

# ANIMALS ON THE MOON

J. M. YALE

## CHAPTER ONE

Look at all these animals. It's hard to believe we're the most advanced civilization of humans in history. *Homo sapien luna* sounds more impressive than it is. True, we've endured this long and rebuilt so much, but if we're so smart, why haven't we fixed Earth yet? Thinking about it makes me nervous. What a strange feeling when you live in a glass enclosure. I better pass it off as *hope*.

Today, we gather in the center of the colony to find out when we can leave the Moon.

I close my eyes and focus on the brilliant light overhead. My neck warms up and a sharp tingle runs up my spine as energy waves surge through me. My body lightens, and my bare feet lift away from the polished surface below. I open my eyes and adjust to the glowing vision. I witness our most amazing spectacle. Digital waves engulf the entire population; over twenty thousand people float like a flowering mosaic. We are in alignment with our artificial intelligence system and supercomputer, Direct.

We assemble, like the rings of Saturn, around the towering metallic arc that houses our most sacred resource. Positioned far overhead is an euphoric orb of light which hosts the source to our alignment.

Through Direct's technology, we can call upon an endless bank of information and project it in our vision as energized knowledge: visualizations from Earth's natural world, like misty mountain tops, sounds of erupting volcanos, tastes of salt water, and even smells of wildflowers. Through Direct, we can explore over three hundred cycles of recolonization missions in an instant, and share and push information back and forth to each other as part of our daily routine.

I feel a nudge on my shoulder from Leif, the boy next to me. If I could call someone my friend, it would be Leif. “Pollo, you’re out of alignment,” he says, pushing me a message.

I didn’t notice, but I am standing back on the surface, alignment while my peers float in unison above me. Leif looks along our row of peers at several females noticing my mishap. They are sharing messages at my expense techno-pathically. Communicating secrets telepathically with the help of Direct is our least civilized advancement.

I refocus on the light, rejoin alignment, and float back up with my cycle. We float together in the energy waves, the way I imagine being carried by the ocean tides would feel. I relax my arms to the sides of my tunic. I smooth out the weightless material. Soft blue is our cycle’s clothing color. Gazing below my knees to my open toes dangling in the air, I push a message back to Leif: “Thank you.”

## CHAPTER TWO

It's time to begin the ceremony. Direct welcomes each of us individually. *Hello, Apollo, tenth generation, son of Copernicus I.* I mentally reply, *Hello*, only amusing myself with the automated process.

I see a complete record of my life, cycle age six through cycle age sixteen, with flashes of my development and key contributions. On my right forearm, an embedded monitor brightly displays my current statistics: age, vitals, and body composition.

Cycle age sixteen

Body temperature – thirty-six degrees Celsius

Respiration rate – Normal

Blood pressure – 110/70

Height – 175 cm

Weight – 60 kg

Eyes – Brown

Hair – Brown

Fully Grown Adult

*Apollo, you are in satisfactory condition.*

The welcome is complete.

My feet gently return to the surface, and my body compresses as the artificial gravity returns. My vision restores to normal. I gaze around at row after row of colony members, assembled by

age and standing in perfect formation. I take a deep breath; our atmosphere feels a little thin with everyone huddled so closely together.

“What do you think the first ceremony was like, Leif?” I ask, stamping my foot on the artificial surface.

“Probably less cramped,” Leif says. “Let’s talk after the ceremony, Pollo.”

Our row is within the original patchwork of the artificial surface, the boundary of the first colony over three hundred years ago. Tiny, compared to the size of our inhabitation now. These walls have expanded seven times since the beginning, each structure a greater advancement over the previous. Now, these four massive walls create mankind’s most impressive achievement: our pyramid of glass. I catch myself staring up at the glass ceiling. The distance to the pyramid apex dizzies me, and the vastness dwarfs us at ground level.

“I don’t wanna get any older, Leif,” I say. “I like our view of Direct from up front.”

“We’re getting too tall to stand up front much longer, Pollo,” Leif replies.

Just in front of us, the structural arc of Direct sweeps its way into heights far above us, shooting toward the peak of the pyramid ceiling. The light of Direct splits the most important level of the colony, the mezzanine.

“Here come the architects, Leif!” I exclaim.

Abruptly, one of the girls in our row pushes a *SHHH* our way.

I ignore her, looking up at the mezzanine level, where the architects reside. They quietly orchestrate the colony; they are the authority. An entire city exists above our level, and countless

towers triangulate from the outer walls. The mezzanine level extends to a great, translucent bridge, ovaling out, with the arc of Direct spearing straight through the opening for all to marvel.

The huge main door of the central, shimmering tower echoes open from far above. The architects begin their march. They only appear for the ceremony, once a cycle. The rest of the time, their tremendous effort is hidden, calculating the intricacies of the colony to ensure our survival.

The distant figures form a parading line down the single, enchanting stairway. Unlike us in our short-sleeve, cropped-bottom tunics, the architects are hooded in white cloaks, their hems dragging along behind them. The ceremony is silent; we can hear the clicking of their steps echoing throughout the immense space as they slowly make their way to the mezzanine bridge.

Once, there were only a few architects who ran the colony. Over time, they grew in population, nurturing greater cohorts. I try to count them but give up; there appear to be nearly one hundred white robes. The architects are selected from the cycle 50s after being great citizens of the colony. Those chosen are granted extended lifespans for their wisdom to lead the colony. Those not chosen, well, nobody really knows. Of all the fascinating things, it's the architects whose identities remain a mystery that we live in most awe of. We believe the cycle 50s we knew, went on to join the architects.

