so full of chance?” said the woman, closing her hers and reaching into her pocket.

“What need of a spinner if the thread’s already spun?” said Moira.

“What need indeed?” said the man from behind her as he thrust the tip of a syringe into her throat.

Moira was dead before she hit the floor.

“None at all,” said the woman, kneeling beside the body. She put Moira’s phone in her pocket and cut away the unfinished dread with a pair of long silver scissors.

“None at all,” said the man.

They snapped open their umbrellas and stepped forth into the sooty rain.

II

Shanghai, Near Huinan

Shanghai was nothing like Iceland. Where the summers had been balmy near the roof of the world, the city of fifty million sweltered nine months out of the year, its towers of concrete and glass shimmering sometimes like an ugly mirage and at others like an oasis, every rooftop and balcony drooping with tropical green. The city was at war with the heat, a sort of trench warfare that guzzled the water of the Pu River and gobbled up enough energy to fuel a country. If China was rich, Shanghai, home of the first AI trillionaire, rivaled the world. Here, behind seawalls and beneath the lush canopy of artificial forest, the people could forget themselves in their extravagance.

For the first month, Eva had cocooned herself in her old bedroom, scrolling through her notes over and over again. Her parents worried, but mostly left her alone. They knew themselves the ebb and flow of grief and the slowness of its passing. Kezi kept vigil, opening one eye whenever one or the other came in, speaking for Eva when she couldn't until one morning in early August, she came downstairs wearing shorts and shirt instead of pajamas, her hair in a messy ponytail.

“Thought I might take a walk,” she said.

“Want company?” her father asked.

She shook her head.

“Sunscreen?” said her mother.

Eva nodded, pulled a self-cooling parasol from the cupboard, and headed out into the blistering summer sun. Autonomous water trucks drove along the village streets, spraying a constant stream of water on the asphalt and the shade trees. Most of it evaporated instantly, turning the air soupy, but here and there in deep pockets of shade, a few glistening beads lingered like will-o'-the-wisps.

School was out, and Nuanhuo children, as the latest generations were tongue-in-cheekily known, played in the streets, soaked in sweat and oblivious to the heat. Eva sidestepped a pair of boys as they ran past her shrieking and spotted a trio of kids, two boys and a girl, squatting in a lunarlike crescent around the trunk of a plane tree, arguing in hushed voices. Something on the ground, hidden by their backs, glowed and turned their sun-browned faces golden.

Eva stopped, then walked over and peered over their shoulders. Planted close to the roots and smothered in shade drooped a single tomato plant barely clinging to life. The kids were arguing about how to keep it alive, firing suggestions and accusations and aspersions back and forth. Eva stepped closer, and all three looked up when the umbrella's shadow fell across them. A safe city, they didn't run.

“Mind if I take a look?” Eva asked.

The kids exchanged glances and then scooted apart to make room for her. Eva squatted beside them, flat-footed, her flipflops sinking into the wet soil. She lifted the leaves with her fingertips, stroked the stalk, palpated the shriveled blossoms. She leaned in, sniffed, touched her tongue to the topmost leaf, tasted its poison. Her fingers left the leaves behind

and found their way into the soil, down among the roots, following the flux of nutrients. She pulled her fingers out and licked them clean. The children stared at her.

“It needs more light, less water, and less acidity,” she told them. She looked around and pointed at a patch of ground where the sun shone and kept the soil from growing saturated with water. “Over there,” I think.

Without taking their eyes off Eva, the kids moved the tomato plant.

“Will you come check on it tomorrow?” asked one of the boys.

“I don’t think so,” Eva said. She hadn’t touched a plant since leaving Iceland. She hadn’t dared speak to the earth only to renew their intimacy with such lust?

“You have to!” said the girl.

She beetled her brow and looked at the children, each one in turn, their faces brown and bright. They were in love with their little plant, eager for communion. But her failure meant the world was dying, and with it these children. The thought was bitter and her throat filled with gall.

“Come on!” said the other boy, licking the soil from his fingers just as Eva had. What harm would it do to spare them her bitterness when they would all be gone soon enough? And the earth had not rebuffed her touch. Could they strike some new covenant, then? A few loving souls, her acolytes, to ride with her and the earth to the end?

The next morning, she applied for a job teaching biology at her old middle school and spent the rest of the summer growing tomatoes with the neighborhood kids. The day before school started, Eva answered the door to find a familiar stranger on the stoop holding a basket of tomatoes.

“Allen?” she said.

“Turns out my niece was one of your little farmers,” he said, handing her the basket.

“She wanted you to have this before school started.”

Eva took the basket half-dazed.

“It’s been years.”

“Nearly twenty.”

“You look good,” Eva said.

“You, too.”

They stood there awkwardly, old ghosts, before Eva said, “Tea?”

“I’ve got to get to the hospital.”

“Oh.”

“Dinner? Downtown?”

“I start school tomorrow.”

“Friday night then?”

“Sure.”

When he’d left, Eva carried the tomatoes to the kitchen where her mother was making lunch. She cocked one eyebrow at Eva, green eyes glowing through her pipe smoke.

“What?” Eva said.

Her mother kept cooking.

When Eva and her mother left the wet market, the yolky autumn sun blazed over the town, making the wet air shimmer like lacquerware. Trees and tropical plants erupted along the avenues, spilling over terraces, sunburned leaves brown against new growth. Women covered head to foot in gauzy sungear waded through the air under umbrellas while sweaty shopkeepers in Beijing bikinis smoked and slept under awnings and whirring fans. Whenever a vine or a branch brushed Eva's shoulder, she followed the flow of food through phloem and xylem, breathing with plants and lingering beneath their leaves. Yet, there, down among the twilight over the roots, she felt the soil burning, hot to the touch, full of fever.

"Why'd you ask me to come, Ma?" Eva asked as they swam toward the bus stop, her mother's little AV shopping cart rattling over the sidewalk behind them.

"You've been back three months."

"Yeah."

"And you're teaching middle school."

"Yeah."

"And mooning over your old notes every night when you aren't out with Wang Airen."

Wrong. I moon over them at his place, too.

"What's your point, Ma?" she said, squirming as sweat rolled down the small of her back.

"Why aren't you back in a real lab? At a company or a university?"

"Ma..."

“I’m just saying,” her mother pronounced, “I could get you an interview at Fudan. I’ve still got colleagues there.”

“In the history department?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I like with working the kids.” True. “And teaching.” A lie. “And it gives me time to think.” Too much.

“You ruminate.”

“It’s been hard.”

“Life’s hard. And full of things we don’t want to do. Duties. Destinies. Don’t waste your time pining for the past.”

“Rich, coming from a history professor.”

They climbed onto the bus and headed out into the countryside.

“History’s about the future as much as the past.”

“There isn’t much future, Ma. It’s in the taste of the soil, the way the plants struggle to breathe. It’s in the fish and the food.”

“Then you make the future, Eva, with whatever you’ve got, a day or a decade. You roll up your sleeves and fight instead of squatting in the mud like a turtle.”

“That’s what I was doing, and they fired me for it.”

Her mother fell silent.

In the coolness of the kitchen, her mother lit her pipe, packed with illegal tobacco, and they put away the shopping.

“At least talk to someone at the university,” she said at last.

“No.”

They’d had the argument before, and Eva knew what came next.

“What about Wang Airen, then? You’re not getting any younger.”

“Mother,” Eva said, cramming the *qingcai* into the fridge and slamming the door hard enough to knock over the jars beside it.

“Do what you want, then,” her mother snapped. “I’m going to lie down.”

The slap of her slippers faded on the stairs and a soft shout came from the second floor followed by the thunderclap of a slamming door. Eva walked into the living room and curled up on the sofa. Kezi jumped in her lap, and she petted him once before activating the neuranet settling against the arm, her head haloed in a houseplant’s leaves.

She scrolled, page after page of notes and data projected before her eyes, everything Moira’d downloaded for her from Wayfinder’s servers, a lifetime’s work humming soulless through the silicon chip buried beneath her skin. And here she was, tilling dead soil like an ancient farmer seeking a grainy grail. One breakthrough, just one, and she find funding. But nothing had come before, and nothing came now.

She was halfway through a report when a second set of slippers came slapping down the stairs and into the room. Her father, round as gourd, plopped onto the sofa at her feet. He watched her, and she pretended not to watch him back over the rim of the e-paper, to notice the way the veins of his hands resembled watermelon rind. After a while, he leaned over, belly bumping her knees, and zapped her beneath the ear with one of his many homemade contraptions.

“Aiyou!” she yelped, clapping a hand to her ear as the data stream vanished.

“Enough screen time,” he said.

“I am not a teenager, Ba!”

“Take an old AIer’s word for it: screens were bad news when they first came out and they’re worse news now. Never should’ve let you get one of those implants.”

“I’m working.”

“You’re turning circles.”

“One fight was enough today.”

“I agree.” He patted her knee. “Let’s take a ride.”

The AV dropped them off in front of the Shanghai Botanical Garden and vanished into the garage to charge. With Eva’s neuronet offline and her father free of it altogether, they had to pay by thumbprint, like the rest of the antique visitors, before crossing the turnstiles and catching the shuttle to the conservatories on the far side of the park. At the arctic habitat, they rented coats from the artificial attendant and stepped into the artificial cold where artificially created plants gave visitors a taste of the polar species lost in the last hundred years.

To the right, a small stream cascaded down from the hills, rimed with ice, and everywhere wildflowers trembled among lichen-spotted stone and hummocks of moss. To the left, in the taiga zone, stood a forest of spruce and pine, needles shimmering aquamarine in the icy air. As they began to climb the stairs toward the waterfall, an engineered arctic fox appeared among the dark boles, sniffed them on the air, and vanished.

Eva smiled after it and slipped an arm through her father’s. What a pair they must have made, she with her stiff limp and Ba like a snowman wrapped up in his white coat.

“Your mother means well,” he said. It was always English between them, even though he was born in the Mainland. With her mother, it was Shanghainese and never a word of English even though she’d once been an American citizen. Eva never had bothered to find out why.

“She doesn’t understand why it has to be my work or nothing, why I can’t be a part of Mitigation.”

The gravel crunched beneath their feet.

“She does. Better than you think. We both do.” He sighed. “We’ve had to leave things behind before, too, Eva, old worlds we thought were ours forever.”

“She could be a little more sympathetic then.”

They paused while her father gripped the handrail, catching his breath. “Not her way. You know that. She’s a historian, a traditionalist.”

“Then she should understand the need to preserve things better than anyone.”

They kept walking, Eva steadying him as they went, crested the hill, and climbed the moon bridge. Below them, the waterfall rumbled, shattering the sun in its spray. The height made her dizzy, and she tried to sink her boots into the stone to keep from spinning apart. On the other side of the conservatory, limned in the rainbow light, the fox threaded its way through the trees. They watched it in silence until it was gone again.

“What would you do if you could go back?” he said.

“I’d go.”

“And then what? You said yourself the research was going nowhere, that you couldn’t get the gene sequencing right for the carbon capture to make much difference.”

“If I had more time, I know I could make it enough.”

“Enough to save the planet?”

Eva stared at him.

“That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? The fiction you lived, the secret you cradled in the dark, how you’d turn back time.”

He might as well have slapped her, but she should have seen it coming. It was his way, hiding behind that jolly red Buddha’s face while he sifted through everyone’s words, unearthing what they hadn’t said, what they didn’t even know they felt, and then throwing it all back at them when he wanted to make a point. He’d have been a better lawyer than he was an AI engineer.

“Ba—”

He held up a hand and she stopped. “Everyone dreams of saving the world in one way or another, and I’m not saying that to hurt you. I’m asking you to think about why you’re clinging to this, why you’re still grieving. I want you to consider the possibility your work wasn’t right for the here and the now, for this moment you’re so caught up in. It’s like this place,” he said, sweeping an arm through the mist, “like your Dome back in Iceland. It’s alien here, one of the ten thousand things pulled out of its proper time and place.”

“So, I should just give it all up, admit I chased the wrong things, that I wasted my life on something doomed from the start?”

He put his hand on hers, the watermelon skin brown and creased as a paper bag. “I’m saying you should find another path among the plants.”

All around her, the greenwhite glowed.

“I thought I had. With the kids. But...”

“But what? You’re awakening souls, Eva, awakening them to the beauty of the world, to the special way you see it.”

“Just in time for them to see it end.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

“Then why bother?”

A hecatomb, she thought. To her father, she said, “I don’t know.”

They made their way back down and her father left at the entrance. “Think about it a little longer. I’ll be in the car when you’re ready.”

Eva gave him a quick hug and walked into the heart of the forest. She sat beneath the leafiest spruce she could find, silent, eyes closed, until a rustling in front of her broke her trance. The fox peered at her from between two citrine-colored trunks, its tail branching out along nine paths through the snow, each one tremulous as a mirage.

“They’re wrong,” she said to it, “Ma and Ba and Moira.”

She was earth, not stone, one with the soul of the planet and beholden to it. And she had failed.

The trees gasped, trunks pulsing, and scattered the frost from their boughs. The fox leaned forward on its forepaws and the whole of the woods bowed with it.

One dot, utterly still, a gem-bright flash in the dark—and then gone.

Sunday night was date night and such a strange new rhythm to her life: the call from Allen when he finished his rounds at Jiahui Hospital, the long walk to the subway station and the far longer ride into town, staring out the windows at the sprawl rolling by, the crowds, the heat, the roar, the smell of Shanghai packed around her in the train car, and finally the stroll through the city proper, glittering and lush with parks and people dressed in clothes more expensive than her entire salary, the new money old money now.

She found the address, a large noodle shop near Century Park. The waiter pointed her to the little table in the back where Allen sat reading one of his pulpy sci-fi novels. Eva threaded her way through the throng.

There'd never been time for dating before. Then Allen had shown up like a fated meeting, carrying his niece's tomatoes, and they picked up right where they left off as teenagers. The familiarity made her uneasy. A waiter cut through crowd balancing steaming bowls on a tray, and she pressed herself against a table to let him by. It made her hungry, too. He was like the perfect little house at the end of her cul-de-sac life. A no-exit road, like she'd told Moira, but it turned out oblivion might be dreamful of color.

She sank onto the bench beside him, always beside him and never across, avoiding those white-picket eyes, the whirling world bright within the rings of his glasses, so full of gravity.

He closed his book and smiled. His eyes were upon her, molten in the middle and fixed on a future she could only see through squinted eyes. She squirmed and smiled back

and waved for the waiter. They talked while they waited, Allen about the book and his patients, Eva about her students, and all the while she watched him watching her.

Would it be so bad, to fall again? The thought made her leg ache and her heart pattered anxiously.

Still, he was smart, not too ambitious, decent in bed, and her parents liked him, Ma for his reverence of all things old and Chinese and Ba for his love of all things new. An almost perfect man. The noodles arrived, filling the air oniony steam.

There'd be children, eventually, a life in motion, traipsing around Shanghai, taking going to lessons, visits with the grandparents, keeping house, cooking food, all of it bright and spinning near the speed of light, sucking her up into the sky when all she really wanted anymore was to sink silently to the bottom of a pond, nestling in the muck like a stone, turning green at the far edge of the liquid light as close to the spark of the earth as she could get, attended by her handful of tadpoles. They ate, Allen quickly and Eva barely at all, slurping up the noodles one at a time.

Allen sat back with a sigh and Eva laid her chopsticks across the top of the bowl. He looked at her, and this time she could not look away. He smiled, a genuine smile, and she tried to smile back. She was too close, too close to the edge of those dangerous eyes. Not a planet at all. A blackhole, a one-way path she wasn't quite ready to follow, tempting as it was. A partner, a family, a few more tadpoles to breathe out the last breath with her. It was one thing to baptize other people's children into her religion. They were already here, and it was too late for escape. They might sip from her enlightenment as they drowned in ruin she had

wrought. But bear her own children and make Jacobs of them? The earth would not ask such a thing.

After Allen fell asleep beside her, she activated the neuronet and scrolled through her notes, looking for solid ground to anchor her against this man of cloud and chaos. She felt like a mole beneath the shadow of a restless falcon, a creature of the deep earth about to be snatched up, feeling the earth fall away, annihilated by the celestial blue of the sky, climbing all the way up until the blue became sidereal black and bird and beast alike wrecked somewhere on the wrong side of heaven. Another way. Any other way.

She had already left for work when the sun came up and Allen began to stir.

Allen wasn't surprised to find her gone. School started early and she was still not quite her old self. He whistled as he made breakfast and then pulled the small black box out of the kitchen drawer. He stared at the ring while he ate, a heavy stone pinning him pleasantly down to earth.

He loved his books about space, but they were only good fun. Real life was here, among real people, and after all the years of waiting, he'd found the right ones to fill his world. Next Sunday. He'd ask her next Sunday. At dinner. He slipped the box back in the drawer and got ready for work.