The white robes finally reach the oval way of the mezzanine bridge far above us. Now positioned, they join our gaze upon the brilliant light.

Our focus goes immediately beyond the light, to the pyramid peak. The vast ceiling has mirrored radiation deflectors that protect us from the violence of space. The locking grid begins

to shift effortlessly, starting at the apex. The mirrored panels quickly angle open, halfway down, toward the pyramid floor. The open view reveals the true reality in the blackness of space: our still abandoned planet, humanity's vacant home, Earth.

### CHAPTER THREE

At the center of the colony is the inner circle, where the cycle 50s are arranged at the ceremony. Each cycle, the 50s are our saving hope. Draped in white, they represent the purest version of humans to date. The 50s will rise to the mezzanine level, their journey ends, and Direct will introduce the new cycle 6s to replace them.

The powerful energy engulfs the 50s, and they rise. They ascend past the mezzanine level and float in a perfect circle around the arc. Their white robes float weightlessly in the brilliant light. The authority overhead raise their hands in silence to announce the newlings have arrived. A ring of children emerges from the light, instantly forming a circle within the 50s. Witnessing the exchange is spectacular for everyone. The newlings come to rest in front of the 50s as they embrace their hands in unison. Pairs consisting of an adult and a child rotate slowly overhead. I am enthralled by it. Then the cycle 50s slowly fade away into the light. The circle of newlings descends past the mezzanine level as the energy waves deliver them softly to the surface. They replace the 50s in the exact same place at the base of the arc.

Gazing up at a full-faced Earth, we see the burnt soils and clouds of poisonous gases clinging to our once green planet. Without Direct giving us our consistent light and darkness, only the Sun's half-month of light and the other half-month of darkness would remain. The authority knows our best interest is consistency and normalcy to help us concentrate on our mission to achieve our goal.

We hear rumbling from far above, rippling the glass walls, and tremors shake through the pyramid floor. A spacecraft burns brightly across the abyss of space. The 50s' lifetime



achievement is leaving the Moon in the form of a greenhouse machine. The most advanced knowledge in terraforming is in this cycle's launch, making its saving journey to Earth.

We've heard whispers of the potential this cycle's technology holds, replicating green cells that can grow exponentially to reestablish a stable atmosphere. It could potentially lead to our return to Earth. I only hope that this will be the mission that gets us back home. In moments, the craft appears as a distant flare.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The ceremony proceeds with the newlings entering their first moments in Direct. They must first take the oath of the colony, our credo. It is simple, and a life-long obligation. No entire cohort has ever made it to cycle 50. There has always been a percentage of failures, those who will not succeed in our mission to see Earth, those who join the 1 percent.

I ask, “Leif, do you remember Marcus?” When we were cycle age 10, he failed early from our cohort and is still the only one since.

“Yes, because he wouldn’t listen,” Leif says. “You’re going to be joining him if you don’t be quiet!”

The newlings begin to speak aloud. Their voices faintly fill the stadium around us.

*Intelligence over instincts*

*for the pursuit of progress.*

*Pleasure through advancement*

*until we return to Earth.*

*As brothers and sisters*

*100 percent or until death.*

We show our acceptance of the newlings by repeating the credo back as an entire colony. As I speak the words out loud, they become very real to me. My devotion is true, and I strongly

agree with our cause. I can tell by the sternness in the colony's voice that they all want to see Earth someday as much as I do. We all live for the same loyal cause.

Direct announces each newling and their matching progeny parent. Five hundred young names and faces flash through our vision with assignments to current colony members. Most of the progeny parents are familiar to me, or I've seen them in passing. Next door to us, they will receive a young girl, Irma, to be the progeny of Cetus, cycle age 30, and sibling of Leif. Typically, we applaud and welcome the closest newling and guardian to us after the ceremony. I hope when we meet the newling neighbor girl, my elder sibling Maive, cycle age 28, doesn't say anything inappropriate for the occasion. There will be no additions to our household, as our living quarters is full with four people. Along with my younger sibling Thad, cycle age 8, we are the progenies of our guardian, Phoebe, a great elder of cycle age 42.

Live images of cycle 50's Earth initiative stream through Direct live. The terraforming machine arrives in Earth's atmosphere and deploys the green cells. We see the vital statistics of Earth in detail in front of us. We focus on the rise in oxygen levels in the air, which were once 21 percent. Even with our nose apparatuses filtering out hazardous gases, we need the oxygen levels to return to 11 percent for our inhabitation. After the Great War, oxygen levels plummeted to 2.3 percent. Still today, after three hundred years of progress, Earth remains at 4.8 percent oxygen, with lingering levels of deadly argon and methane gases.

The data results from the initial impact tests on the green cells calculate now. We expect the impact to be most potent when the projections complete. The scanners compute from the baseline before the exposure of 4.8 percent, and a green line on the graph rises. The calculation of forecasted oxygen increase throughout the cycle after full exposure is...

I'm on my tippy-toes, hands clenched together. *Forecasted oxygen level increases to a maximum of...*

*5.2 percent.*

Transmission is complete. The broadcast diminishes.

*5.2 percent!*

My heart sinks. But that's less than half a percent increase! I know progress is uncertain, but this solution is no improvement over the past ten cycles we've witnessed. It had no impact.

My peers do not show any feelings and remain still. My feet feel heavy, and I shuffle around. I look around in disgust, saying, "Wait, why didn't it work?" I get no response from my peers.

The ceremony ends.