Eva wandered into the school cafeteria, balancing her tray in one hand and running her fingers across the veiny vines growing up the walls. She sat alone, half-listening to her colleagues' chatter while she picked at her rice porridge and followed the flow of notes before her eyes.

"There's another typhoon coming in—"

"Out of nowhere—"

"Supposed to be big—"

"Anything from admin yet?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure it's coming. Just look outside—"

"The seawalls'll keep the water out. Always do—"

"Subway still floods, and I'm not spending the night here."

"Anyone see what's happening in Texas?"

"I did—"

"Another Mars shot—"

"Some consortium—"

"Deep pockets—"

"Who?"

"No one knows—"

"Very hush-hush—"

"How?"

"Lots of money—"

“I heard one’s Chinese—”

“Where—”

“Douyin—”

Everyone groaned.

“I’m just saying—”

“It’ll go belly up, like all the rest—”

“Should be spending it here—”

“Ants trying to shake big trees—”

Eva stopped listening. Always someone running away instead of trying to fix what was in front of them. She pushed back damp hair and kept scrolling. Even in the airconditioned cafeteria, the heat came, around windows, under doors, and through cracks in the tofu walls.

Eva didn’t notice the room go quiet. Her leg was aching again, and she couldn’t concentrate on her reading. She switched off the neuranet. Outside the window, the willows trembled in the wind and the sky had begun to bruise. No garden today. The kids would be disappointed. She liked them, mostly, only half-awake yet greedy for insight. She’d found a way to them through the garden, hands-on biology.

They worked together, afternoons a week, the kids watching her in wonder, imitating her. In her shorts, they saw the tattoo, saw her bare feet and fingers burrow into the soil, saw her go utterly still, eyes closed. And then the world breathed with her, tree trunks bulging and willow branches reaching into the clouds to prop up the suncracked shell of the sky. The water in the swan pond bubbled as the duckweed shook and the koi rose to the surface,

moving their mouths slowly in the air, shimmering with frogsong and birdspeech and the susurrus of snails and ants skittering over bark, all of it glowing green around them.

From far away, she heard them whispering as they watched her hands move through the soil, seeing by touch, and even in the terrible heat of this now endless summer, the garden grew. Then she would open her eyes and smile at them, and they smiled back, clapping and calling her *laoshi*. Not so bad after all, being back home and living at the end of the end of the wor—

“Eval!”

Someone was shaking her. Jack. The physics teacher, frowning down at her like a paramedic.

“Sorry,” she said, shaking her head.

“School’s canceled because of the storm. The city’s closing the subway in case it floods, so you better get home.”

Eva nodded and smiled her thanks. She was alone in the cafeteria. No one had bothered to latch the doors. The wind howled and left-behind litter rode twisters of air down the empty halls.

Her phone rang, Ma and Ba asking after her. Ba wanted to send the car, but she refused.

“It’s already raining here,” she lied, “and Huinan’s too far. Keep an eye on the cat and I’ll see you when the storm blows over.”

The lights flickered and went out.

Eva sat in the dark, listening as the first fat drops of rain turned to a torrent, drowning the world outside. When she was a girl, Grandpa Eddie used to take her to the Methodist church during the summers she spent with him in Idaho, and though she didn't remember much of the sermons, it seemed to her now, with the storm rattling the walls, as if God, finding fire hadn't worked fast enough, were returning to water to wash creation clean. Let it come then and sweep her under.

The school remained closed the next day while the city wrung itself out. Dark veins of storm cloud still streaked the turquoise sky, and Eva swam through the muggy air gathering broken branches from the fruit trees to toss on the burn pile. Elsewhere, down among the wet mess, her mother duck-walked among the rows, tutting and sucking her large yellow teeth as pulled away ruined vegetables and leaves. Ba, in constant motion to keep from sinking, waddled behind her, trailed by the many little machines he'd built in retirement conscripted now into graveyard duty.

"Look at this!" said her mother, scooping up dripping soil. Eva's bare feet squelched in the mud as she squatted beside her.

Her mother poured the soil onto Eva's outstretched palm where it glowed obsidian black. A tremor of death flowed into her hand and an earthworm appeared, limp and bloated, as the soil oozed between her fingers and plopped onto the ground. It was surrounded by a faint corona, already fading. Animals and people were part of the same holy

fabric as the plants, but only rarely could she trace their threads. Beneath her feet, the planet shuddered so hard it nearly knocked Eva off her feet.

Her mother snapped at Ba over her shoulder, and he handed her the pipe, bowl already aglow, and she began to smoke.

“Any tobacco left?”

“Only what you already dried out.”

Her mother sighed, then stood, brushing her hands on her pants.

“Enough for today,” she said, eyeing Eva where she still squatted, burying the earthworm in a watery grave. They headed inside, carrying baskets of salvage. The Maintenance policy was a mistake, but such storms turned a few oases green and gave people an excuse to kid themselves, mistaking a death rattle for a hearty gasp. Everywhere, the deserts and the killer snows and the rising waters crept like cancer, killing the whales and the polar bears and the corals first while working their slower alchemy on the hardier species. All of them. But it was no secret, and all of them knew. Eva felt suddenly clammy and went upstairs to sleep.

That evening, Ba listened to the news while Eva and her mother cooked, Eva making pasta and sauce with the waterlogged tomatoes while her mother whipped up half a dozen local dishes. She told stories while the cooked, the tales of Ancient China she’d spent her lifetime studying, and Eva nodded along without really listening. Her mind was on the earthworm, on that terrible tremor, on the school garden, likely drowned. On what a life here, with Allen, without her work, might mean.

Then her mother swore, and Eva looked up.

“Turn it down!” she shouted at Ba.

He turned it up, and her mother rolled her eyes.

“How’d the two of you ever end up together?” Eva asked.

Her mother scraped furiously at the wok with her chopsticks, swirling the smoking vegetables. “What’s the point of a legendary past if there’s not a legendary future waiting one day to take its place?”

“I thought you hated technology.”

“Oyster sauce,” said her other, holding out her hand. Eva poured. “It’s dark ages I don’t like, and this is one of them.”

“You really think that?”

“Don’t you?”

Eva nodded.

“Still,” her mother continued, “days of legend need days of dark. We’re down, and there’s further to go before we come back up.”

“You think we will?”

“I know we will.” She pointed to the salt, and Eva added a pinch.

“Well, I don’t.”

Her mother switched off the heat. “You always did think in lines, Eva. Thank heavens some of us don’t.”

There was a rap at the front door, loud enough to carry over the television. The door opened, the TV switched off, and they heard Ba speaking. Eva and her mother exchanged a look. Ba poked his head into the kitchen.

“Someone’s here to see you, Eva.”

Eva glanced at her mother with a beetled brow, and her mother waved her toward the living room even as she plunged her chopsticks into Eva’s pasta sauce and gave it a stir.

The Strangers—Eva didn’t recognize them at all—stood on the stoop, a man and a woman, hands clasped in front of them. They weren’t Chinese. They weren’t anything Eva could place, but the woman wore an ocher cheongsam and the man a mandarin-collar suit embroidered in dragons. She had *buyao* in her hair and his was caught up in a golden band. They exuded elegant modernity, the confluence of the old and the new. When they saw her, they bowed.

“Dr. Peng,” said the woman. Her Mandarin was fluent and unaccented, better than Eva’s really, and sounded like pearls striking a jade plate.

“Yes,” Eva said. “And you are?”

“Your work,” said the man.

“Shines,” said the woman.

“And has drawn,”

“Our employer’s attention.”

“My teaching?”

The man and the woman smiled as one, their teeth small, translucent, and flawless.

“Your erstwhile work,”

“In the land of the midnight,”

“Sun, beneath the glass,”

“Of the Dome,”

“A sea of soft green,”
“And purple flowers,”
“Inhaling the carboniferous air,”
“And breathing out fire,”
“The very breath”
“Of life.”
“Fine work,”
“Done for the wrong people,”
“In the wrong place,”
“At the right time,”
“For it led you here.”
“Our employer,”
“Would be yours, too,”
“Though the Work is hard,”
“And far away.”
“Far indeed,”
“Stretching outward,”
“The final ripple,”
“Frozen,”
“Marmoreal,”
“In infinite serenity.”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about but—”

A card appeared between the man's fingers, and he snapped it out towards Eva. They smiled.

"One call,"

"Dr. Peng,"

"To prove the worth,"

"Of your work,"

"Against all doubt,"

"All denial,"

"All disgrace and disregard."

"Our master,"

"Mr. Shen,"

"Awaits."

For a moment, she didn't know what to do. But if there was a chance...

She took the card, and in that moment, her fingertips brushed his and Eva yanked her hand away.

Nothing. There had been nothing. Warmth, yes, and the throb of a heart. The coarseness of a callous and the keratin of a nail. The whorls of a fingerprint pressed against her own, but beneath it all, beneath the verisimilitude of flesh, lay no trace of life, no spark of soul. Even a stone had a soul, an ant, but not these two.

She was about to drop the card and slam the door in their faces when Kezi started up the garden path. He froze when we saw the strangers, twitching his tail warily. Then he

suddenly relaxed and wove his way between their legs with a purr before slipping into the house. All three of them watched him go.

“I’ll...think about it,” she said. “Thank you.”

They bowed again, turned together, and walked across the yard to a waiting car. They did not speak to one another, and they did not look back. When Eva finally turned around, her parents were watching her from the kitchen door. She tapped the card on the lintel, blinked twice, and went upstairs without a word where she scrubbed her hands with soapy water and set the card on the desk beside her bed.

When Lin Hua came up an hour later with a tray of food, a single lamp lit the room, warm wet air rolled in through an open window, and Eva snored softly on the bed. The neuranet still flickered, and she switched it off before pulling the blanket over her daughter. Her daughter. She didn’t think of herself as Eva’s mother, but she did try to think of Eva as her daughter. She deserved that much. So did her father, sitting downstairs, peering over the rims of his glasses at whatever contraption he was fiddling with now.

She picked up the card and examined it. Fine paper, very expensive, embossed with nothing but a private contact number, eights and sixes bounded on either end by fours. She was not a superstitious woman, but she was a traditionalist. Why would someone choose to surround lucky numbers with dead ones?

She didn't trust the strangers or their offer. Why would someone suddenly want to fund her daughter's obsession after everyone—and she did mean everyone, including her many professional contacts and friends—had called it dead-end work?

She went to the window, lit her pipe, and puffed. She did this, sometimes, when Eva and Peng Dafei slept, her husband the sleep of the dead and her daughter the sleep of a restless stone dreaming it had once been something else—and might be again. She watched them, and she worried, and she wondered about a future she would have to wait many lives to see. Would she wake up again in the dark, or would she walk among the legends she loved? No way to know.

She snorted and exhaled smoke into the warm air. How like her grandmother Eva was—and her grandfathers—and, for that matter, her mother, tangled up all of them in their obsessions like flies on flypaper, flapping their way towards ruin.

Eva would accept the offer, whatever her misgivings. She knew that. What she didn't know was whether Eva's soul was heading downward or up. She supposed it didn't matter. Wrangle with history and the Great Wheel as she might, it had a purpose and a will of its own. Unlike so many around her, she learned to surrender to the course of events. In this lifetime or the next, Eva would too.

Peng Dafei came up around midnight to collect the untouched tray and let the cat into the room. Kezi hopped on the bed and curled up beside Eva while he opened the window wider to let more air in.

Like his wife, Peng Dafei believed firmly in fate, the turning of the Great Wheel on which rode the many souls, events, and places of reality, seemingly separate but all of them one, waiting across the eons to align time and again along creation's infinite arc. Waiting for *yuanfen*.

Eva was meant to meet the Strangers and to follow them, of that he was certain, yet it mystified him all the same. They had been soulless—a man didn't spend his life giving minds to machines just to confuse a mind with a soul—but they hadn't been machines. Empty vessels, perhaps. But was it not the emptiness of the vessel that imbued it with worth? Peng Dafei had thought all souls were formed in the instant of creation. Empty vessels. Perhaps he had been wrong. Perhaps the Wheel had secrets still and turned a far greater machine.

Unlike his wife, he wasn't sure Eva would go. A choice remained. And doubts. Would she see this thread of destiny for what it was?

He picked up the tray and pulled the door to with a soft snap.

Choose wisely, daughter, and follow the thread where you find it. It's a long wait for the next revolution.

It was the last period of the day and the kids clambered around Eva, eager for the outdoors. Then one of them noticed the stack of worksheets in her hands.

“Aren’t we going out today?”

“The garden needs help!”

“Come on, miss!”

“We’re not going to the garden today.”

“Peng *laoshi*—”

“Not today.”

They slumped sulkily into their seats. She paired them up, handed out papers, and wandered around the room, barely noticing the occasional hand sprout and the wither away when it became clear no help was coming. She had no time for their questions or their childish yearning. Let them find their own ways for once.

What was the harm in calling? In getting the details?

She watered the plants in the back of the classroom. The clock ticked. The kids wrote.

Could it be a trick? Or a poisoned peach? Did it matter?

She sprinkled fish feed into the tank by the window and watched the mudfish uproot itself from its mucky wallow, tempted suddenly out of stillness. It made her dizzy.

I might’ve been wrong about the Strangers. And I could quit if I didn’t like it.

The bell rang, and the kids left without saying goodbye to her, some of them muttering maledictions to one another as they dropped their papers in the inbox.

Once they'd gone, Eva fell into her desk chair and fiddled idly with the leaves of the houseplant on her desk before slipping her finger into the soil. She left them a long time in that little oasis, fecund and bright but still shaded with death. Then she shook them loose like dense roots and licked them clean.

She messaged Allen first, inviting him to dinner, and then Moira, telling her about the offer. Allen confirmed immediately. She chewed at her thumb and flipped through the kids' papers until Moira's message pinged. One word: *Go!* She scooped the papers into the wastebasket before plugging As into the gradebook for the assignment. Then she spent the rest of the afternoon hauling her classroom plants out into the hallways and into other teachers' rooms where she knew the *ayis* would keep them watered. Then she carried the fish tank out to the pond, sloshing muddy water all the way across the pitch, and poured the mudfish in among the stelliferous koi. She deposited the tank in her classroom and scribbled a short goodbye on the board signed *Love, Ms. Peng*.

She had no need of acolytes any longer. Now, she would be able to give them something so much better.

She met Allen at the hot pot place by his apartment, and she could he was nervous. She never called on weeknight and he kept fiddling with his pocket.

"Where are your scrubs?" she asked.

“I had to run home first. To get something,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting to see you.”

When they reached the table, she sat across from him. He looked at her quizzically.

“Tonight’s important,” she said.

Allen swallowed. What was in his pocket?

They ate in silence, catching sight of one another through the steam, Allen smiling like a worried schoolboy and Eva smiling sadly.

Halfway through the meal, the waitress refilled the broth and turned up the heat. Eva squirmed, suddenly sweaty and irritable, the fabric of her bra itchy and damp. The air conditioners did nothing to hold off the heat. The broth was too spicy and the whole room was thick with the sharp smell of Sichuan peppers, five spice, and lard, with the smell of a future she had narrowly avoided. The corner of the card thrust through the thin fabric of her pocket and pierced her thigh like a thorn right where the scar glowed among the serpent’s scales of her tattoo.

When the steam cleared, there was Allen, holding something hidden in his fist of ghostly knuckles, his mouth unfolding beneath a lip rimed in salt-white sweat. His skin was pale, like a seashell too long gone from the sea.

“I got a job offer,” Eva blurted before he could speak.

He snatched his hand away and his white face flushed.

“In Shanghai,” he stammered.

Eva shook her head.

“And you’re gonna take it.”

Eva nodded.

Allen swallowed and slipped his hand back in his pocket.

“And us?”

Eva paid the bill even though he offered, as he always did, standing beside her like a lost little boy, shellshocked and far away from the moment. They faced one another on the noisy street, passersby streaming all around them like bits of bright paper blown on the breeze. She tried to give him an awkward hug, which he didn’t return, and wished him well before turning in the opposite direction and slipping into the stream of people.

His eyes were on her back, reaching for her with rays of light, but his roots within her were shallow and easily sundered. To Eva’s surprise, she still shed a tear, swiping at it with a fingertip and flicking it away into the air where it hung for a little while, iridescent and trembling, before it tumbled to the asphalt and vanished underfoot.

She pulled the card from her pocket and fingered it as she walked. Sixes and eights surround by fours.

She dialed.

“Dr. Peng,” said a man’s voice.

“At last,” said a woman’s.

The hair on her arms stood up and behind her, the tear made a *si si sizze*. She swallowed her misgivings.

“I have questions first,” she said.

“Ask.”

“Where am I going?”

There was a pause.

“To West Texas,”

“And then the new lab.”

Her heart fluttered. She’d been to Texas once, a long time ago.

“Is that in Texas, too?” she said, tongue dry.

“No.”

“Where is it?”

“We cannot say.”

“We are sworn,

“To secrecy.”

“We must protect,”

“The Work.”

“Fine,” Eva said. “And if I change my mind?” She wouldn’t, but she wanted to hear what they said.