Far above us, the authority begin their march back to the mezzanine towers. The mirrored panels begin to flip effortlessly back in reverse fashion. Quickly, I gaze in the void of space at our still burnt planet. I know it will be another full cycle before I see Earth again. I get one last glance as the panels seal our fate for another whole cycle.

A thundering *crackle-boom* surrounds us from the announcement system. I don't remember hearing any messages from the mezzanine level before. Looking around with confusion, we wait. Near the base of the stairs, in front of the huge tower door, one member of the council stands alone. An astonished crowd stirs. There are several shrieks as the sound cracks overhead once more. A gruff old voice speaks, a human male voice.

“My children of Copernicus 1, an anomaly has occurred in our intelligence system, Direct.” His voice is shaking, and the next few words are wheezy. “Rogue messages were discovered being transmitted in Direct. If any members of the colony have been contacted, you must concede all knowledge to the authority immediately,” he says.

He takes several heavy breaths and continues, “Elders above cycle 40 are to remain here to receive further details. All others, return to your quarters immediately and wait for more instructions. There will be no greeting of the newlings this cycle. We must find justice for the infiltration of our most precious system, Direct!”

There is a blood-curdling cry from far behind me, from a much higher level. Words I’ll never forget hearing...

“THERE’S A *GLITCH!*”

## CHAPTER FIVE

A *glitch*! Could it even be possible? A *glitch*! In Direct? The calculations verify it to be impossible. How could outside information penetrate our closed system? A *glitch*! The words still resonate in my head. The frazzled crowd scatters as the tower door slams shut from the mezzanine level. The muffled echo rings overhead. “Leif?” I say to him, who is already turning away.

“We better go home, Pollo. This sounds serious.” He pushes back to me, not turning around.

Images invade my vision from all sides as people try to rejoin one another. In the commotion, I can tell most have not felt this uneasy about anything before. I feel prone to the unsettling truth that something strange is going on. Finally, some excitement on this rock!

I siphon out the images as I pass through the crowd and make my way out of the center of the colony. As I mix through the higher cycles, their more evolved thoughts filter to me, being a lower cycle and intelligence. Higher conversations are unknown, but still invade my personal space as they project what I perceive as visual noise. Through the buzz, I feel Thad reaching out to me. Thad is the youngest sibling in my home quarters.

“Pollo! Wait for me, I’m scared,” Thad says.

“I’m here, Thad, just outside the walkways,” I reply.

Thad says, “The kids in cycle 8 claim the *glitch* could be aliens from outer space.”

I laugh, trying to find him. “No, Thad. It’s not aliens. There’s a reasonable explanation for this.”

In an instant, Direct pauses our thoughts, all of the people in a moment. A flashing message freezes us in time.

*Return calmly to your chambers. The authority will resolve this matter before our evening feast. Do not stray. Intelligence over instinct.*

All around, colony members snap back to their normal pace, and I feel a tug from behind. Thad catches up to me, he yanks my tunic. I extend my hand back, pulling him along as we head away from the center of the colony, toward the civilian walkways.

“It can’t be true, right?” Thad asks, walking quickly to keep up. “A *glit*—”

I cut him off in thought. “We can’t discuss it anymore. You heard the authority; let’s get home.”

Just then, the hover bots fly overhead, repeating the message from Direct. The round, blipping disks glide above us, patrolling in their usual friendly fashion. The route home already seems longer than usual with all the commotion. As we reach the outer edge, the crowd thins out, and activity is calm, with pleasant sounds filling the atmosphere as we cross onto the walkways. The walkways’ energy field helps move us quickly along, to and from the center of the colony from our chamber homes.

Hundreds of living chambers stretch downward from the great outer walls to form a huge geodesic city. Luckily, we reside on the first level, and our walkway ride is a brief one. Living on the ground level is another advantage of being a progeny of an elder. Living with Phoebe, our guardian, means we don’t have to feel the queasy force of the walkway ride skyward to the upper chambers. We step into the walkway, and our energy signatures confirm where the walkway

system will deliver us. Our ride begins on the energy field just off the ground, about knee-high, off to our chamber's doorstep.

Unexpectedly, I feel a strong tug on my tunic from beneath. Turning, I see it isn't Thad. Something is pulling me down to ground level. Wildly, my legs flail out, tripping Thad as he shoots past me, rolling ahead. Beyond my sight, I hear the commotion his fall causes, while hands snatch me out of the energy flow. I see who is pulling me, a man in tattered clothes, just before we collide hard on the surface. He is a creeper. Part of the 1 percent; a fail.

Although aggression is forbidden, I react by pushing him away violently. I struggle to free myself, but he has two fists full of my collar. People flow just overhead on the walkway, and my head takes the impact of several kicks as he wrestles to keep me down. Abruptly, my body realigns with the energy signature of the walkway and my legs elevate off the ground, dragging us both along. He desperately pulls me into his body, facing his trembling form. My nose filter lights up, red from his pungent smell. His dry, pale hands are cracked and exposed; his radiation coating is long dissolved from his skin. I drag the creeper backward with me, and with madness in his eyes, he desperately cries, "You must trust them!"

The energy of the walkway is too much, and it rips me free of his grasp. "Trust them," I hear once more from the crazed man, zooming away. Rolling over in the walkway from below, I astonish a group of civilians with my reentry. I regain my senses and get to one knee. My tunic is nearly ripped off my body, the breath of the creeper lingers on my skin.



## CHAPTER SIX

I arrive at my chamber doorstep within moments. Thad is standing, shaking, waiting on the square pad outside our entrance. “Are you hurt?” I ask. I can tell he isn’t, but separating from me is scary to him. With a face full of confusion, he shrieks, “Is that guy crazy? What is he doing crawling around under the walkway?”

“He’s a creeper, Thad. He’s grounded in the energy wave because he isn’t assigned to a chamber anymore,” I say. “He isn’t allowed in the ceremony, so he probably just wanted to know what happened.”

Thad accepts it, but I know the creeper isn’t just a crazy person; somehow, his madness is different. And this was no ordinary encounter. He targeted me, but why? The message haunts me now, to *trust them*. What was he talking about? I can’t tell anyone about this, especially with the *glitch* warning.

“Come on, Thad,” I say, leading him inside our quarters. “So, how about the terraforming machine this year?” I ask. “Not a very exciting percentage of oxygen increase, is it?”

Thad’s face ignites. “The cycle 50s should be focusing on hyperdrive technology, so we can fly to other planets, instead of making more terraform machines for Earth,” he boasts as we enter the common room. The room is dim and the seating cold from the day’s abandonment. Thad continues, “At this rate, it might take three hundred more years to fix things.” His enthusiasm reduces as he looks past me toward the stairway.

In the low light, Maive standing there went unnoticed. She must have beat us home with the scuffle. “You don’t like our mission?” she asks. She crosses her arms, leaning against the only structural pole in the quarters.

I feel it’s necessary to take her wrath, since I unknowingly set Thad up for his comments. “We do like our mission, but we can always try to find a new home, as Thad suggests,” I say.

“We’re here because we have to be, Pollo,” Maive grumbles. “This is as dreamy as it gets. Other generations had it much worse, you know. We live here, so you better get over it.”

“Well, we could find a better way to do it, is all,” I add. “We’re mining oxygen and water from the Moon, so maybe we could do the same somewhere else.”

“And what about an atmosphere?” Maive replies. Her expression grows grim as she brushes her dark hair behind her ear. “We know where home is. Think space is native? Take a step out the outer doors, and you’ll find out how cruel things can get. Direct keeps us alive, and following Direct is going to get us back to Earth!”

“Okay, we know the outer doors to leave the colony are left open; we understand,” I say in a finite way. I know, of course, she isn’t finished.

“And you better hope there isn’t a *glitch* happening right now,” she sneers. “Singularity did occur, and it’s for our own good. Computers told us long ago to trust them if we wanted to survive. We did, and we survived. Our mission is to learn, advance in theory, but take no action. This is not a debate, lest you forget cycle 6, the first lesson,” she says. If she could reduce us to a dunce cap in the corner, she would. She flashes messages to our receptors violently, invading us,

but not in a kindly manner like our lessons. I block most of them, ignoring her, but I know Thad isn't old enough to attempt it.

She persists, and she unfolds her arms. "Why do you think they have the ceremony? To remind fools like you it's not possible to leave this egg without following their design. And if you two don't like it, you can join the 1 percent."

Her nose filter blazes red from her rant; she forgot to breathe while engrossed in drilling us with the creed.

"MAIVE!" Phoebe says, walking in the door.

Maive's dead eyes immediately focus on the floor. It is not her place to correct us. She's not our guardian.

"Explore your thoughts, Maiven." Phoebe's saving voice shifts calmly. "Apollo knows his disputes are delusional."

The lights turn up in the chambers with her presence. "This is not the day to follow words down an altered path. These quarters know their lessons," Phoebe says, glancing at me.

I nod, showing deference.

"Come now and forget this. Let us prepare for our ceremonial meal," Phoebe says, smiling. She moves along the plain gray surface effortlessly to the dining area. "Please take your seats; forget this *glitch* business for now."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The far wall hums. The delivery tubes sound off for our celebration meal. We take our places at the table. Thad, full of excitement, bounces into his position across from me.

“Thad, no fidgeting,” Maive says. “You’re not a youth anymore.” I notice a glance from Phoebe, who chooses to let Maive’s nagging pass this time. The table edge glows bright blue around the large surface. The table is a clear oval, which awaits our confirmation before delivering any nourishment.

Our house emulator welcomes us as I extend my right arm. Thad’s arm is already in place across from mine, fingers wiggling. Our palms reach only halfway to the center of the table. The computers in our right forearms activate a series of lights and flashes from the table, scanning us in an instant. Direct identifies us and projects thank-you imagery to us. Capsules zoom along the far wall, zipping down, one after another through the delivery tubes, making a *thunk* sound as they travel below our feet, and spiraling out through the center of the table.

As each long capsule comes to rest under our outstretched palms, the emulator says in a calm, feminine voice, *Enjoy your celebratory meal*. The capsules open promptly, revealing a multi-compartmented feast. Thad’s mouth is literally watering at the sight of food. With perfect posture, we sit in our seats. It’s dinnertime at last.

Our meals steam in front of us. Inside each of the eight compartments is something new, unusual-colored shapes, perfectly centered. Thad’s curious fingers extend toward the first bright purple cube. Phoebe interjects, “Before we eat tonight, I want to discuss a lesson learned from the day’s events.” Phoebe gazes in my direction.

I don't dare look at her as I scan my dinner. My mind immediately goes to the creeper on the walkway. Did she know I interacted with him? Maybe she was behind us watching it all unfold. I know Thad is more worried about eating than discussing what happened. I meet his gaze across from me, hoping my story is safe with him.

Phoebe's soft voice stiffens. With a question to the table, she asks, "Is it possible for one person to change the world?"