“From here,”

“From now,”

“The way back is simple.”

“From Texas,”

“Is it harder.”

“And from the place of the Work,”

“It is very hard indeed.”

“You must be certain,”

“Your resolve like stone.”

“Much depends upon you,”

“Upon your work.”

They had her. She knew it, and so did they. But she didn’t have to make it quite so easy.

“I have two conditions.”

“Yes?”

“I don’t fly, so no planes.”

“We are aware of your fear,” said the man and Eva shuddered.

“No planes,” said the woman.

“And I’m bringing the cat. To Texas and to the lab.”

A pause.

“It would be—”

A sound on the end of the other end of the line. Distant speech.

“It will be,” said the man.

“As you wish,” said the woman.

“When do I leave?”

“We will come for you,”

“Tomorrow.”

“So soon?”

“All the machinery,”

“Is in motion.”

“The Wheel turns.”

“The Work will not wait,”

“And wills itself to Being,”

“Rushing forth,”

“That we might stand in stillness,”

“Atop the wreckage,”

“Of time.”

“What does that me—”

“Tomorrow,”

“Dr. Peng.”

“Will you come?”

Such hope in that question. Such yearning.

She chewed her lip and let the silence stretch. The soles of her shoes stuck to the sidewalk as if sinking into the cement. All around her color whirled, the ginkgoes and the planer trees bending down and breathing her in.

“Will you come?”

She missed a step and for an instant became untethered, airborne, and terrified before she fell back to earth the delicacy of a *wuxia* warrior, the concrete bending beneath her like a sponge and then splitting apart to reveal the dark soil underneath, teeming with life. The woodlice and worms swelled into squirrels and serpents before vanishing among mushrooms and grass grown large with life.

“Will you come?”

The trees, wearing Strangers' faces, shook off their shoes of stone, pulling themselves up by the roots and climbing down into the crater beneath her feet to settle anew in ancient soil long buried beneath the madness of men.

"Will you come?"

Heart hammering, she breathed the forest air, stinking and sweet, sweltering and suddenly chilly, the smell of it rust-red. And then it crumbled, all of it, beasts to bones and bones to dust as fungus devoured the trees until it too turned to desert and all the world lay silent in death.

"I'll come," she said, stepping down onto the sidewalk, the sound of her footfall round with roar of the *Om*.

"Tomorrow," said the man, and the line went dead.

She WeChatted her resignation to the principal, transferred the cancellation fee without waiting for a reply, and deleted his contact as she headed for the lustrous maw of the subway station.

Had she not so feared the sky, she might have noticed the Moon, the stars, and the ruddy speck among them reaching down with arms of russet light, and she might have seen the trees stretching their limbs towards heaven. Blind as she was to everything above her, she still felt the old roots of the world shudder below as the escalator dragged her down to the glowing metal guts of the earth.

“You’ve made up your mind then?” said her mother from the doorway.

“I guess so.”

Her mother walked over to the bed, sat, and pulled out her pipe.

“Ma...”

“It’s the last I have left and the smell on your clothes will remind you of home,” she said, sucking the pipe to life and blowing blue smoke onto the laundry.

Eva rolled her eyes and smiled as she continued to pack.

“You tell Allen?”

Eva stopped folding and started again. “Yeah.”

“And?”

“He didn’t say much.”

Her mother nodded, sagely and silent.

Eva stopped folding and looked out the window.

“I think he was gonna ask me to marry him.”

“He loved you even when you were kids.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Any regrets?”

Eva sighed and started folding again. “No.” She meant it. She’d guessed what he held in his hand when she cut him off. If he’d spoken first.... That was a path she could no longer follow, not with this last chance hanging like low fruit before her. Allen would be fine. Eventually.

Her mother let it lie and, with the pipe clenched between her teeth, she began to help fold and pack. Around the pipe she said, “Where is it?”

“Somewhere in Texas, I think. At least the first part.”

She stopped folding for a moment and looked at Eva, green eyes bright.

“Same place as—”

“I didn’t ask,” Eva said, snatching up a shirt.

“Will you be OK?”

“He died a long time ago.”

Her mother nodded again and placed the last of the shirts into the knapsack, then pulled something from the pocket of her dress.

“What’s this?”

“Tranquilizers, in case you have to fly.”

“They said no planes.”

Her mother made to put the bottle away and Eva stuck out her hand.

“Where’d you get them?”

“Someone called in the prescription and the *Eleme* drone delivered it.”

Allen. Who else could it have been? Her new employers? Her stomach turned. Allen. It must have been Allen, looking out for her, telling her “No hard feelings.” *Would I still go if they asked me to fly?* She hadn’t flown since the accident.

Eva slipped the bottle into her bag and zipped it shut.

Her mother reached over and patted her hand. For the first time, Eva saw how old she looked, the backs of her hands as rindy as her father’s, gnarled and green with age.

“Come downstairs when you’re ready. We’ve got something else for you to take.”

On the coffee sat a small chest. It was ancient, cobbled together from many types of wood, and the tarnished brass lock chocked on the key before the bolt slid loose and the lid groaned open. The four of them, Ma, Ba, Eva, and cat looked down at it. It was filled with papers and a notebook wrapped in oilcloth, an old-timey flash drive sealed in a Ziplock bag, and pendant of particolored stone strong on a tarnished silver chain.

“What is it?” Eva asked.

“The past,” said her mother.

“And the future,” said her father.

The pages sighed like spirits as Eva thumbed through the yellow papers and the notebook, heavy in her hands with a gravity such objects should not have possessed. Latin and a little English, some illustrations, other languages she didn’t know, and the flash drive was too old to be opened on a modern computer.

“What do they say?” she asked, wrapping the papers back up and picking up the pendant.

“You’ll have to find out for yourself.”

She pulled Kezi out of the chest, locked it, slipped the key onto the chain, and put the chain around her neck. The stone glowed against her skin and the houseplants seemed to swell when the stone first touched her, filling the air with a murmur before fading and falling silent. Eva blinked, waiting, and finally shrugged. Whatever it was would have to wait.

The next morning, she looked back at her parents from the rear window of the AV and waved. They were holding hands, something they hadn’t done in years, and just before

they vanished behind the garden walls, a shade of sadness colored their smiles. For an instant, Eva thought about telling the car to turn around, but it had already slipped into traffic, racing down the highway toward the pier.

Beside her on the seat, Kezi stretched and settled down to sleep, utterly at peace with wherever they were going. Eva envied his ease. Then she slapped her thighs, flexed her bad leg, and let out a breath. She had her second chance, whatever the cost. With Allen, her parents, and the box already forgotten, Eva switched on the neuronet and began to work.

As soon as they were informed that Eva was aboard the ship, the Strangers slipped through the garden gate and into the house where they set about their work in silence.

They did not question their instruction. They were incapable of it. But something deep down flickered in them as they finished, as if some lingering bit of Eva's breath had found its way to them. They looked at one another, eyes bright for one fraction of second before dimming again and strolled out the door into the dawn light.

III

Rural West Texas, Kongsang Complex, Two Weeks Later

The van turned off the highway onto a service road in the West Texas desert. The Strangers who had collected Eva from the port in California rode in the front seat, the man driving and the woman staring straight ahead through the windshield with hazy blue eyes. They wore cowboy boots and bolos, costumes Eva found strange when she saw them, but she had been too tired after the trip to bother asking. There'd been a little prick when she took the bottle of water the woman offered her in the van, and she'd been asleep ever since.

The guards waved them through a checkpoint wordlessly, and the van turned again, following the curve of a low hill until a complex of low buildings came into sight, still as a ghost town.

A rumble filled the air.

Beyond the buildings rose the scaffolding of a launch tower and squatting upon it like a smoldering dragon stood the rocket, aswarm with ant-sized technicians performing final maintenance.

The woman looked back at Eva, slumped over and slack-jawed in the seat. No planes. A promise kept.

But would she come?

The woman glanced at the man as he drove, and he returned the look, quickly, pale eyes to pale eyes, their hair glowing. They did not speak, but something passed between them, a prismatic spark that died like sparks from a flint with nothing to catch onto. Even so, their hearts beat suddenly faster, and the slow metal of their minds turned once.

The man drove the van into a garage and down into the earth.

Eva awoke with a start on a soft bed. Lamplight burned somewhere in the room, and she heard a soft sound like chopsticks clicking.

She sat up, rubbed sleep from her eyes, and turned on the bed to find a woman sitting in one of two chairs in the corner of the room, humming away as she knitted while Kezi purred in her lap.

The needles kept moving as she said, “Welcome back to the world of the living.”

Eva smacked her lips, blinked, shook her heavy head.

“They doped you, I imagine,” said the woman, her voice raspy. “There’s water on the nightstand there.” She motioned with her chin.

Eva drank. Guzzled in fact, until the glass was empty. She looked at the woman. Hair the color of silver thread beneath the lamp light and skin leathered, crisscrossed with a patchwork of gullies. A smoker’s skin. Smoke. The woman shimmered and hung lazily upon the chair like a brume.

“Dalia,” she said, smiling.

“Eva.”

The room rumbled and Eva looked around wildly.

“What was that?”

“Nothing to worry about,” Dalia said. “Have some food.”

A peach sat on the nightstand beside the empty glass. Suddenly ravenous, Eva took a bite.

“Feels better already, doesn’t it?”

Eva nodded. “You work here, too?”

“Something like that. Ninety-eight of us. Ninety-nine now that you’re here. We’ve been waiting.”

“For me?”

“For one another. People have been arriving for the last month. I was one of the first. You’re the last.”

“And what’s next?”

The room rumbled.

“We leave.”

“Where are we going? The—those people—wouldn’t say.”

“The boss likes to meet folks when they arrive. Everyone’s here for something different.”

“Makes sense.” Eva paused. “But shouldn’t people start working immediately? Why wait?”

Dalia smiled, “We have to go together.”

“Why?”

Still knitting, Dalia said, “Jumpy as June bug.”

The room rumbled.

“What is that?”

“Our ride.”

“Are we on something?” Eva said, sweat prickling her underarms. “Are we on a plane?” She looked around, felt the wall, her mouth dry.

“Relax. We’re in the dorms, safe and sound on the ground. We don’t leave until tomorrow. They’re testing the ship.”

“What kind of ship rumbles like that?”

“The rocketship kind. The going-to-Mars kind.”

Mars. They wanted her to go to Mars. Like hell. her stomach twisted and the peach came up, raw and mixed with water. No planes. Nothing about flight. The medicine. Allen? No.

Dalia was standing over her, holding her hair while she wretched. What good was her work billions of miles from home? If they even survived. No one else had. Not for long unless they returned.

Dalia handed her a tissue, sat down again, and picked up her knitting. Kezi ate from a bowl by her feet.

“They said no planes,” Eva whispered.

“It’s not a plane.”

Her skin was clammy, and her throat ached.

“I don’t fly.”

“You will.”

Her head spun. Nothing. No memory of arriving. Had the Strangers touched her, carried her here? Left the lacuna of their being upon her. Her stomach roiled again.

“I was asleep when we arrived.”

“They do that to the skittish ones.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Dalia smiled at her, “You will.”

“Oh yeah?” The fear was making her angry, filling her with fight. A long way, they’d said. A long job. But this?

“They’ve got something on all of us, something we need, or want, or fear. You weren’t the first one to get cold feet, the first one to wake up in my room, but every one of them’s stayed so far.”

“Is that what you did?”

Dalia laughed, “Nope. They told me up front we were going to Mars when they came for me. Of course, they could have told me we were going to hell and I’d’ve gone along just to get out of that prison.”

“You were in prison?”

“Death row, in fact. Over in Indonesia.”

“What for?”

Dalia shrugged and smirked, “I was a doctor with a prescription pad and a lot of debt.”

“Drugs?”

“Yarn,” she said, eyes glittering.

“So, they blackmailed you? And all the others?”

“Some, sure, but not me. They’ll come for you soon and give you a choice. But like I said, they all choose to stay.”

“What was yours?”

“To walk out with them or walk out with the executioners.”

Eva fumbled her phone out and began messaging her parents and Moira.

“Won’t work,” said Dalia. “No signal here.”

She wanted to scream, but before she could, Dalia set her knitting aside, walked over to her, and embraced her. Eva tensed and went slack. She’d expected smoke, but the woman smelled like Moira, the smell of incense, experience, and age. Of talcum powder and lavender.

“What’s keeping you here?” Dalia asked, “The distance or the fear?”

Eva didn’t answer.

The Strangers came for her in the night. She’d slept again and dreamed of the fall. She lay there, beneath the spinning tire swing, the sky rolling within its black ring, her fractured femur thrusting up red-stained where it had pierced the muscles of her thigh. Grandpa Eddie was already gone, and she turned in the grass towards the trunk of the oak. A fat ocher and emerald serpent slithered out from the roots and spoke to her. And then the ants and every dewy blade, the crisp leaf fall, the loam. She turned, pressing her lips to the ground, and the soiled breathed itself into her—

Dalia was shaking her.

“They’re here for you.”

So they were, dressed again in Chinese clothes, their hands folded before them. They bowed, stepped aside, and she entered a corridor speckled here and there with potted plants.

As they walked, she noticed the others, always in pairs, moving through the halls on secret missions. They looked alike, mostly, except for their clothes, not clonelike but a clan.

“The same,” she said.

The woman glanced her.

“You’re all the same.”

They did not speak.

“What are you?” she asked.

The man smiled, “We are the *zhiren*,”

“The paper people.”

“*Jintong*,” said the man, touching his chest.

“*Yunü*,” said the woman, touching hers.

“And so are they.”

Creatures of myth. The servants of the immortals. Playthings of gods.

“Come,” said the woman, quickening her pace.

“The time grows short.”

They turned down an empty corridor and passed a room where a picture hung. Nine people. A towering man, grasping the brim of his shining Stetson; a bored-looking woman with golden hair piled atop her head picked at piece of thread hanging from her Chanel suit; a short woman stood beside her in a sari, eyes closed beneath her luminous bindi. A young man in a sweatshirt and sneakers, stared into the near distance at data no one else could see,

lips twitching as he coded. An old man in a biretta and the robes of a priest stared unpriestly at the woman beside him; she had the bearing of a general, straight-backed and severe, her dark hair cropped short. An ancient couple in expensive dashikis lounged lazurely beside one another like senile cats; and among them all, almost hidden, floated a handsome man, Chinese, wearing a mandarin collar suit glittering with embroidery. His face was familiar, though she couldn't place it.

"Is he usually up this late?" Eva asked.

"He has been awake,"

"For many years,"

"Prying apart the Sky,"

"And the Earth,"

"Fashioning from fecund clay,"

"And fertile sea,"

"The very matrix,"

"For your work."

"Dalia said there are ninety-nine of us."

"She spoke,"

"The truth."

"So, it's our work?"

The *zhiren* glanced at one another as if she weren't there.

"Yes," said the man.

"Your work."

They walked in silence.

“How did you get this job,” Eva asked when the walls rumbled again and nearly spooked her out of her skin.

“We were made for it,” said the woman.

“And you’re going to Mars, too?”

“Some of us,” said the man.

“Are already there,” said the woman.

Eva missed a step, stumbled, and caught herself on the woman’s arm. The same nothingness as before, the same void. Made? Already there? She felt suddenly sick again, and when they passed a potted plant, she headed towards it and thrust her fingers into the soil. The green. She was back among the green. That the plant should not have grown in the unsunny halls coiling beneath the desert did not occur to her in her relief.

When her stomach was stilled and she came back, the *z’hiren* were watching her, their dark eyes full of adoration, like worshippers looking into the face of God.

“Come,” said the woman, her voice like a hollow pot.

“The time is short.”

They stopped before a door, larger than the others she’d seen, intricately carved and painted with scenes of a yellow sky and ruddy earth. The *z’hiren* stood to either side and the door slid open. The room beyond was fast and dim, full of mist and the fragrance of plants, frangipani and osmanthus, jasmine and peach. Eva stepped through the door and stopped. The *z’hiren* closed in behind her, blocking the way back. Only way to go.

She walked deep into the grove, following a path of stones set in moss, and brushed her fingers over bark and bamboo. Living, breathing plants, growing beneath the earth. Nothing was artificial, not in any way she could detect, though clearly something had been done to make them grow without light. It was synbio of the most cutting-edge sort, a work of genius.

Among the trees stood an easel. The Chinese man from the picture stood before it, his feet and the hem of his robe lost in mist, painting with delicate precision, a wandering man among flowering peaches. He set aside the brush, wiped his hands on a towel from a *zhiren*, turned to her, and spoke.

“What do you think of my work?”

“The sophistication’s extraordinary.”

“But it’s not what you would have made, is it?”

Eva shook her head.

Mr. Shen smiled, “That’s why you’re here, why I need you on Mars.”

“I’m here because your people promised to fund my work.”

“Yes.”

“On Mars.”

“On Mars,” he repeated.