Thad, still eyeing his meal, blurts out, "Yes!"

"And your explanation, Thaddeus," Phoebe responds, taking his hand away from his open meal.

Thad replies, "Any single person is capable of doing great things, therefore changing the world." With certainty, he looks at me with a grin of zeal, inferring his freedom to now devour dinner.

Phoebe squeezes Thad's hand and gently places it into hers. "Your heart is true, Thaddeus, and your answer noble," she says.

Thad grins. Phoebe's kindness is always pure, and it means Thad gave the appropriate response for his age.

Phoebe adjusts her form, shoulders back proper, and faces forward. "Maiven, do you have any words to contribute?" she asks.

"No," Maive replies.

"No rebuttal?" Phoebe asks, perplexed.

Maive's focus is on Thad. "No. *No* is the answer to the debate," she snaps. "One person can't change the world. An individual does not have the capabilities or the means to create any noticeable difference in this environment. Direct won't allow it."

"Someday," Thad says, refocusing on his meal.

*Someday*. The word resonates in my head.

"Yes and no," I say. "They're both right. Presently, we don't have the ability to change things, but if the environment changes, then our restrictions would also change. Someone could change the world, or someone from the outside could change it."

Phoebe's face shows alarm. "Apollo, what we are talking about is a positive change. Your comments, in theory, could possibly result in a negative environment, which neither our present nor future state can consider. Those thoughts are not for this day." Phoebe says, smiling. "Thaddeus is on the right track; all of us are capable of greatness."

Maive laughs. "Can we just eat now?"

"Yes, we may!" Phoebe says.

Finally, the turmoil in the pit of my stomach dissipates. I'm in the clear.

The savory aromas of dinner fill the room. I stab around my container until I choose half of a large, round fruit, nearly the size of my palm and perfectly ripe. It is bright purple in color, with even darker stripes on the skin. In my hand, it has a significant weight, very dense and is completely new to me. A special treat just for today, I imagine. I turn it over to have a better look

at the bottom side, and notice bright red juices dripping onto my hand. Curious to the cause, I rotate it toward me. Cut deep into the fruit, unmistakably carved, is the word: *SHHH!*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

I can't believe my eyes as the red juice runs down my wrist. It is certainly a message beckoning for my silence. I feel my face flush. *I am being contacted!* And it hits me—the creeper encounter was no accident. But how can this level of contact happen?

“Apollo, is everything okay?” Phoebe asks. “You look very unusual.”

“Don't you like your food?” Thad asks. “Because, I'll eat it if you don't want it.” His face is engorged with his meal; his hands are a mess.

“Apollo, is there something wrong with your meal?” Phoebe asks. “I've never encountered that strain of fruit before. Let me examine it.”

I quickly take as large of a mouthful as possible, right into where the markings are. “Nope,” I mutter while chewing the sweet fruit. “It tastes great!” I say.

“Have some manners,” Maive says. “Are all boys cavemen?” she rolls her eyes, and adds, “I've had my fill. A good evening to you.” She closes the lid on her capsule and slides it back into the center of the table. A pleasant, *thank you and good evening*, comes from the emulator. Maive stands up and gives us a look of disgust as she turns to leave the dining room.

“Please sit down, Maiven.” Phoebe beams. “I didn't give you your gifts yet.”

Phoebe's capsule lid swiftly shuts when she sends it sliding toward the center. Another *thank you and good evening*, immediately follows from the table.

“Take these gifts,” Phoebe says, reaching into a small brown pouch on her lap. “I have one for each of you.” She extends her hand and reveals three flat disks.



“Wow, what are those?” Thad asks.

Maive cuts him off, still standing, and reaches over Thad. “They’re something useless, that’s what they are,” Maive says, snatching one out of Phoebe’s hand. Thad and I do the same.

I carefully take the remaining metal item from Phoebe’s graceful, outstretched hand. It’s shiny, with a glass top. In the center is a long, red needle. It spins downward as I examine it closer.

“It’s a compass, a very old instrument,” Phoebe says.

“Where did they come from?” Thad asks.

Phoebe pauses.

“Great individuals followed these compasses to their destiny once,” Phoebe says. “If ever you lose your way, they will guide you.” She looks down at the empty bag and carefully folds it. “They are not from here,” she says. “So they must stay hidden.”

I know these gifts are very rare, and Phoebe went to great lengths for us to have them.

“So when can we use them?” Thad asks, “If they don’t work here?”

“You will use them on Earth someday,” Phoebe replies.

“Oh wow, really? This is so great,” Thad says. “Pollo, can you believe it? We’ll know the way, and everyone will follow us!”

Maive stands, laughing. “No one is following you two fools,” she says.

I stare at the shiny metal tip of the red arrow. The resting point aims in my direction. “So how do they work?” I ask.

Phoebe explains, “The magnetic poles of Earth have a very different gravitational force than here on the Moon. A compass always points north to help those who become lost find their home. For now, keep these as symbols of hope. Someday, these simple mechanisms, which appear to be resting, will show unlimited potential. Just like the three of you,” Phoebe says, squeezing the empty bag tightly in her hand.

“Well, thank you for the relic,” Maive says, as she turns away.

“These are great,” Thad says, setting his on the table, and resumes eating.

I smile, watching Phoebe slowly fold the brown bag in her lap.

Maive reaches the stairway, but stops at the first step. Not bothering to turn around, with a shaky voice, she asks, “But, Phoebe, why don’t you have one for yourself?”

Phoebe looks at her with wide eyes, as if she wishes she never heard Maive’s question out loud. Phoebe’s smile widens at us, and with a shimmer in her eye, she says, “Well, I don’t think I will live to see Earth in my lifetime. My only hope is that the three of you will.”

Maive pauses with no response. Her slow climb up the steps to her chamber loft is reaction enough. I slowly take one last mouthful. Thad and I shut our lids silently and slide our capsules together into the center of the table. Simultaneously, we hear *thank you and good evening*.

## CHAPTER NINE

Climbing the stairs to the second level of our quarters, I see a last glimpse of Thad disappearing down the hall to his chamber on the right, the door sliding down swiftly behind him. My room is the last door on the left. As I enter the threshold, the lights brighten, and I place the compass on the bed stand. The compass holds my attention, and I stare at its complexity on the stand's plain white surface. The compass is not like the cold furnishings or coverings I am accustomed to. It is unique, and maybe even handmade. I feel a natural connection, not knowing where it's been, out there somewhere. Then I remember the daunting message in my fruit and the creeper's words today. They were both very unnatural.

I slip my tunic off, reach down under my feet, and realize it's the last time I will wear light blue. I know to discard attachment, but it's the first color clothing I feel I grew out of. Crumpling it into a ball, I throw it to my far wall, into the square chute. It disappears into the delivery system with a *swoosh* the instant the vacuum senses something near it. The outer top edge rattles, like it always does.

I step around my bed, into my cleansing cell, in the back corner of my room near my door. The ultraviolet lights are bright as the door closes behind me. The emulator welcomes me for a health review. The feminine voice interprets my vitals while the lasers scan my body from head to toe.

The emulator says, *Apollo, day twenty-nine is the last day of the current lunar month and cycle. Your vitals are standard, your vitamin levels standard, skin health is standard. All your measurements are equivalent to those of a full-grown adult.*

My cleansing cell has a metallic edge, so I can see my own reflection in the wall. We don't have mirrors, but I am able to check my features here at night. I barely recognize myself after this cycle's growth. My facial features are fuller, especially my neck, nose, and jawline. My dark hair is very short but has filled in thicker; my earthy-brown eyes shine, my skin is still a darker hue than most people's. My body has filled out as well: I'm more muscular, and now larger than the majority in my cycle.

The floor hisses as the emulator continues. *Your radiation coating is beginning. Please place your feet on the markings.* A full-body vitamin bath sprays from beneath and above as my old coating washes off quickly down the drain. *Please raise your arms above your head.* The wash transitions to steam, and I feel my skin absorbing the minerals. The hot, pressurized liquid flows evenly over me. Next, a thick powder of purple ash covers me evenly. The silky residue has a base property of diamond to shield us from harmful space radiation. Quickly, a silicone shine emerges from my skin and shimmers purple in the light as the fans dry me off. *Thank you, Apollo. Your cleansing is complete.* The lights go dim in my chamber.

I feel refreshed after each new coating. It only takes a moment for my skin to glisten. Exiting to my bedside, I feel my backside dry walking out. Unexpectedly, my chamber door opens. It's Phoebe. Her silhouette darts into my room. She has never before interrupted my nightly procedure.

"Apollo, please climb into bed," she says.

Pulling the crisp white sheet from my bed, I slide one leg under the cover and ease myself onto the cushioning. Phoebe strides over and sits next to me on the edge of the bed.

“Apollo, where is the safest place you can keep something in your chamber?”

“In the top drawer of my stand, I suppose. Should I keep my compass there?”

“Apollo, your compass is not the only gift I have for you tonight,” Phoebe says. “No one can know about this item. Not even Thaddeus, and especially not Maiven. Please, promise me.”

“Yes, of course,” I say. “But I don’t understand.”

“Good, but now is not the time to explain,” she says, revealing an object fastened her wrist. Her hand turns over to reveal a shiny metal clasp. She swiftly takes it off and flips it over in her hand. My gaze fixates on the shimmering half-orb, dark yet still reflective in the low light. On the right side of the circle dome, a sliver of white light shines.

“Phoebe, how did you get this?” I ask, still not knowing what it is.

“Not how, but why,” she whispers. “I will explain when the time is right. This is a Moon watch, and today is a new Moon.”

“Of course!” I exclaim, covering my mouth. “Of course, I see the Moon,” I whisper this time. The new Moon is dark, and the sliver of light on the edge of the dome is the start of the new lunar cycle. “So it counts lunars?” I ask.

Phoebe nods her head in confirmation and covers the Moon watch with the brown cloth, folding it in my hands.

“Now, your hiding spot. Think quickly,” she says.

Then it hits me—the cover on my vacuum chute; it always rattles. I point to the far corner of my room.

“Phoebe, over there, the top corner is loose.”

In a moment, Phoebe moves into the shadows and searches the top side of the square metal edge. She pries back the metal frame just enough to slip the Moon watch between the outer edge of the vacuum chute and the wall.

“Aaaaah!” Phoebe shrieks. I hear the metal snap back into place. I gesture with sympathy to find out what is happening.

“It’s okay, Apollo.” She grimaces, turning around. “I’m fine, but I cut my hand.”

I sit up in bed with the covers still around me. She wraps her fingers and palm in her tunic, gesturing for me to lie back down.

“I’ll be fine. Now, go to bed and speak none of this to anyone. I’ll explain more soon,” Phoebe whispers. “Good night.”

Unexpectedly, my door opens, the lights brighten, and Maive is standing there.