“That’s not what I thou—”

He cut her off, “You came here on a promise, without batting an eye. Did you think there would be no cost? No compromise?”

“The cost is higher than I thought.”

“The place? Its history of death?”

Eva didn’t answer.

“It’s not the distance, is it?” he said. “And it’s not the history. No. But it is your history.”

Mr. Shen stepped toward her, close enough for her to smell the oolong on his breath.

“I know you, Eva Peng. I know what you fear. Leaving behind the stillness, stretching the little sphere of your life into something unfamiliar? Those are only the fears you pretend to.”

He took another step and leaned in, his lips beside her ear. “That scar on your leg, the memory of what happened here.”

Eva stiffened.

“Oh yes, right above this very spot, his fall poetic justice for your own. That promise you made as you lay broken beneath the swing, a promise made in fear, has buried you alive, smothered you in soil. You book passage on ships instead of planes and spend summers in the land of the midnight sun, afraid of the firmament looming over you like a monster in the dark.”

The room rumbled. She heard his lips bend beside her into a smile.

“The very thought of climbing upon the back of that smoldering dragon makes you sick with terror. Will you fall again? Is that your fate?”

“But it wasn’t the sky that broke your leg, Eva. It was the unyielding earth that nearly crippled you, and yet you ran for cover into its very arms. You let it trap you here.”

“What about Eddie?” she whispered. “It wasn’t the ground.”

“No, it wasn’t the ground. But his fate is not yours.

“Of course you can stay behind. You can spend your days rummaging through your notes while Allen’s children play at your feet, wondering what might have been while the world you love—the world that holds you prisoner—breaks the rest of your bones in her death throes. Or you can come with me, and in so doing, keep your promise to her.

“I have poured everything I have into this, lifetimes of labor, just as you have done. You need my support to realize your work, and I need you to realize mine.”

He held out a contract. “A special agreement, Eva, just for you. Transportation back when your work for me is done and financing for your work in perpetuity.”

Her shirt clung to her skin and the trees around her trembled. How had he known? The mist parted and through the veil she the *zhiren* at work, raking leaves and harvesting fruit. Childlike. As yet unbroken.

She let out a breath and it swelled, filling the air, shaking the boughs of the trees and bending them backwards, blowing away the mist and shocking Shen and his *zhiren* into stupefied stillness.

Then she signed the contract with one trembling finger.

Mr. Shen smiled as he watched her go, limping faintly and reaching out idly to brush the bark and the blossoms as she went. He believed in yoking the fate, not following it, and

everything he did was meant to shape destiny, to wrench the wheel in the right direction, and, like a stubborn donkey, one day, to break it.

Eva Peng was part of that, the mission of many lifetimes. Why else had he established the scholarships that funded her education? Had one of his smaller companies establish Wayfinder and the Dome? Had her work there gently sabotaged? Cut off her funding? Forced her back home? The divinity within her, proven in that terrible breath, was the divinity he had gifted her, and all around her hung his reins of silk.

“Are you sure about her?” said the Golden Woman, coming to stand beside him with a thimble on her thumb and the frayed Chanel jacket over her arm.

Mr. Shen nodded.

The Golden Woman coughed, a tearing sound like ripped silk, and he looked at the canyons furrowing her face beneath the heavy make-up. The rings beneath her eyes were the color of bruised plums and her once golden hair was ghostly and strawlike. As he waxed, she seemed to wane, and it tore at his heart. Even now, when she had no love left for him and he had bled her dry, she stood steadfast beside him, no longer a wife but forever an ally, the only one of the Nine he could trust.

A pair of *zhi ren* approached with platters of freshly picked peaches. Shen and the woman each took a bite.

He took her hand, and she did not pull away, not immediately.

“I am sure of everything.”

She spat the peach onto the tray with a sneer, twisted loose, and walked away. Over her shoulder she said, “I hope you’re right.”

Mr. Shen nodded to another pair of *zhiren* standing to the side. They bowed, took activated their neuranets, and began to erase every earthly trace of Eva Peng.

He swallowed the peach. Not yet ripe. But soon. Very soon indeed.

Back her in the room, Dalia was already asleep, her knitting on the table beside the chair. Eva messaged her parents and told them she might be gone a long time, that it really was a remote assignment, much further away than Iceland. She messaged Moira, too. They responded almost immediately, as if they'd been waiting, urging her to go. She didn't tell them where. That would have made it real.

The room rumbled, the rocket's borborygmus threatening to devour her. She took one of Allen's tablets and tried to sleep, slipping in and out of dreams.

Grandpa Eddie was there, and Grandpa Simon, the three of them sitting around the kitchen table at the end of her last summer on the farm before college.

"It's only a few days," Eddie said. "Down to Texas, up into the sky, and then I'm back."

Simon frowned, and Eva picked at her eggs.

Eddie left that afternoon.

They watched his stream from the living room, heard him chatting with the other men and women dressed in blue flight suits for the trip of a lifetime, up past the edge of the atmosphere and around the world a half dozen times before a gentle runway landing in Western China. They were all going to meet up in Shanghai after, at her parents' house, their

first full reunion in years. The rocket burned up on launch and the live feed died in a flash of fire.

Eva woke and the room rumbled.

Dalia was there, holding her hair as she vomited.

They came for the cat and their belongings before daybreak, packing the cat into a stasis container and the rest of their things into small plastic boxes, half a cubic meter each to carry their lives to another world. Eva's hands were shaking so badly that Dalia had to help her with the zippers while the *zhiren* carried the boxes out to the loader.

A gong pealed, summoning them to the assembly point. Dalia took Eva's hand and threaded her through the halls, whispering all the while words of comfort. Eva could make no sense of what she said, but having the drugs and Dalia beside her was enough, her hand like Theseus's golden rope guiding her through the labyrinth of her terror. She took another tablet, and the roar of her heart grew distant.

They drove to the launch pad in caravan of military transports. The nine people from the picture, including Shen and the man in the Stetson, the Cowboy, were waiting. The Cowboy drawled instructions over the intercom, and they fell into place, a rippling throng, and filed forward two by two into the elevator. The desert sand struggled through the concrete and steel, reached out for her, and tangled around her legs, tugging her earthward. With one terrific yank, Dalia hauled her forward and the ground fell away.

Eva scrambled for Allen's bottle and found it empty. When had she taken them all? She looked around wild-eyed and saw the line of people shrinking below her. The rocket rattled her teeth and she felt them breaking, plummeting back to earth, piercing the sand like

anchors. Dalia was pressing something between her lips, holding her nose and jaw closed. Eva swallowed and something warm spread in her. Dalia rattled an Altoid box under Eva's nose and winked. First in a trickle and then in a torrent, the earth let her go. She stepped across the threshold and through the hatch, her bad leg holding strong as it landed. Eva glanced over shoulder at the horizon. *Be back soon.* Mercifully, she even believed it.

III

Mars, In Orbit above Isidis Planitia, Jacob's Ladder

The portholes were small, and the ship was oriented such that the plant remained hidden while the AI pilot maneuvered them towards something the Cowboy called Jacob's Ladder.

Eva clustered with the rest of the colonists in the fo'c'sle, waiting for the shielding to slide away from observation windows and give them their first view of Mars. She'd already bummed another pill from Dalia just after coming out of stasis to keep herself from going to pieces. She clung to the handrail with a white-knuckle grip and, while almost everyone around her tumbled and floated, did her best to press her feet to the floor. Once in a while, Dalia floated by and gave her shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

The Cowboy commanded them to silence as the machinery clicked and the shield rolled back. Dead ahead and growing slowly closer was Phobos, Mars's largest moon, and

from its oblong promontory a rope of black carbon descended toward the lower lefthand side of the window.

“Jacob’s Ladder,” said the Cowboy, pride in his voice. “It’ll take us straight to the surface in just under a week.”

The colonists followed it with their eyes, and there, shining like a russet pearl, was the planet. It turned beneath them, the northern hemisphere unblemished and capped in white and the southern a mess of canyons and craters. Thin clouds scudded across the ocher surface and in the north, unimpeded, a vast wall of dust and fire rolled low and rough across the plains, a Martian simoom, crackling with lightning in the poisonous air. Nowhere was there a trace of green or blue. Just brindle stone and the ghostly frost of the icecaps glowing like funereal chrysanthemums. A corpse of a world. *What am I supposed to do with this?* Eva said to herself, looking away.

The ship docked and they began the transfer to the gondolas of Jacob’s Ladder. All the while the Cowboy talked at them over the intercom. It was a space elevator, he said, a marvel of AI engineering and construction, the crown jewel of his contributions to their enterprise, begun by the advance team nearly a decade ago and ready just in time for their inaugural descent. Riding down the sky in a piece of untested megatech made Eva lightheaded and it was all Dalia could do to get her doped again before she vomited. Once aboard, the *zhiren* escorted each of them to a private pod and they began their long descent to the surface.

With Dalia’s Altoid box in her suit pocket, Eva closed the door to her pod, darkened the windows, and curled up. She missed Kezi, still in stasis until they arrived at the habitat.

In the dimness, she couldn't feel the elevator's movement, and she fooled herself into thinking she was standing on solid ground. Later, during the first artificial night, she slipped out and wandered towards one of the observations decks, taking another of Dalia's tablets along the way. She sat with her back to the windows, sipping cold tea and eating freeze-dried fish from packets, and tried to screw up her courage to turn around and look at the infinitude of distant suns speckling the sky.

The very thought of it nearly brought the tea and the fish back up.

She hadn't always feared the sky. She'd even loved it, once, on summer visits to the farm when she was very young. The middle of August. The height of the Perseids. If Grandpa Simon ruled the day, night was Grandpa Eddie's domain, but during the meteor showers, even Simon stayed up late, slurping strong tea from his thermos to keep awake.

Toting blankets and lawn chairs and a cooler full of snacks, they set out at twilight, just as the world was growing dark and the last of the fireflies, nearly extinct, shimmered like visiting stars in the mist around the woods and the stream. They splashed through the water, Eva giggling and grunting as she clutched the cooler in two hands and balanced it on her hip, careful not to look at the little mausoleum beside the creek where, Grandpa Eddie sometimes whispered to her, smoke curling from his nostrils and his wet green eyes wild, ghosts lingered.

And then they were out of the woods and the water, into the field smelling of new-mown hay. The grass trembled with the bonesong of crickets and the frog chorus croaked brekekek behind them. Above them, the new Moon stood so close Eva might have stepped up onto its dark face. They sat among the bales, oohing and aahing while the holy dome of

the heavens shattered and the stars fell, joining the fireflies and multiplying their numbers until the field turned to light, sky and earth vanishing into one as in the first days before man had sundered himself from the world, and even the frogs and the crickets fell silent in awe.

It had all changed when she was ten, and she'd made the mistake of slipping into one of the forbidden rooms on the top floor of the house where Grandpa Eddie spent most nights skulking about, muttering to himself, rattling locked knobs and moving his water-rumpled canvases from wall to wall like as if he were trying to solve a puzzle. It was his old observatory, sealed up tight since before she was born.

Why don't we watch from up there she'd said over breakfast the morning after the meteor shower. Grandpa Simon pressed a finger to his lips and wagged his head like a stalk of wheat. Somewhere in the kitchen, Eddie swore, and smoke filled the room.

While Eddie slept away the late morning and Simon worked in the greenhouses, Eva rummaged through the scary drawer where all the odds and ends ended up, including the farmhouse's many keys, until she found one with a piece of masking tape that read "observatory" and slipped it into her pocket.

Whether the shriek of the hinges woke him or some more sinister intuition, Eva never knew. Grandpa Eddie caught her just as she was stepping through the door into the dusty dimness. He grabbed her hard by the arms and hoisted her into the air, spinning her around and shouting at her with such fury that spittle flew from his lips and his words failed him and a blood vessel burst in his eye, inches from her small wet face, turning the sclera crimson. Then Grandpa Simon was there, speaking sternly in a soft voice, peeling Eddie's

fingers away, taking Eva in his arms. They left him there, tall shoulders stooped and shuddering as he wept.

The next morning, except for his bloody eye and a few finger-shaped bruises on her arms, it was as if nothing had happened. The observatory was locked again, and Grandpa Eddie even served her ice cream and pecan pie for breakfast, their customary end-of-summer indulgence. But the next year, when they made the trip back to the field, the woods and river were just woods and a river and the meteor shower was just that: a handful of faraway streaks at the edge of the atmosphere, slow to come and quickly departed. For the first time ever, she asleep halfway through and had to be carried home.

Eva was one of the last ones out when the gondolas made planetfall at the anchor point in the middle of Isidis Planitia. The sun was small and strangely white in the thin air, and all around her stretched the plains until she struck the distant southern cliffs bounding the crater's basin. The transports were coming for them, the Cowboy said. Have a little fun!

Eva switched her helmet's intercom to emergency-only and shuffled away from the gondola towards the sand, careful to move too quickly and launch herself into the air like many of the others were doing in the low gravity. Dalia had cut her off the anxiolytics, and she felt naked, stripped down to nothing without the green around her. The wind ruffled the dunes, shaping them into slowly shifting waves. She squatted down and stuck her gloved fingers into the sand.

Where the Earth had teemed, even in its sickness, Mars moved not at all. She found the same void, the same emptiness as the *z'hiren*, even through the suit. A dead world. No. Something had to have lived to be dead, and nothing had lived here. They were invaders, interlopers, and this world was not for them. *What am I supposed to do with this?* she thought for the second time, scooping up a handful of sand. She let it slip through her fingers, blowing away on the wind. Wind, but not breath. A toxic exhalation. Would it smother her? Her own breath caught in her throat.

The transports arrived in a cloud of dust, and a new voice, husky and dry, crackled over the emergency channel.

“Time to load up, folks. Follow the *z'hiren*.”

Eva wandered back to the group and fell in beside Dalia.

“What do you think?”

“I think I made a mistake,” Eva said.

Dalia climbed into the rover first and held down a ropy arm for Eva to grab. “Give it time,” she said with a wink.

Eva tried to smile, took her hand, and heaved herself into the cabin. It wasn’t until they were underway that she realized her leg no longer hurt, the serpent quietly sleeping. Instead of relief, it filled her with terror. An anchor cut away. A soul adrift.

The rovers took them across the plains towards the southern escarpment where a shimmering hemisphere bubbled up like an oasis among the dunes. There was no road, but the AI knew the way, and the rovers’ many comings and goings had begun to etch ruts in the dust. The world was already changing.

Glancing out the rear window, Eva their gondolas were ascending, and more were coming down, around and around like buckets on a vast water wheel. Not people, surely. Everyone on the ship was here. More supplies? The ship was large, and they'd been restricted in their movements before and after stasis. More *zhiren*? She was suddenly too tired to care.

Beneath the dome lay a city of low buildings, none more than a few stories tall. The rovers stopped outside an airlock and then began the slow process of passing through, two at a time. On the other side, the rover doors opened, and the voice said, "We walk from here. Keep your helmets on."

They followed a broad avenue through gently sloped buildings fashioned from Martian regolith. The walls were thick and there were no windows. Instead, some walls held many small circles of particolored glass glowing in the dim Martian daylight. Here and there, a few people moved briskly along side streets attending to outdoor maintenance. Instead of EV suits, they wore thickly padded jumpsuits with headwraps, goggles, and respirators, every centimeter of skin covered.

"They're not wearing helmets," someone said over the all-call channel.

"Keep yours on," said the stranger. "There's no heat here. The air's breathable but cold enough and dusty enough to scar your lungs without a respirator."

"Y'all'll get suits and respirators of your own eventually," added the Cowboy. "Until then, pretty much everyone's bivouacking underground." A tremor of irritation flashed in his voice and was gone when he continued. "Marcus here's gotten his team to put in tunnels

under the buildings, and they tell me most everyone from the advance team uses them to get around. Easier to keep warm and control the dust.”

“Why the buildings if we have to live underground?” someone asked.

“The city’s for later,” said the Cowboy. “Waiting for us.”

Across the crowd, a helmet turned to glance at Eva. Mr. Shen. She looked away and found another helmet facing her. The Golden Woman. Waiting for us or waiting for me? She looked quickly away.

The Cowboy was still pontificating, “—wanted y’all to get a look at things, though, see the diamond in the rough, the slumbering stone. Do your jobs right, and one of these days, won’t be any call for tunnels or respirators or even heated clothes.”

He drew their attention to the dome, another of his company’s accomplishments. It rested on a stone rim about three meters high and was anchored at four points, one in each of what Eva guessed were the cardinal directions.

“How’d you manufacture this here?” someone interrupted.

“We didn’t,” said the Cowboy. “We shipped it here all folded up like a fitted sheet, zapped it with an electric current, and bam! stiffened right up. That’s what those anchor points are: generators and polarizers. We could even move the thing if we needed to. Or turn it inside out,” he added with a guffaw.

They arrived at a large building in center of the city’s eastern quadrant and filed through automatic doors into an unfinished community center.

At the head of the throng, two people climbed onto a table, one of them staring at his wrist.