“I heard a noise. What is going on in here?” she asks. “Phoebe, are you bleeding? Pollo, what did you do?”

Phoebe walks out, hunched over, still holding her hand.

“I cut my hand, and I came to Apollo for a bandage.”

Maive storms after her, the door shutting behind them, and a muffled debate drifts down the hallway. Thrusting my head back against my pillow, I glance at the corner with the now hidden Moon watch. *What a day.*

## CHAPTER TEN

Each day, we awake to the same disembodied, feminine voice as the artificial daylight activates throughout the colony.

*Good morning, Apollo. Your tunic is ready,* the emulator says.

Today, we start a new cycle, and the combined knowledge from the previous cycle achievements are now available for review. This happens overnight, and our resting hours are three times the length of Earth's nights because Direct uploads new information constantly.

Sharing our annual progress ensures each successive cycle is more advanced than the previous. Last night, I was awarded an update of cycles 6 through 15. I'll have plenty of time to meditate on the new knowledge, starting today in the fields.

Swinging my legs over the side of my bed, I see a freshly folded tunic is already waiting for me near the laundry chute.

Maroon. Cycle 17's tunic color is maroon. I pull the tunic over my body and take stock of my new color. A very mature color. I suppose the light blue made me feel younger than I am at times, especially as I grew in size. I could get used to the maroon color. It's not like I have a choice.

I make my way downstairs. Thad stands in the kitchen, gorging on a fresh fruit delivery from the tubes.



“Your light green tunic makes you look much shorter,” I jest, ruffling his hair as I walk past. “Hopefully the rest of your cycle 9 friends can find you in the crowd.” Thad shakes his head as we make our way out the door. “Come on, are you ready for your first day of lessons?” I ask.

Thad swallows hard. “Yes, and I hear we get to learn thermodynamics this cycle!”

We step outside into a bustle of people. “Thermodynamics in theory, Thad. The authority doesn’t want cycle 9s blowing up the colony,” I say.

“Hey, Thad!” says a young girl from cycle 7. She is wearing a burnt-yellow tunic as she runs over to our doorstep.

“Hi, Amirah!” Thad says, matching her excitement. “Check out my light green tunic. Do you like it?” he asks.

Rumor has it, Amirah was a troublemaker during her fifth cycle, and the elders ordered her guardian to keep her home from lessons until she “adopted the appropriate attitude.”

Two boys from cycle 8, Petro and Lucas, quickly join in with Thad and Amirah, all heading in the same direction toward school. Thad continues showing off his fresh, light green tunic to the younger kids.

From the doorstep, I see Ruby, another youth, run after them. Thad’s popularity is becoming a bit more than I can stomach. Ruby is a cycle older than Thad, and she is nothing short of perfect. Her scarlet-red cycle 10 tunic adds a sense of sophistication to her already striking features.

“Thad, wait for me,” Ruby calls as she bounces her way to the group, matching their pace.

Thad greets her shyly, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Get straight to lessons, Thad,” I say.

The group attracts even more youths to them as they turn toward the colony center, blending into the crowd. I shake my head and reflect on the days I was a youth in lessons.

I usually went to lessons alone. Maive was older and wouldn't dare be seen with me.

I related most to what we learned in lessons from the “extraordinarily profound professors,” as the elders call them.

My favorite lectures were from Marie Curie, Sir Isaac Newton, Galileo Galilei, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Martin Luther King Jr., all of whom are only holograms, a unique way Direct teaches the youth of the colony about Earth. I enjoyed the lessons that were taught by Albert Einstein the most. I would imagine Albert Einstein as a second guardian of mine, and we would solve equations together in my chambers before bed.

“Hey, Pollo! Deep in thought,” Leif says, closing his door. Leif lives next door to us, so we interact a lot. He is tall and lanky, like I imagine the trees on Earth to be. His hair is fiery red, and it appears to give off a strange glow in the artificial lighting. His skin is ghostly white, as if he bathed in a vitamin bath for too long.

“I am just thinking about being a youth again, going to lessons,” I say. “Wouldn't it be nice just to stay a kid forever?”

“I never really thought about it,” Leif says.

“Anyways, how is Irma doing?” I ask, changing the subject.

“She’s doing all right, for a newling,” he says with a shrug. “She is disappointed there is no newling celebration this cycle, so we are going to host a party for her tonight. Cetus wants me to invite everyone in your quarters.”

Leif looks away as he speaks the last few words.

“Everyone, like, all of us?” I ask, clarifying. “Even Maive?”

“That’s what Cetus implores,” Leif says, not wanting to upset his guardian.

“Okay, Leif. I will tell them later,” I say with a sigh. I can’t promise an evening without an outburst from Maive.

“Why is Maive so grumpy all the time anyways?” Leif asks.

“O’ you know, when she was cycle 20-25 she was never given a progeny child from the authority, no matter how hard she tried. She lives with a lot of resentment towards those who have newlings, knowing that she never will,” I say.

“It sounds like she really took it really hard. I’m sorry to ask,” Leif says. “Well, come on, let’s get to the fields.”

We make our way out to the fields. It becomes impossible to imagine what it must have been like to come here three hundred years ago. “So, Pollo, Cetus told me once, only a few hundred people were able to flee Earth during the wars and make it to the Moon safely. After arriving, almost half died due to a variety of illnesses and critical errors made by the untrained and exhausted settlers,” Leif says.

Now, looking around the artificial fields, it's impossible to count the number of adults out here, although the hover bots flying overhead happily do so. As we begin the start of every cycle, the hover bots take attendance for the authority.