“Give it a minute,” said Marcus as the walls rumbled and the floor began to warm beneath her feet. A moment later, the figure on the table reached up and removed his helmet. Marcus, Eva guessed, and beside him stood a young woman.

The air filled with pops like a hundred coke cans opening at once. Warm air was blowing from somewhere and the stone walls radiated heat, but still the cold was unlike anything she’d felt before. Beside her, Dalia sucked in the air and sighed.

“Reminds me of summiting Everest,” she said, and Eva gave her a dirty look. Dalia laughed, “ You’ll get used to it.”

Beside a door on the far side of the room, behind Marcus and the young woman, stood the Nine with a coterie of attendants. The Cowboy was taking his Stetson from a box. The Golden Woman looked angry and exhausted and waved away two concerned-looking *z’hiren* with an embroidery hoop. The boy was already lost in the datahaze and the bindi-ed woman had her eyes half-closed in vipassana meditation. The priest was ogling the woman at Marcus’s side while the elderly couple slept beneath blankets in their autonomous wheelchairs. Oblivious to the priest, the general clenched her chattering teeth. Mr. Shen stood inscrutable among and apart from them, speaking to a cadre of his *z’hiren*.

Another contingent of *z’hiren*, dressed in padded suits like the ones Eva had seen on the technicians outside and carrying supply boxes between them, appeared from another doorway to the left. While they placed the boxes on the table at Marcus’s feet, the Cowboy, crowned again in his ten-gallon hat, beckoned to Marcus. He covered his intercom and leaned down to listen, nodded, stood again, and addressed them.

“This is Claire,” he said, cocking his head at the woman beside him. She beamed.

“She and the *z'hiren* will complete the orientation.” Then he climbed down, fell in with the Nine and their attendants, and the whole group vanished through the door without a backward glance.

Claire had one eye on the data in front of her, another on the newcomers, and had the look of an organizer. Her auburn hair was shorn close the scalp and she quivered with energy.

“Welcome,” she said. A few people nodded and replied, but for the most part, the crowd stayed silent. “The *z'hiren* will be coming around to recalibrate your neuranet implants. The Firestar is your communicator, your PA, your lifeline. If you thought you couldn’t live without the neuranet back on Earth, it’s actually true here. Keep it charged and keep it on. All the time. Follow the instructions it sends you. All the time. The Firestar’s synced to the communications cloud we put in place above the planet, and its AI will orient you, help you get around, remind you of appointments, etc. If a zone’s restricted, which includes going outside or visiting other districts—safety, you understand—the doors won’t open for you. And they won’t open at all if you’ve got the Firestar off. Which you won’t.”

She gave them a schoolmarmy stare before continuing.

“We’ll break into nine groups in a minute, by department. Each department’s got its own dorms, but the mess is shared and you’re free to socialize in the rooms and common areas. Everyone’ll receive a private ensuite room, fully equipped with most of the modcoms you had back on Earth. You can get cleaned up, eat, and rest. I warn you now, though, that you only get ten minutes of wash water per Martian day, so shower smart,” she said, rubbing

a hand over her buzzed hair and grinning. “If you need a little more water time and don’t mind the cold, there are public baths carved into the stone below the city.

“Labs, of course, are restricted to assigned personnel only. Meals are at your leisure and taken in the mess hall—except for today—and the Firestar will remind you to eat. Diets are strictly limited to what you’ll need to operate optimally. Starting tomorrow, you’ll be required to visit the med bay for bloodwork. We’ll calculate your dietary requirements and prepare an individualized monthly injection to prevent illness, ensure proper metabolism, and help your bodies acclimate to the environment.”

She paused, looked up, and for once did not smile.

“Injections are compulsory, and non-compliance will become forced compliance for the safety of the colony and to ensure the success of our mission. Everyone’s familiar with the history of Martian exploration and colonization attempts, and we’ve made every effort to avoid the mistakes of our predecessors. So far,” she said, beaming and sweeping an arm over herself and around the room, “we’ve succeeded.”

Eva glanced at Dalia, and Dalia gave her arm a reassuring squeeze.

“You’ll be expected to report to report to your work details and department leads in the next few weeks, but feel free to settle in first. If you’re having trouble, don’t be embarrassed. Just head to the medical center, and we’ll get you ship-shape in no time.”

She tapped her lips thoughtfully for a moment while the *zhiren* recalibrated their implants.

“Ah!” she said, as if she had nearly forgotten. “You’ll be confined to quarters until tomorrow morning. Think of it as a quarantine. If you have an emergency, the Firestar can summon the *zhiren*.”

“I think that’s about it,” she said, hopping off the table. “Enable the Firestar and follow the instructions.”

Claire swept across the room and through the doors, giving them all one last smile and a friendly wave as she vanished.

The crowd hung there for a moment in stunned silence before erupting in chatter and breaking apart, people interfacing with the Firestar’s AI and following in with their soon-to-be peers.

“Which group are you with?” Eva asked.

“Firestar says ‘Facilities,’” Dalia answered. “You?”

“Biotech,” said Eva.

Dalia handed her the Altoid box. “Just in case you get panicky before we see each other again.”

A woman stepped in front of Eva, *buyao* tinkling softly. She inclined her head and directed Eva towards a cluster of people standing with a man, his hair gathered into a topknot. Eva noticed each group’s *zhiren* seemed, in one way or another, to echo one of the Nine. Shen was her boss apparently. She looked for Dalia and found her across the room near *zhiren* dressed in dashikis. They head through the door and down into the bright tunnels beneath the city. The others talked to one another as they walked, and Eva gathered they’d gotten to know one another a little back in Texas. She was the odd woman out, and though

she exchanged pleasantries, she made no connections. Hers was the last room, and she was alone with the *zhiren*, alone on an empty world. The *zhiren* bowed to her, something they had not done for the others, and Eva was left wondering what it meant as they walked away.

Kezi was waiting for her inside the room. Someone had tucked him under a heated blanket on the narrow bed, and he lay there, his tongue lolling and his paws twitching as the stasis drugs wore off. Eva ran a hand over his head and called him a good kitty.

Dim daylight trickled down a long corridor of glass, casting five-colored spotlights across the floor. Her things sat neatly arranged on a small desk and there was a military-ration-style meal with them along with a thermos of scalding tea and a single, half-green peach with two withered little leaves still clinging to its stem. Her stomach churned.

In a small wardrobe, she found padded clothes, boots, and slippers, all of them self-heating, and more blankets. The tiny bathroom contained a shower and a chemical toilet with a sink built in the top. An ascetic's room. She returned to the desk, picked up the peach, and sat on the bed beside the cat. Or a penitent's cell. She curled up on the blanket clutching the peach to her chest. Did the Earth feel absence as she felt the Earth's?

She was almost asleep when Kezi stirred, and the peach began to glow. She sat bolt upright in bed. Spectral tendrils of pale green radiated from it, piercing the stone walls. She closed her eyes and raced along the ribbons as fast as she could, penetrating deep the city before the trail finally evaporated and left her awareness lost and lingering in alien soil. She

opened her eyes slowly and licked her dry lips. This was no stasis-preserved peach brought from Earth. Somewhere beneath the city, plants grew.

She needed out. She needed to find them, but when she walked up to the door, the Firestar reddened the world. The quarantine. She told it she had an emergency. It responded that all her vitals were optimal. She tried again, more urgent, pumping up her heart rate and holding her breath. Again, the Firestar told her everything was fine. She looked around the room. Every edge was rounded. There was no cutlery with the food. The chest key was too old and smooth-worn to cut. She stopped short. And would a cut get her? A trip to the infirmary and probably a dose of medication to mellow her out. The plants weren't going anywhere. She could wait. That's what she was here for, after all, to care for the plants, to make them thrive. She set the peach aside.

Kezi stirred. She found food and water for him in the cabinet beneath the desk, and he gobbled away, purring beside her feet. Eva sat and began to eat, sipping the tea to moisten the food and contemplating the peach. Sickly. Barely edible, even. But something grew. Would it be enough, enough to get her home and away from this dead world? The stone did not answer. Could not answer. It had no voice, no heartbeat, no soul. She switched the Firestar to full-stream mode and tried to work. The light around the peach went dark and it sat before like a smothered lantern.

She woke just before dawn, or what the Firestar suggested was dawn, dressed, and walked to the door. This time, the dial remained clear, and the door whispered open. She left Kezi lying on the bed with one eye open and the peach on the desk, dark as charcoal.

A handful of people moved through the halls, passing her like a parade of zombies. She recognized one or two, vaguely, but she didn't bother speaking, instead slipping past them like a lone catfish, preoccupied with itself and seeking the safety of a muddy bottom. Her dreams had been ugly, full of emptiness, and the peach had remained silent when she woke.

The Firestar glimmered in the corner of her eye like a phosphene and told her it was time to eat. Her stomach rumbled and she followed the glowing blue indicator to the mess. There were more people here, somewhat livelier with food in front of them, and Eva was forced to smile and nod as she collected a tray from the dispenser. The Firestar flashed red and notified her that the mess doors would remain locked until she finished. When she queried the AI, she received a blurb about the importance of energy maintenance and personal health to the success of their mission.

There was no fresh fruit this time, no tea either. Just packaged food decorated like the dead in shrouds of artificial flavoring and a sludgy drink dense with calories and nutrients. She concentrated on her work, eating mechanically and keeping her mind far away from the food. Once she finished and returned the waste recycler, the Firestar flashed green and then orange, displaying an alert to report to the medical bay.

Half a dozen people were already there, waiting their turns. Eva took a seat just as Dalia appeared, dressed in a lab coat, to see out one patient and collect the next. Her eyes lit

up and she waggled her fingers at Eva. Eva waved back. Dalia disappeared through the door with her patient in tow. A pair of *zhiren* moved around the room on inscrutable errands, and Eva watched them from the corner of her eye.

Their chests rose and fell as they breathed. Their eyes were shiny and wet. The man had the tiniest trace of food where he'd carelessly wiped the corner of his mouth, and the edge of the woman's thumb was scabbed where'd she cut it. Their pores gleamed in the oily light. Everything about them bespoke life. When the woman passed nearby, her skin was warm and supple, covered in vellus hair, the backs of her hands cracked into a patchwork of diamonds no different than Eva's. Not machines. She was sure of that. AI was sophisticated, yes, almost human at times, but not the robotics. Not nearly enough to make them seem such perfect human simulacra. The *zhiren* were flesh and blood, born or grown or something else entirely, Eva couldn't say. The woman was watching her, and cold fingers spidered down the fretboard of Eva's spine, making her shiver and look away.

"Eva?"

Dalia was beckoning her from the doorway. Eva followed her into the exam room.

"Long time, no see," she said.

"It's been less than a day," said Eva.

"Feels like longer." Dalia rolled over on a stool.

"I guess it does."

"How's the cat?" She said, wiping Eva's arm with disinfectant.

"Completely at ease."

"And you?"

“The opposite.”

Dalia laughed and Eva felt a sharp prick. Black blood filled one vial and then another, like liquid soil, her earthy essence. “I can give you a prescription for the anxiety. Turns out the pharmacy’s loaded to the hilt.” A *jintong* appeared and took the samples and prescription. Dalia began to knit. “Takes a few minutes to run the tests and calculate the dosage.”

“Is it safe?”

Dalia nodded, “Immune system boosters, antiradiation, some preventative medications, vitamin D, a whole cocktail of other stuff. Nothing to be worried about.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s all standard and I read the reports. The regimen is solid.” She unbuttoned her jumpsuit and showed Eva her own injection, still covered with a bandage.

“Why’d you start working so soon?”

“Turns out they were low on medical staff. I got pressed-ganged at the door this morning.” The *yunü* returned with syringe, a vial of dark liquid, and a bottle of pills. Dalia yawned, took the everything, measured a dose according to the report on her pad, and administered the injection. It burned, and Eva winced. Dalia applied a bandage and handed her the pills.

“Meet in the mess hall for dinner tonight?” she said.

“Sure,” Eva said, shaking the bottle.

Dalia walked her out, waved goodbye, and summoned the next person.

Back in her room, she thought about heading to the lab, but her head swam when she stopped moving, and she slumped onto the bed. The Firestar flashed red and informed her the door would remain locked until she took one of the pills Dalia had prescribed.

Eva obeyed, and an alert chimed in her mind: *Medication routine established*, followed by a second message: *Dietary requirements established*, and finally a third: *Preventative treatment logged, next appointment in thirty days*. The Firestar slumbered again, but Eva decided to stay put. Her shoulder throbbed and the medication was already making her feel drowsy. The lab would have to wait.

Kezi hopped up beside her, and she petted him, lying back against the stone wall and scrolling idly through her notes. The cat was purring and had begun to glow, a rare and wonderous thing. It was different with people and animals than with the plants. Most of the time she couldn't feel them at all, part of a web of being that came to her and went like will-o'-the-wisps, rare and fleeting where the plants shone almost perpetually. It would be gone in an instant, and so she savored it while she could. And then, like the light of the peach yesterday, it was gone. She felt faded, like upholstery left too long in the sun. Half-starved, too, despite the food in her belly. A hungry soul instead of a hungry body. She longed for the long green of home. Was this how it felt to lose God? This terrible, unassailable, unassuageable longing? Was it the way a potted plant felt when it struck the edge of its world and had nowhere else to go but back around itself, crushed by a veil of clay?

She awoke late in the night. A message shone on the periphery. *I came by, but the Firestar said you were sleeping. Catch when you're up and going. Dalia XO.*

Kezi meowed and circled his bowl. Her stomach rumbled. The Firestar flashed an alert telling her to eat. She poured a packet of food into the cat's bowl, patted him once, picked up the peach, and slipped out the door, heading for the mess hall.

On the way, she rounded a corner and found herself face to face with a man the color of bronze. His features were boyish and rounded, and damp hair haloed his head in cloudy ringlets. His eyes were almost purple, the same shade as the summer storms that used to gather over the farm when she was a girl, rattling the earth with biblical thunder and soaking the world nearly to drowning. He flowed past her, muttermusing like whitewater and weathering shoulderstone.

"Hey!" she shouted after him, but he did not answer, rounding the corner and leaving nothing of his passage but a trail of wet footprints, a patch of dampness on her suit where his shoulder had struck, and something like the smell of rain on Martian dust. She considered following him, but the Firestar's exhortations and the weight of the peach in her pocket pushed her forward.

The Firestar refused to direct her to the lab, telling her it was closed for the evening, so she walked the empty halls aimlessly, holding the peach in front of her like dowsing rod. It never twitched, and she got the sense she was moving in circles, shuffled around and around by unresponsive doors and curving walls that might as well have been dead ends. She was about to give up and return to her room when Marcus stepped out of a side door right in front of her, the two of them nearly colliding.

Up close, she found him coarse and little ugly, his face all craters and canyons and angular planes. He was windworn stone and pitted iron, all ropey red muscle beneath brindled skin without a trace of fat anywhere on him. His chin was stubbleless, and sandy eyes scoured her beneath thin brown brows and a shock of ocher hair veined with white. Despite everything, Eva guessed he wasn't more than a few years older than her. Fortyish, maybe, if ancient of soul. And suddenly, as she took all of this in, he began to luminesce, a soft red glow. Her jaw went slack.

"Couldn't sleep?" he said, and Eva shook herself into sense. He was still shining, and she had trouble looking at him directly.

"I...No. Well, I slept a little. In the daytime. And..."

Marcus nodded, the glow fading, and Eva let out a puff. "Happened to me, too," he said, "the first night I was here. Nowhere to go walking back then but outside."

"What did you do?"

"I went out."

They regarded one another.

"Marcus," he said.

"I know," she said stupidly.

"Oh?"

"The Cowboy said your name when we arrived."

He laughed, dusty wind rolling over desert rock. "The Cowboy?"

Eva covered her mouth. "That's what I nicknamed him. The one in the Stetson. I don't know their names. Any of them. Except Mr. Shen. And you."

“You think I’m one of them?”

“You left with them.”

“I did.”

“So...”

“No, I’m not one of them.”

“One of us then?”

“Not that either.”

She shivered. “One of the *zhiren*?”

He smiled, white teeth like bleached bone. “No.”

She was suddenly exasperated. “Then who are you?”

“I’m their Architect,” he said simply, holding out his hand.

Eva fumbled the peach away and shook it. The glow again. And an ancient filament, like the farthest flung roots of the Pando, stretching through many hands through his into hers. Or hers into his. She was lost in the labyrinth of roots, or whatever they were, and she pulled her hand free.

“Eva,” she said.

He was watching her, the smile still on his lips like he already knew. Maybe he did. She slipped the peach into her pocket. His eyes followed her hand. She thought he might ask her about it, but he didn’t.

“Eva Peng,” he said instead. “Mr. Shen’s great hope.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “I didn’t tell you my last name.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“How’d you know it?”

“Mr. Shen thinks you’re the key to all this, so I read your dossier. Well, I read everyone’s dossier, but yours I paid special attention to.”

“I’m just another synbiologist.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.”

“What does that mean?”

Marcus flexed his jaw and looked her over. “I didn’t expect to meet you like this.”

Eva took a step back.

“It might be a blessing.”

She took another step back. “I think I’d better go.”

“Wait,” he said. “Please.” The roots were in his voice, and he was glowing again. Eva looked at her hand. It was glowing, too. She stopped.

“I want to show you something. Something important. Something about your work.”

“What do you know about my work?”

“I know why you’re here. And I want to change your mind.”

Against all reason, Eva found herself nodding.

“Turn off the Firestar.”

“Won’t that draw someone’s attention?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

Doors she was sure she’d tried before opened for Marcus, and they scurried through, hip to hip, almost as if they were one, until they came to a dead end.

“Nice wall,” she said, breathless.

Marcus tapped on the wall and a hidden paneled opened, revealing circuitry and a manual override. His fingers flew through the wires, snapped the override down, and the wall cracked apart, opening onto a service shaft running parallel to the main corridor. Marcus stepped through. Eva hesitated, then, feeling the sinews stretch between them, followed, squeezing in among the pipes and cables. They shimmied along until the corridor widened and they were able to walk side by side to a wheeled hatch Marcus had to open by hand. Beyond it was a small, freezing room filled with EV suits and, to Eva's surprise, dust. On the far wall stood another hatch.

"Are we supposed to be here?"

"You aren't."

"I don't want to get in trouble, Marcus."

He laughed a sere laugh. "You won't. Old rules don't apply here, Eva. Not to me, not to you, not to any of us."

He handed her a suit.

"We're going into the city?" she asked as they dressed.

"Not exactly," Marcus said, handing her a helmet. A helmet.

"We're going outside?" she said, heart hammering. She wished she had Dalia's pills.

"Helmet on," he said, securing his own. When she didn't move, he said, "You'll definitely want it when I start the atmo exchange."

She snapped the helmet into place, and a moment later, the room hissed, and the temperature began to drop. Marcus pulled the hatch open, and Eva followed him up a rung ladder. They emerged into the luminous night a hundred meters outside the city. To her

right and left reared the walls of the crater. Dead ahead, the obsidian spindle of Jacob's Ladder rose into the welkin, a handful of lights rolling along its surface like ophanim. Another ship? More cargo? She had no way of knowing. She took one quick look at the sky, thin and cloudless and spangled with light, before looking back down at her boots, covered in ochre dust.

Marcus elbowed her, and when she looked at him, he leapt, soaring higher than she had imagined possible. She shouted and snatched at his boot. He grinned down at her from the apogee and fell back to Earth—to Mars—as gently as a leaf.

“Try it,” he said.

Eva shook her head. “No way.”

“You won't float away.”

But I'll fall. She shook her head again.

He unstrung a line from his utility belt, clipped it to hers, and plopped down in the dust like a gangly anchor. “Come on.”

She looked down at him, and he pointed up. “See that bluish dot? That's Earth.”

Eva followed his finger and found it, a sapphire ember glittering in the white welter. She took a shuddering breath. What was an ember but the last light of life before the darkness? And yet the green still glowed and she knew it would come for her if the line broke and she tumbled away from the red world. She half hoped she would.

She jumped, rushing upward, growing dizzy, her breathing sharp and fast, reaching out towards the green...

And then she began to fall.

She screamed, snatched at the air, and found nothing. Her bad leg betrayed her when she landed, and she toppled, Marcus managing to catch her before she ended up sprawled among the stones.

She wrenched away and swore at him.

“Never again!” she shouted. “Don’t ever bring me out here again.”

She stood there panting, fists clenched, and scanned the horizon. The planet hadn’t let her go.

“What do you see?” said Marcus.

“Dust and death.” Never again.

“Dust, yes, but not death.”

“There’s nothing here.” The next time she saw the surface, it would be on the way back to Jacob’s Ladder. To hell with this place.

“There’s a whole world here. Just not the world you’re used to.”

“It’s not my world.”

“It could be.”

She shook her head.

“Why are you here, Eva?”

“You read my file.”

“I want to hear you say it.

“They brought me here to make Mars breathe. That’s what Shen said.”

“Listen for a minute,” he said, reaching over to the wrist controls and switching off the intercom.

At first, all she heard was her breath and her beating heart. Then the sand beneath her feet began to shift as the wind blew, slow at first, barely moving in the thin atmosphere until the gusts became a gale and she had to hunker down on all fours to keep from being bowled over. And there, down among the stones and the shifting dust, she could the wind filling the great silence around her, the roar of the desert, the voice of the planet. Marcus stood, unbent by the wind, arms outstretched.

Little by little it died away, and Eva rose. The intercom clicked back on.

“Did you hear the voice?”

“I heard wind.”

“Not breath?”

“No.”

Marcus frowned and sighed. “That peach in your pocket. That came from Shen’s hydroponics.”

“What?”

“That’s what you were looking for, right? Where the peach came from.”

“Yes.”

“Did you see any other fresh food?”

“No.”

“That’s right. They can grow it inside. I even built them the infrastructure. More than enough food to feed everyone, under the domes, without changing the planet’s ecosystem. But that’s not what the Nine want, so they import everything but their own food. They want you to turn Mars into something like Earth, to terraform it instead of areoforming

themselves. We're out here to become something more, not to make everything more like us."

"Maybe you are," she said, looking out across the plains. She tried to envision is greenbright and growing. She tried to see the stones come alive. In both cases, her inner vision betrayed her, and she saw nothing but desolation.

"You don't see anything beautiful here?" he asked.

"What are you asking me for, Marcus?"

"I'm asking you to refuse to do what they want. I'm asking to convince Shen to try another way."

"Why?"

"To save this place. To live with it instead of conquering it."

If I do that, I'll never go home.

Just before they reentered the main corridor, Eva caught Marcus's arm. Once again, something ancient passed between them.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For taking me out there. I...I wish I could love it the same way you do." Why had she said that? Why had she meant it?

He smiled without showing his teeth. "Your room's back that way. Make sure you turn the Firestar back on."

She nodded, let his arm go, and touched the peach in her pocket.

He stepped into the hall first and she watched him go, whistling a tune she didn't know, wind and gravel crashing across the gullies of his lips.

As she walked back to her room, she found he had grown on her. She couldn't do what he asked, but she could appreciate his love for this world. They were alike in that, kindred spirits, even, the green and the red. But to keep the Earth from turning to dust, she had to make Mars grow. How did you imbue a planet with a soul? She had no answers. None at all.

After breakfast the next morning, she requested directions to the lab, and the Firestar obliged her with a trail of blue wending through digital corridors. She'd finally eaten the peach, on the verge of spoiling, and now kept the leaves in her pocket, a reminder of what waited for her in the lab. She would taste soil again, the taproot of her tongue and the tips of her fingers transmuting the Martian dust into loam, puffing it up with living breath, and turning the rusty world golden green. And then she would be home, laden with spoils and ready to continue her work. If death must surround her, let it be the luxuriance of forests and seas and not this red realm empty even of specters.

A turbaned Sikh greeted her at the door, beaming through his beard. They shook hands.

“Manpreet Singh.”

“Eva Peng.”

He led her into the lab where a handful of people busied themselves with microscopes, spades, and plastic tubs of earth. The smell made her giddy.

“We’ve been looking forward to having you here, though we weren’t expecting you until later.”

“You’re the boss?”

“Welcome wagon and nominal supervisor, I suppose, by dint of being the first one here. Everyone’s allowed to work in whatever way they wish, planting many seeds instead of one.”

He introduced her to people whose names she forgot immediately and led her to a vacant desk. “No one has an assigned seat, but everyone stakes their territory.”

“This is fine,” Eva said.

The equipment was state-of the-art, as nice as anything she’d ever worked with. But technology wasn’t magic, her father was fond of saying. If Manpreet and the others had been here as long as Marcus, why hadn’t they made any progress?

“I didn’t see anything growing inside or outside the city when I arrived.”

Manpreet stuck out his bristly lower lip. “That’s because there isn’t anything.”

“But you’ve been here...”

“Nearly a decade.”

“There’s atmosphere in the city. And down here.”

“We can grow things in imported soil and in processed atmosphere, but that’s not why we’re here.”

“Can you tell me what the problems are?”

She was being rude and had expected irritation, perhaps even an argument, but Manpreet simply looked helpless. And tired.

“Let me show you what we’ve been working on.”

He led her to a second room, bright beneath an artificial sun, where trays of sickly seedlings languished on a large table. Not all of them were sick, Eva saw as she approached the first tray. They ran the gamut of health, and she could tell instantly it had something to do with the soil. She glanced at Manpreet, and he nodded. She examined the healthiest plants. Sniffed them. Rubbed the leaves between her fingers and touched her tongue to the stalks. It was no plant she knew, clearly something engineered, but she recognized in it elements of dune grass. She pierced the soil with her fingertips and tumbled into the matted roots. A low-water plant meant for anchoring the soil against the wind.

These plants, though a little dry, thrived, butting against the edges of their tray seeking a way out. She pulled her fingers free and licked them, one by one, the soil like light on her tongue. Manpreet watched her, dark eyes loamy and wet. The soil tasted no different than most potting mix.

“It’s pure.”

“Imported from Earth, yes.”

Eva nodded and moved to the next tray. Something was different. The leaves were brittle and corrugated, like rumpled laundry, and the soil was sandier. It made her tongue tingle, and she grimaced. She moved to a third tray of moribund plants, and the soil was gritty and bitter. She sampled the soil from the last tray where the stalks were shriveled and dead. No trace of nutrients and no hum of life. Even in death, there should have been an

echo of what had been. She tried to follow the roots and they crumbled before her. It was as if the sand had erased it, negated the *qi*, returned form to primordial chaos, and in that moment, she had a terrible premonition of what lay ahead for her home. She swallowed hard.

“You’re mixing the Martian sand with terrestrial soil?”

“In endless combinations and with endless enrichments and manipulations, both to the plants and the mixtures. Whatever we do, nothing lives long in the Martian soil, and the results are even worse in the local atmosphere. In pure Martian soil, they’re dead in minutes. In pure terrestrial soil, the hardiest ones, best adapted to the local air, live a matter of hours.”

“And the temperature? The water?”

“Everything’s been engineered to tolerate the cold, grow deep roots, and live on what little liquid moisture exists below ground. In regular soil in the climate simulators, they do fine.”

“You’re sure there’s enough water?”

“Plenty. The city’s on top of a huge aquifer, and the hydrological team has been using areothermal energy to thaw the ground and melt the water. There’s a huge reservoir of liquid now, and our tests show trace amounts in the ground. I’ve heard there are similar operations elsewhere around Isidis Planitia and the northern hemisphere where they’re planning future settlements. The planet’s primed, if only we can something to take to the soil.”

“Or get the soil to take to the plants.”

Manpreet nodded.

“Have you planted anything directly outside?”

“A couple of times, but as I said, the air’s also a problem. And there’s no way to enrich the entire planet. Whatever we do will have to work with what’s already here.”

“Can you send me all the data?”

“It’s already on the Firestar.”

One of the scientists she’d just met came through carrying a tray of seedlings.

“Are you moving them into the areosphere?”

The woman nodded. Her cheeks were gaunt, her eyes nimbused in purple, her fingers reaper long. If ever death incarnate had stalked the world, this was it.

“We’ll join you.” He turned to Eva. “You might as well see what happens.”

The woman glowered at Manpreet, but there was no real venom in the look. She knew as well as he what was coming.

On the other side of the airlock, beneath the open sky, Eva’s heart stopped. It was a wasteland, a killing field littered everywhere with the brown bones of the dead interred in sarcophageal trays. In the corner, someone she hadn’t met squatted, tossing corpses into the bed of a utility rover.

“Do they biodegrade out here?”

“No,” Manpreet said. “We have to move the dead material back inside and send it to waste management for processing. Even the bacteria and fungi die in the local soil. There’s no ecosystem at all, and no way to start one. It’s completely sterile.”

The woman they’d accompanied stood back from where she transplanted the seedlings, the empty tray dangling in front of her. She was holding her breath, and Eva saw a

wet rime of despair beneath her eyes warring with the fever of hope. How many times had she stood here over the years, chewing her lip and praying—

And then it began. The seedlings shuddered, gasping like fish, and brown blotches bloomed on their stalks. It was not the healthiness of cyclic decay but something unwholesome. Complete death. Terminal stillness. The absence of life. Eva saw the glow leave them, sundered souls with nowhere to go.

The woman sighed and stifled a sob. Manpreet looked at her helplessly, flexing his jaw. Eva motioned for him to go. He nodded, leaving Eva with the woman.

Together they began to pull up the seedlings and toss them onto the refuse wagon.

“How long?” Eva asked as they worked.

“Almost ten years.”

“You were with the first team?”

She nodded. “We tried everything. Then Marcus built the city and the lab. They sent all this equipment. And...”

“No luck.”

“None. All I ever wanted was to garden, to grow things. Now I do this.”

They returned to the lab. The woman didn’t bother thanking Eva, but she did nod as they parted. Eva wandered over to where Manpreet was testing soil samples.

“I know what it’s like,” she said, “to have everything fail.”

He nodded. “We had such high hopes.”

“I’d like to get started.”

“Lab’s all yours. If there’s anything you need and the Firestar doesn’t give you access, let me know.”

“Thanks,” she said. She found her desk, perched on a stool, found the lab’s data, and began scrolling, taking notes as she went. Ten years. Her heart sank.

For the next six months she was an angel of death. It was like seeing the reclamators beneath the Dome again every time she tore up another crop of dead alfalfa and sent it to waste processing. She sensed both commiseration and vindication in her colleagues as she failed alongside.

She sat back on the stool and rubbed her eyes. She even cried sometimes, alone in her room. Not often. Only when the frustration had built to a climax and she had nowhere else to go, falling over and over again. Her leg had begun aching, again, too, badly enough she’d asked Dalia for pain meds. She picked up a mister and sprayed the cluster of alfalfa she kept in an incubator on her desk. She’d synthesized it according to her earlier work, with a few modifications based on the lab’s data, and it was sinking CO₂ and breaking down methane beautifully. It was a little patch of luminous Earth beside her, and making such remarkable progress on her real work kept her sane while everything around her died.

She closed the incubator door and set the mister aside. Beautiful and satisfying, but ultimately useless, at least here. The Martian atmosphere needed more greenhouse gas, not less, and this latest iteration of *Medicago sativa evae* grew only in the pure terrestrial soil she’d appropriated from the lab’s supplies. She needed a break, a drink, a respite from these bitter days.

Was Marcus around? She tapped out a message and left the lab.

As often as not, he was away, either elsewhere in the city or supervising new settlement construction. Maybe Shen would give in, following Marcus's advice to use hydroponics and give up on the terraforming. Would he let her go then? Would he still fund her research?

No answer yet. She stopped in the mess hall for a late dinner.

Marcus. When he was around, he was known to blow through the halls like the Martian simoom, crackling with lightning and elemental fury. Except when he saw her. Then he glowed, an almost constant aura, and she glowed, too. A smile would play upon his cracked lips and the canals of his cheeks glittered, catching the light like dark water. He must have been pleased by her failure, but he never showed it.

No answer. She headed for her room.

She hadn't been back outside with him since that first night, and she counted it a small blessing. No vertigo, no danger of floating away. No temptation. In her darkest moments, she wondered whether she could stow away on Jacob's Ladder and escape. But to where? If she got away, her real work, progressing but still imperfect, would wither back on Earth without Shen's support. That grain of success irritated her into resolve. She would continue, for a little while longer.

The Firestar pinged and a note appeared: *I'll be back in a few days*. She acknowledged and messaged Dalia.

It was enough. Their time together didn't seem to strengthen the ghostly threads between them, but something else had begun to grow alongside those cryptic roots. She wouldn't call it love, but it was drawing them together all the same. As if in another life

they'd brushed together and been blown apart and here they were again, not destined for romance but some other collaboration.

No can do, Dalia's message read. Fixing a busted lip and a black eye.

Another time then.

Count on it.

Eva fed the cat, changed into her warm pajamas, and crawled under the covers. Dalia seemed forever on call, treating injuries from the little bruhahas cropping up when people butted heads, stretched to breaking but the cold, the processed food, the endless days cooped up together away from the sun, the water rations, the lack of communications outside the planet's impenetrable intranet, the lack of progress, the static, the storm lockdowns, the disappearance of the Nine into some private adyton. There were whispers they'd left, or never been here at all. When Eva repeated the rumors to Dalia, she'd laughed.

"Everyone's accounted for, even the dead."

"What?"

"You didn't think everyone would go on living forever, did you?"

"No, but I still wasn't expecting.... What happened?"

"A heart attack and an accident."

"What about the bodies?"

Dalia shrugged. "The *zhiren* came for them after the autopsies. Never saw them again."

"And you just let them go?"

"I'm a medic, not a mortician."

“There weren’t any funerals.”

“Nope.”

“Didn’t you ask where they were taking them?”

“Sure I did.”

“And?”

“And they spoke cryptic nonsense back and forth like they always do and left.”

Another day, another failure, and Eva was at a breaking point. Marcus was away again, but Dalia was around and told her to come over.

“I need to get your size, anyway, and I’ve got a little treat, too. And bring the cat.”

She was sitting in the desk chair, knitting a sweater when Eva arrived.

“You look terrible.”

“I feel it,” Eva said, opening Kezi’s cage. He sniffed once and was out, hopping onto the bed.

“Rough day at work?”

“Same as any other day.”

“Ah. The heart of the problem.”

Dalia stood and motioned Eva over, holding up the arm of the sweater. She sat and the *snick snick* of the needles resumed.

“Take a look in the cabinet.”

Eva found a urine beaker full of clear liquid.

“Dalia. Ugh.”

“It’s liquor, not pee, and the bottle was new when I took it. Cups are on the table.”

“Where’d you get it?” Eva asked, pouring. It stung her nose.

“Some of the fellows in waste management set up a still.”

They drank, Dalia in gulps and now working one-handed, and Eva in sips. Her cheeks flushed.

“No luck at all?” Dalia said handing Eva the glass for a refill.

“Everything keeps dying in the soil, just like it has since the first team got here.” She handed Dalia the glass.

“Do you meditate?”

“Sure.”

“What do you do first?”

“Close my eyes.”

“And then?”

“I focus on my breath.”

“There you go,” Dalia said with a smirk, needles flying faster than Eva could follow.

“There I go?”

“Focus on the breath.”

“My breath?”

“The Breath,” she said, dragging out the words.

“The breath.... The Breath.” Eva sat up straight.

“You see?”

Eva was halfway out the door before she turned and said thanks. Kezi hopped into Dalia’s lap and, smiling to herself and humming a ditty, she continued to knit.

The synbio team muttered among themselves. Eva had gone door to door, knocking them out of their beds in the middle of the night, and no one was happy. Until they saw the plants. Growing. In the Martian atmosphere. Lush and green and bright with purple blossoms. They turned to look at Eva, and she beamed.

News of the triumph spread, but it was short-lived. She’d solved the atmosphere problem. The gene modifications could be transferred to different species, and the plants were producing greenhouse gases alongside oxygen, but they only grew in imported soil. The moment the team started experimenting with Martian mixtures, the plants began to die.

“It’s still progress, Eva, more than we made in years,” Manpreet told her one afternoon a few weeks later. “We’d never considered the modifications you made.”

“But we’re still stuck. It’s like we broke one logjam and ended up with another ten meters downstream.”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“In another decade? Longer?”

Manpreet shrugged. “Take a little vacation. Give yourself a chance to come down.”

She almost refused, but then she nodded. In her room, she found a bowl of fruit and a flask of tea. Shen. She ate and drank, drumming her fingers on the cat’s belly and turning

the problem over in her mind. So close and still so far. She tried reading her notes and got frustrated. She tried reading one of the eBooks from the Firestar's library but couldn't focus. She moved Kezi aside and walked to the wardrobe. For the first time since she'd arrived, Eva pulled out the chest her mother had given her. She retrieved the key and the pendant from the desk drawer. She tapped the key against her teeth. The wood and the stone hummed.

The colonists had cobbled together a small library from all the treasured books they'd brought along and set up a reading room in one of the smaller communal areas. Eva didn't expect to find anything useful in the chest—she couldn't even read the contents—but she felt such a sudden need for something from home, for a different sort of puzzle, that she decided to look anyway.

She was walking toward the library, lost in an empty reverie when she barreled headlong into a pair of the Indian woman's *z'hiren* coming from the other direction. The chest fell with a thundercrack, the lid coming loose and scattering the contents across the floor. One of the side pieces splintered and bowed, and Eva's leg ached in sympathy. All three of them squatted down to pick things up, but Eva's hand brushed the woman's and she recoiled. The *z'hiren* didn't seem to notice and instead righted the chest and began to fill it slowly, passing each object between them, turning it, examining it, their bindis bright.

"Old," said the *jintong*.

“Yes,” said the *yunü*.

“The language is strange,”

“A mixture of many,”

“Latin,”

“And Greek.”

“Gaelic.”

“Codes,”

“Idiosyncrasies,”

“Private hieroglyphics,”

“Holy tongues.”

The woman looked over at Eva. “Your secret histories?”

“Heirlooms.” She wanted to snatch the box away, but she also wanted to hear what else they said.

“Old, too,” said the man, holding up the flash drive in its Ziplock bag.

“Mid-century.”

“What a wonder,”

“This residuum or spirit.”

He placed the bag in the chest and set the lid on top. When Eva reached for it, the *zhiren* saw the pendant.

“And this,” said the woman.

“Is the oldest of them all,”

“A shard,”

“From the splintered firmament,”

“Fallen,”

“In fire,”

“Long silent,”

“Long waiting,”

“Like us.”

The *jintong* held the chest towards Eva, and she took it gingerly. Then she rose and hurried around the *zhiren*. They turned to watch her go, their bindied gazes chasing her along the arc of the Great Wheel.

That night, Marcus helped her reattach the lid, and he splinted the cracked panel with a strip of steel. She was back in the library the next morning, flipping through the vellum pages. They still held the smell of the sea, briny and deep, and she rode the roll and the crash of the waves as she turned the crinkling pages.

“Come,” said a woman, and Eva started.

The *zhiren* stood before her, blocking the light.

“Mr. Shen would see you.”

“About what?” she said, packing up the chest.

“We bear a summons,”

“But not the message.”

It was about her progress, she was sure. Closer and still so far. How she'd tried, before Manpreet told her to rest, to span that final gulf. Sooner reach a hand across death than unify the alien principalities of Earth and Mars. She didn't want to explain herself. And she didn't want his praise or his encouragement if that's what this was about. She wanted to be alone and lost in thought.

"I'm busy," she said, closing the lid and turning the key. She slipped the chain around her neck and tucked it into the jumpsuit.

"It is a summons,"

"Not a request."

"Your contract obliges you,"

"To obey."

"It is an honor to enter,"

"The adyton."

"None of the rest,"

"Enjoy such privilege."

"A few do," said the woman, looking at the man, a startling break in the symmetry of their speech and the consonance of their thought. They seemed suddenly to forget about her. To argue.

"These are—"

"The Architect," interrupted the woman, "and the Hydrologist."

"*Yunii*. You speak—"

"She is counted great among the lesser gods—"

“*Yuni!*” the *jintong*’s voice reverberated in the stone corridor and the woman stopped, blinking her eyes and cocking her head.

“Those are others,” continued the man.

“The elemental powers,” said the woman, her head still cocked to the side.

“She is not one,”

“Yet.”

“*Yuni!* What thoughts are these?”

Slowly, she shook her head, the *buyao* jingling. “I do not know.”

“You are weary.”

“I am.”

The man turned back to Eva, “Come.”

The woman turned to her, “Come.”

“The chest?” Eva asked.

The *jintong* held out his hands. “I will take it to your room.”

“I don’t want you in my room.”

“All is well,” said the woman, taking the chest and handing it to the man.

“We are the messengers,”

“Nothing more.”

“You treasure,”

“And your secrets,”

“Are safe.”

The man stepped past them.

“Come,” said the woman.

As they walked along the stone corridors, up and down stairs, around bends, Eva tried to question the woman about what she had said, but the woman claimed to have no recollection of the argument. Yet there was something off about her. She seemed confused, unsure of herself, slow.

She changed tack. “I didn’t realize you got tired.”

“We tire and just as you do.”

“Do you die?”

The woman looked straight ahead and something like fear flickered on her face.

“We die.”

“Do you live?”

“We exist.”

“In emptiness.”

The woman looked at her.

“I felt it,” Eva said, “the first time I met you—well, one of you.”

“We feel nothing,” said the woman, and Eva asked no more questions.

They stopped before a door like all the rest, and the Firestar glowed an inviting green. The door slid open, and she took a step. The woman grabbed her arm and cold chaos coursed through Eva. She tried to pull away, but the woman held her firm. She leaned in, pretty face, painted lips, unreadable eyes far too close. Sweat beaded the fine hairs above her lip and her breath smelled of rose oil and ash. Fear frothed in her eyes and the lids fluttered slowly like butterfly wings.

“I am...” she stammered. “I am...”

Steeling herself, Eva quickly pressed a hand to the woman’s head. She was burning up.

“I am,” she said again, and crumpled, slamming against the wall, leaving a streak of blood where the stone split her skin. Eva sank with her, trying to hold her up.

“Wake up,” she said, and the woman’s tongue lolled.

Eva pounded on the door and shouted for help, looking back at the woman as she did so. Her eyes were glazed and wild and staring up at Eva. She pawed at the air, reached for Eva’s face.

The door opened and *zhi*ren surrounded them. Two of them picked the woman up and pulled her away.

“Luminous,” she slurred before going slack.

“Come,” said a second pair of *zhi*ren as the first pair bore the woman away. Eva followed them through the door, glancing down once at the smear of blood on the wall. A cleaning drone was already approaching it. Luminous. What had she seen at the end?

The door slid shut, and Eva found herself in the foyer of a vast suite of rooms. The furnishings were elegant, with flourishes here and there of dragons and landscapes. Paintings from the masters hung on the walls. Through an archway on the far side of the room, Eva saw Mr. Shen seat on a *kang*, sipping tea. He waved her forward, and she sat facing him. A teacup appeared beside her, and she saw another pair of *zhi*ren departing.

“What are they?” she asked.

“They’re human, almost. As close as I can get them, anyway.”

“But not machines?”

“Clay, like us. Flesh and blood.”

“Organic.”

“Completely.”

“Clones?”

“No.”

“One of them collapsed outside.”

“I know.”

“What happened?”

“Clay cracks.”

“You don’t seem bothered by her death.”

“What is death without a soul?”

He must have seen something in her expression.

“You’ve felt what I’ve always known. They’re hollow.”

“Why?”

He shrugged, “They are like us in every way. My people could find nothing to distinguish them from a real person, and yet.... After a while, I told them to stop trying, and now they serve. The one that died was part of the first pair to survive to adulthood.”

“They grow up?”

He nodded.

“Can they reproduce?”

“They have no such desires.”

“What will happen to her?”

“Recycled, like any other organic matter, and turned into soil for the hydroponics and the labs.”

Eva shuddered.

“And her *jintong*?”

“The survivors rarely live long. I will keep him busy, filled up, until the end.”

“That’s it?”

“Would you have me mourn? They are like treasured objects, Dr. Peng. But objects nonetheless.”

Her throat was dry, and she took a sip of tea. Pu’er. She set the cup aside. A bowl of peaches sat to the side. She picked one up and brought it close, inhaled, let her lips brush the skin. Shen watched her.

“May I?”

“They’re here for you.”

She bit into it, juice squirting and dribbling down her chin. He handed her a silk handkerchief and she nodded her thanks.

“Sour, aren’t they?”

“Very.”

“You see the problem?”

She looked at him and he picked up a peach, balancing it on his fingertips.

“Grown here, inside, in boxes, they’re like the *zhiren*.” He bit into the peach and swallowed. “Realistic, but incomplete. I want them to grow native here.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“You’ve made progress.”

“The fundamental issue remains: this world isn’t made for life.”

Shen flicked two fingers and the *zhiren* appeared, the man carrying something fist-sized wrapped in silk and the woman a pot of tea. She refilled their cups and cleared away the fruit, and the man placed the bundle in front of Eva. At Shen’s invitation, she unwrapped it.

Inside lay a lump of yellow stone.

“Pick it up.”

It was almost claylike, and it tingled—throbbed—between her fingers. Her eyes widened and she glanced at Shen.

“Crack it open on the *kang*.”

What she saw inside stole her breath.

“Where did you get this?”

Mr. Shen sipped his tea and smiled.

Eva kept her hand in her pocket, wrapped around the two halves of the sulfur yellow stone. She followed the Firestar’s map into the bowels of the city, passing through doors and down elevators she’d never been able to access. The final descent opened onto a vast, dim room filled with pipes and steam. The air was soggy and warm, and the walls sweated rivers onto

the floor. The ceiling was lost in cloud. Through the mist, machinery, pumps, and turbines whirled and flashed like a leviathan's scales, and the air roared with the voice of a trapped ocean. And yet, for all the water and warmth, Eva smelled no hint of mildew, no secret scent of growing things.

People moved among the machines, wraithlike in the brume, checking panels, adjusting flows, and checking everything against invisible data streams. Her fingers tightened around the stones.

"You're not supposed to be," said a man emerging from the pipes on her left. She recognized him, the one with the damp hair and storm-colored eyes who left wet footprints and the smell of rain in his wake before evaporating into thin air. Here, in the heart of his element, his features seemed softer, more boyish, like river stones and sea glass tumbled smooth by the endless action of moving water. His voice rasped with sound of shells in the surf. He was everything Marcus was not, and she caught herself staring.

"You need to leave," he said.

"Mr. Shen sent me."

"No one told me about a new hydrologist."

"I'm not. I work in synbio. Eva Peng," she said, holding out her hand.

Beams of blue light burst from his eyes, and he sneered. "The gardener who can't get anything to grow. Well, you won't find anything growing down here either."

"But I might find answers."

A technician approached, but he shooed her away. "Why are you here?"

“I’m supposed to talk to someone about this.” Eva pulled half the stone from her pocket and held it out to him. “Do you recognize it?”

He glanced at it, the wet blue light of his gaze lapping at the yellow rock. “You smell of salt.”

“Excuse me?”

“And wind. Warm wind before a summer a storm.” His eyes were closed, and he sucked air through his nostrils.

“Look—” Eva said.

“Suppose I tell you,” he said, cutting her off and opening his eyes.

“Suppose you do.”

He bored into her, water cleaving stone. “Will you visit again?”

“I could.”

He chewed the inside of his cheek, then looked away. “We brought up heaps up of the stuff when we drilled the wells.”

“Where is it?”

“Gone now. Hauled it all out to create the waterworks.”

“Where did you take it?”

“The excavators dumped everything in the waste piles outside the city.”

“Can you take me there?”

“No.”

“I need—”

“I don’t care what you need. I answered your questions because I can smell the water in you and see the sky. Because you might keep your word and return, but I’ve had enough. Figure out the rest on your own.”

He turned and vanished into the steam. Eva stood there, with arm outstretched, watching the ripples his footsteps made in the puddles. They kept pulsing, long after he was gone, like the water had come alive beneath him.

She made her ascent without looking back.

Marcus met her in the mess hall the day he got back.

“I need to go outside,” she said.

“As I recall—”

“I know what I said. I don’t want to go, but I have to.”

“Why?”

“I need to see the dump.”

“What for?”

She told him everything, both the facts and her suspicions. Her hopes. His eyes shone red, and he crossed his arms and clenched his jaw as she spoke.

“Please, Marcus.”

“Eva—”

“You said it’s about becoming more, about blending? This might be the way.”

“You’re still talking about changing the planet.”

“Aren’t you, with this city and your trips?”

“It’s different.”

“Please, Marcus. I want to go home.”

They met the next morning in the garage. Marcus was surly, and Eva didn’t press him. They left in one of the smaller rovers, cutting across the sand towards the eastern escarpment. Dalia had given her a heavy dose of meds, and Eva was almost able to enjoy the view. It *was* beautiful, the way cemeteries sometimes were. She held the stones in her lap and rolled them between her gloved fingers like prayer beads.

Jacob’s Ladder glinted against the fading blue aura of the rising sun, stretching like a strand silver beads into the butterscotch sky. She gotten it backwards when she arrived, thinking of it biblically. For Marcus and the Nine, heaven lay here, planetside, and not in the sky. But for her? Well, the way to salvation was never easy.

The rover ground to a stop a stone’s throw from the dump, a vast litter of rock, dust, and construction materials heaped and strewn at the edge of Isidis Planitia. Even here, the garbage was growing. For all his self-righteousness, she thought, Marcus had made his mark, too.

“Take a look,” he told her over the intercom. “If you find anything, I’ll summon a retrieval team.”

“You’re not coming?” Eva said, surprised at her disappointment.

“I don’t think so.”

She climbed out of the hatch and dropped gingerly to the ground. Her leg held. The wind stirred, and then a great gust rolled across the dunes, nearly knocking her over, and she had to grab the rover's handlebar to keep upright.

"What was that?"

"Could be a storm."

"You don't know?"

"The weather's unpredictable. You'd better hurry."

She shuffled across the expanse and set to work, scrabbling over the scree and feeling for the faint resonance of ancient life while the wind whipped the planet raw.

Mars had been lush once, she remembered reading, but lush meant wet with rivers and seas, not life. She picked up a stone and discarded it, then reached for another. It was supposed to be sterile, water alone and nothing like the Earth's primordial brew—

Eva froze, then brushed away the dust at her feet to reveal a pile of yellow stone, embedded here and there with the fossils of nascent life.

"Marcus," she said into the intercom.

"Yeah?"

"I found them."

It took her nearly a year, working in secret, to make sense of the stones. There was no DNA, of course, no organic material at all, but the structures held secrets and revealed novel approaches, radical solutions she could never have imagined on her own.

When she was ready, she invited Manpreet, Marcus, Dalia, and the rest of the synbio team to join her. It took two trips for everyone to pass through the airlock into the Martian habitat where Eva waited with a sealed container.

She let out a breath. Breath mattered, the benediction and the orison of her respiration, rich with the essence of her soul. She looked at Marcus, standing with his arms crossed and his jaw shut tight, at Dalia, somehow still knitting despite the thick gloves, at Manpreet and others, watching like a cadre of priests.

She opened the container and transferred the alfalfa shoots one by one into the native soil. When she finished, she set the container aside, dusted her gloves on her pants, and turned to Manpreet.

“Can you watch it for me?”

“You’re not going to stay?”

“I can’t.”

“How about tomorrow?”

“I guess so.”

“It’s good work, Eva, whatever happens.”

She nodded.

Had she been less preoccupied when she reached her room, she might have noticed the Kezi's rumpled fur, brushed the wrong way, or the wardrobe's door standing slightly ajar and the pen left casually on the desk instead of in the drawer, or the lingering scent of embroidered silk. Had she been less absorbed this last year in the story of the stones, she might have noticed it was not the first time these anomalies had occurred.

Instead, she absent-mindedly smoothed the cat's fur as he rubbed against her legs, returned the pen to drawer, and pushed the wardrobe door to before collapsing onto the frosty coverlet and falling into troubled sleep.

The tire swing was miles above the earth, the ropes popping as he twisted her higher, right up to the edge of the atmosphere. She was crying, but he didn't seem to notice.

"Hold tight, starlight," Grandpa Eddie said, and then he let her go.

She awoke when she hit the ground and felt her femur splinter.

No point waiting any longer. She climbed from bed, changed out of her sweaty pajamas, and headed for the lab on fox feet. The last day in the Dome came back to her as she stood before the airlock, the stone floor transforming her into a mountain. What did it take to tear out a mountain by the roots and compel it forward? She breathed—and broke free.

The tray was before her, and her gloved fingers were in the soil.

The plants grew.

It was everything Manpreet could do to keep everyone quiet. Be patient, he kept telling them, raising his voice over the rumble. Dalia was there, knitting, and Marcus, too, his iron core keening. Some of her colleagues looked at Eva with eyes of fire and others with eyes of ice, but writ large on every face was wonder.

“I’ve informed the Nine,” Marcus said, “and they’ve authorized an outside planting, the first since the early experiments.”

The roar rose, and then the *zhiren* arrived, nineteen of them, a pair representing each of the Nine, decorated in the ornaments of their masters. The assembled scientists fell silent. They watched the *zhiren*, and the *zhiren* watched Eva. They seemed not to breathe, the room emptying of air.

They bowed in unison, bent at the waist, and stood. The *jintong* in the center, topknot caught in a golden cylinder, stepped forward. Alone. There was silver in his hair, something Eva had never seen before, and she realized this was the man whose partner had died. She had given him much thought. She’d assumed he was long dead. Shen’s representatives stepped forward to join him.

“Come,” he said, squinting and licking his lips.

“Come,” repeated before continuing haltingly as if he had been waiting for another to speak. “The place is prepared.”

Shen’s *zhiren* stepped forward and took the sealed crates of seedlings off the table while the rest of them parted for Eva, Marcus, Dalia, and the lone *jintong* to pass through. They closed ranks when Manpreet and the others moved to follow, blocking the lab’s exit.

They milled. Someone asked why they couldn't pass, and someone else why Marcus and Dalia were allowed to go.

"He is the Architect," said one of the *z'hiren*.

"And she is not one of you," said another.

"And what are we?" some shouted.

"Valued instruments,"

"And engines of creation."

"Abide," said a man.

"And be content," said a woman.

"For your time to join,"

"The shifting surface,"

"Of the world,"

"Accompanies,"

"This triumph."

"You are not forgotten."

"You are not left behind."

"I want them with me," Eva said.

"They cannot come," said a woman crewcut hair.

"Too many," said the man beside her.

"It's all right, Eva," Manpreet said. "You can fill us in later."

He raised a hand in farewell, and Eva waved back. Dalia took her hand and led her out of the lab, followed by Shen's *zhiren* and the plants. When the door to the lab was closed, the remaining *zhiren* advanced.

None of the Nine accompanied them when they left the city in one of the large rovers. Eva was too focused on what was coming to worry about it, but in the corner of her mind, a coal of disappointment glowed. If this worked, it meant her time here was at an end, and she'd expected the chance to press Shen on his obligations to her.

They arrived at a small field of plowed Martian sand a few kilometers outside the city. Two more rovers were already there, and Eva saw men and women in pale blue EVs assembling drones and unloading plastic drums of chemicals mixed to her specifications. They would accelerate the alfalfa's growth and the production of greenhouse emissions.

Her party, including the lone *jintong*, made their way towards the workers. She glanced at Marcus and saw him stony behind the helmet.

"I'm sorry," she said over a private channel.

"You did what you had to do."

They stopped at the edge of the field and watched while the workers went about their business, unpacking the trays of seedlings and carrying them away.

"Will it really be so bad? To breathe the air? To smell a living world one day?"

"We're meant to bend, like water and the wind, along a certain course."

“The wind and the water change the course they follow.”

“Will you still go back? Even now?”

“That’s why I did it.”

A man in a dusty suit sprang towards her, light-footed in the low gravity. His eyes were lowered, scanning back and forth. “We’re ready to begin planting the—” he looked up. He knew her before she knew him, and though he tried to turn away before she recognized him, it was too late. Eva stared. He was older and grayer, his once round face worn away to bedrock. But it was him. How he’d changed in the last fifteen years.

“Sammy?” she said.

He looked down and hurried on. “We’re ready to plant.”

Before she could catch his arm, he was moving away, stumbling in his haste, shoulders stooped, back bent, a man of spirit broken. The last time she’d seen him was the day Grandpa Simon gave him the keys to the farm. *Yuanfen* Simon had said, clapping Sammy on the shoulder and smiling at his wife and children.

Eva was still running through her memories of him when the first set of seedlings settled into the ground. She was nearly driven to her knees by the roar of it, the thirsty world guzzling up the green, sucking it downward and threatening to bring her with it. Dalia and Marcus moved as one to catch her, and the sky spun above them, brown and bright.

She shook them away and took a shaking step onto the turned sand, the dusty white of her suit suddenly aglow in a nimbus of green and she saw the world—this one and many others—shuddering awake.

The second set of seedlings went into the quaking ground, but she was no longer being swept away. She rode upon the waves like Christ upon the Sea of Galilee. When the third set was planted, she knelt, her bad leg bending effortlessly. Shen's yellow stones were in her hand, and she slipped them deep into the shuddering core. The waves calmed. The ground stilled. And Eva stayed there for a long time, her fingers in communion with Mars and the Earth.

Marcus's eyes grew wide, and he followed onto the roiling ground. Not a cataclysm but an awakening. He felt the roots take hold, piercing his lungs and diaphragm, filling him with breath. When Eva finally stood, he was beside her and took her hand.

Sammy saw nothing. The ground was firm beneath his feet, and he busied himself with the planting, checking everything with a farmer's eye. All the while, he kept his back to the girl—the woman—whose mother he once had loved, whose secrets he still kept, and whose history he had not been able to save.

To the workers and the *zhiren*, it was only a task, partial payment of their debts for the farmers and unthinking duty to the paper people. Though in each of their heads thoughts trickled or tumbled, they all of them moved only upon the material plane, both the soulless and the subjugated dimly glowing.

All of them except one.

The *jintong*, alone of all the *zhiren* to live bereft of his other half, watched Eva, his head full of the secrets he had found in her chest when he visited her room while she labored of the secrets of the stone and breathed new life into them. Where before there had been an endless emptiness in him, one shared by all his kind, the *jintong* suddenly felt the faint pulse of a newborn soul. He marked the spot where Eva had knelt and planted the stone, and when they had departed, he stood where She had stood, filled with her breath.

Forgotten by all of them, Dalia stood to the side, knitting.

Marcus saw her to her door. His hands were shaking.

“You felt it, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“Everything will change now.”

“It might not work.”

“We both know it will.”

“You could come back with me.”

He shook his head. “I still have work to do.”

“And when it’s done?”

“You could stay.”

“Here?”

“Would it be so bad?”

“What about tonight?”

“Shen’s already told me to leave.”

“For how long?”

“A few days.”

They regarded one another.

“Will you still be here when I get back?” he asked.

“Will you still be the same?”

“I don’t know.”

“Neither do I.”

“I’ve got to go.”

“Me too.”

They kissed once, quick and bittersweet. Marcus headed down the hall, and Eva closed the door behind him.

On her desk, she found a tray with fresh tea, a peach, and a note. Kezi rubbed her ankles as she read.

I have an old story for you, Dr. Peng.

Once, a woman of the Wa clan found herself climbing a strange path. She followed it up into the mountains, above the clouds, and into a land of dust and stone where nothing grew. The woman grew afraid and wandered for many days, but the path was lost to her, and the mists were impenetrable. Weak and full of despair, she sat in the dust and spoke to a stone, unburdening herself of her sorrow. The stone soaked up her breath, awoke, and replied, exhaling a single green shoot. The woman wept for wonder and the sky transformed her tears into rain. The shoot became a peach tree. The tree became a flowering forest.

You've done fine work. Follow the *zhiren* when they come for you, and I'll tell you the rest of the story.

— 神

Eva stared at the signature. All the while she'd thought his surname was Shen, but no. He was calling himself God.

She tapped the card against her teeth. His hubris alarmed her, as did the word “beginning.”

She picked up the peach and set it down. She sipped the tea.

Did he mean to have her wait, making sure of success? Or did he merely want to congratulate her in person? To arrange her return?

She the cup aside and walked to the door. She didn't need the *zhiren* to show her the way.

And yet there they were, standing to either side of her door like guards. Her hands grew clammy.

They motioned her forward, one in the lead and one falling in behind her.

Mr. Shen sat on the *kang*, swathed in silk robe embroidered with white chrysanthemums. He was writing this time, holding back his sleeve as the inkbrush swished across the paper, sand on bone. A poem. Beside him steamed a cup of tea, and there was another for her opposite him. Eva sat.

“It’s done,” she said, when it became clear he would not speak first.

“It’s just beginning. A patch of green is not a garden world.”

“The plants will proliferate on their own, cover the planet, thicken then air, and then suffocate themselves, dying away and breathing life back into the Martian dust. You don’t need me for the rest.”

“I do.”

“It’ll take centuries.”

“It might.”

“We had a bargain, Mr. Shen. I came here to help you, and you—”

“You came here to soothe your wounded pride and continue your pet project. The *zhiren* tell me you’ve done that.”

“And I need to finish it back on Earth.”

He took a sip. Savored it. Swallowed.

“It’s very good,” he said.

“I’m sure it is.”

“Grown right here, in the hydroponics.”

“Like the peaches.”

“Tell me, Dr. Peng, what would you do if there were nothing left for you back on Earth?”

“The contract says—”

“I can give you money and a lab, a hermitage to disappear in, but that’s all you would have. No friends, no family.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Try the tea.”

“I don’t want any tea.”

“A peach then?” he said, raising a finger.

Eva expected *zhiren*, but her mouth went dry when a man approached carrying a dish full of knotty green fruit. A man she knew. A man she did not expect.

“Allen?”

“That’s all, Allen, thank you.”

“Allen!” Eva called after him, standing and trying to follow, but he was already through the door and crew-cut *zhiren* moved to block her.

“Get out of my way,” she said, ignoring the cold and trying to push past until she felt the muzzle of a gun biting into her ribs.

“Come sit,” said Mr. Shen.

She backed away, head spinning.

“What’s he doing here?”

“He emigrated from earth, as have many others. You must have seen the elevator moving on your trips outside.”

“Why?”

“Work. Opportunity. A new and healthy world. Allen is a medic in the immigrant quarters. He has a wife. A son. He saw the old world for what it was, and he’s not waiting for you back there.”

“I didn’t expect him to. It’s why we broke up.”

“And your parents? Your friend Moira? Did you break things off with them, too?”

“Of course not.”

“Try the tea.”

She shook her head.

“Allen’s not the first ghost you saw today.”

Eva looked at him.

“I chose him for the planting on purpose.”

“What about the farm?”

“Consumed by the desert, repossessed by the banks, and sold off to be a solar farm. The house, the creek, and the swing—the mausoleum—all of it gone.”

“How?”

“You lived an ivory life. Most people didn’t. Try the tea.”

Eva lifted the cup in trembling hands and drank.

Mr. Shen was watching her now, greedily, eyes glittering like flecks of jet against the glowing sclera.

“Do you feel anything when you drink? Like you do with the plants?”

“Where’s Moira? Where are my parents?”

He signaled again and the *zhiren* came. On the tray lay her mother’s pipe, her father’s glasses, and one of Moira’s unraveling braids.

The cup shook in her hands.

“Right here with you, in the very soil.”

“You killed them.”

“And you will see them live again in the transformation of this world. Let me tell you the rest of the story:

Having received life from her, the Stone could not let go. Though the land turned green, the mist remained, shielding the sacred grove from all that lay below. So, the woman buried the Stone and built a temple above it, sat among the falling blossoms to meditate on her creation, and turned to light. Thereafter, those favored few who found their way through the mist heard the voices of the woman and the Stone singing among the trees and rejoiced.

You’re not leaving, Dr. Peng. Not yet. Not when the peach tree’s just begun to grow.”

The cup fell, the tea fanning out in the air like a hand snatching at air and crashed onto the *kang*.

“You need time,” he said, picking up his brush. “The *zhiren* will see you home and I’ve arranged a caretaker for you.”

The *zhiren* were hauling her up and away. Tea had soaked her pants and scalded her thighs.

“Why?”

Shen was writing again and did not look at her. “The universe seeks to know itself, to grasp its own infinity, but in the ebb and flow of the ten thousand things, it remains only half-aware. We are the instruments of its awakening. Eat and rest. Mourn. Spend time with Marcus. Feel the stone changing. And when you’re ready, rejoin us.”

He finished the final character, leaned back, and smiled, the black ink on the brush glowing red. Eva tried to scream, but a syringe punctured her throat, flooding her with warmth.

When she came to, she was not alone.

“Who’s there?” she said, sitting up shakily. The cat hopped off the bed and headed into the shadows. Her head spun and leg throbbed. A bead of dried blood crusted her throat.

“Who’s there? She said again. She tried to shout, but her voice was soft. All the anger, the fear, the loss she should have felt floated far away and out of reach.

The shadows moved, and figure appeared from the bathroom, Kezi at its feet.

“How do you feel, Eva Peng?”

She stared at the *jintong*, dressed in a loose-fitting silk robe, his hair unbound.

“I—I feel nothing.”

“It is the medication.”

“Why are you here?”

“I have been tasked with your care. When the medication is gone, your head will fill with sorrow.”

“Why you?”

“I asked it of Mr. Shen.”

“And he agreed?”

“He is not with affection. For me as well as you.”

“I still don’t understand why you wanted to be here.”

His eyes gleamed.

“Because I have come to know you,” he pointed at the desk, and Eva saw the chest open, and the contents arrayed. “Because I was there yesterday. Because I felt it.”

“What did you feel?”

“The breath of life, piercing your helmet and saturating the world. I saw the plants shake themselves awake and stand taller. I smelled the clay and the water, the fire and ice, the starlight and the moonlight and the bloody sweat. The tingle of life upon my tongue.”

He reached out. She tried to move away, but he caught her arm. She tensed, expecting the frigid void and in its place felt a lambent flicker. Her eyes widened.

“Does Shen know?”

“If he did, I would not be here.”

Kezi rolled across the *jintong*’s feet, purring.

“He knows you.”

“I have been here before. Many times.”

“You delivered the fruit?”

He shook his head. “I was here, returning your chest, when I felt her die.”

“I didn’t know... I didn’t know you felt like that.”

“It came as a surprise. We were not made to think or to feel. My first emotion was grief, a terrible thing, and it nearly unmade me. Because of the chest, my second emotion was wonder.”

“You read my things?”

“While you worked.”

“How?”

“It took time to unravel the words, Latin and Irish and macaronic texts, but without the *yuniü*, I was both purposeless and useless, and my time was my own. The translations are there.”

“What do they say?”

The *jintong* stepped across the room to the desk, reached inside, withdrew the drive and a homemade adapter, and held it out to her.

“I will return tomorrow,” he said.

Eva stood slowly, flexed her fingers, and took it from him. In the instant of contact, she sensed it again, a saffron light, glowing in the once-upon-a-time darkness. The unmistakable awakening of a soul.

End of Eva Peng Part I

CURRICULUM VITAE

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