I always feel in awe looking out at the vastness of the rolling hills, set just beyond the center of the colony and stretching to the opposite end of the colony, to the far wall. It's important for us to begin each cycle with meditations to reflect on the mission given to us each new cycle.

Leif and I walk slowly out to find our very own spots in the meadow. We both prefer a place deeper into the meadow, but most adults don't like to walk quite as far as we go. Leif stops, but I go until I can barely make out the next closest person to me.

I settle into a space and peacefully think about the ceremony. We have our mission for cycle 17, and the updates from the previous cycles settle in nicely. Our mission for this cycle is to explore aspects of the genetic laws of botany. Specifically, our charge is to discover new ways to increase oxygen production on Earth using plants. Botany is one of my favorite subjects to research, and Leif's too. This will be a rewarding cycle for both of us.

Searching deeply with the help of Direct into the subject matter, I begin cataloging plants in my mind and making notations on those like the snake plant. Without sunlight, the snake plant can absorb CO<sub>2</sub> and produce oxygen in the dark. I use the unlimited computer knowledge to access what seems like thousands of references for my studies. Taking my time now, I dig deep into new, dark subjects, like dark foliage, and long, dark, raven hair.

Raven hair? What am I talking about?

But sure as I blink my eyes, an enchanting woman appears, standing just a few feet in front of me, with long raven hair. She speaks to me, shrouded in darkness, but I can't quite make out her words.

"What are you saying?" I ask, but she continues to whisper secretly. "I can't hear you. Come closer," I say, unsure of what she wants.

She stops speaking and gestures for me to follow her. Following her long black hair blowing around her whole body, I go after her, reaching to catch her, trying to grab her hand, growing closer, and...

*Pollo! Pollo!* she sings my name.

Our hands are so close to touching.

*Pollo!* I stir in place as the yelling becomes louder.

"Pollo! I have been looking everywhere for you!"

"Pollo!"

I open my eyes to see Leif standing in front of me, shaking me from my vision.

"Leif, where am I?" I ask, jolting back to reality.

"Pollo, you're all the way out at the outer wall. The hover bots sent warning messages to you, and you kept walking. Are you okay?"

Was that a dream? It couldn't have been. Dreaming is impossible.

Direct acts as our subconscious mind, ensuring we only think and act on intelligent information. I shouldn't be able to have a dream like this.

“Pollo, are you okay? You look a little... well, pale,” Leif says, acknowledging the irony as he glances at his skin tone.

I laugh for Leif's sake, not wanting to give away that I've apparently lost my mind.

“Of course, I'm just really deep in thought about some of these botany projects. Did you have a good meditation?” I ask. “Where is everyone?”

Leif's confusion is apparent. “Pollo, we're the only two left in the fields. We've been out here the entire day.”

We turn to walk back toward the colony. I take one last glance at the far wall, wondering if the raven-haired girl is hiding nearby.

The hover bots beep and buzz overhead, giving notice for us to return safely to the colony, away from the outskirts of the fi

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Say, how did you get all the way to the outer wall, anyway?” Leif prods, trying not to show too much interest in the strange circumstances he witnessed.

“Sorry, Leif. The truth is, I don’t even know how I got near the outer wall. I sat to meditate, and next thing I knew, you were yelling my name,” I say. “I guess the mission about our new botany theories really got me tangled in thought.”

I silently consider telling Leif everything. Maybe he can help me figure out these mysterious messages. “But what about you, Leif? How did your meditations go?” I ask.

“They went pretty well,” Leif says. “I’m convinced plants are the answer to our mission, since plants can naturally produce and expel oxygen. During my meditation, I discovered algae that can adapt to almost any environment: salt water, fresh water, and perhaps even highly contaminated water. Cycle 50s long ago developed a way to inject human red blood cells into microalgae and allowed it to mutate. They actually called it *grow-in-the-dark algae!*”

Leif continues adamantly as he walks even faster, swinging his arms. “If we could duplicate that effort again but find a way to make it self-replicating, perhaps the algae could grow in the darkness of the ocean, absorb the water, and then release the oxygen back into the atmosphere as the algae grows uncontrollably.”

Even more than me, Leif has a love for botany, and between the two of us, we will likely be taking on most of the explaining and training of the others in our cycle.

“Leif, that’s brilliant!” I say. “What if, while the algae are producing more oxygen, the process is also absorbing the toxins out of the water and eliminating them from Earth’s atmosphere?”

Leif’s face is on fire, matching his red hair, as he grows more excited about his idea with the additional benefits.

“This sounds a lot like what I stumbled upon in a previous mission cycle’s research on genetically modifying mushrooms that could absorb toxins,” I say. “Maybe it’s something worth bringing to the group tomorrow.”

“Hmm, I don’t think I saw that record. I’ll have to go back and recall it tomorrow,” Leif says. “So what about you? Do you remember anything from wandering around out there?” he asks, waving his hand back toward the fields.

“The snake plant,” I say, reminding myself how excited I am at the potentials of botany. “The snake plant can absorb CO<sub>2</sub> and produce oxygen at night.”

“Excellent,” Leif says. “So they don’t need sunlight to be productive.”

“Precisely,” I say, “But, you know, snake plants would take forever to grow on a mass scale. Imagine if we could isolate those properties that absorb CO<sub>2</sub>, replicate them, and transplant them into rapidly growing grasses? We could see incredible benefits in double the time!”

“Okay, but remember, we would need to be able to create grasses that can grow without fresh water and potentially without nutrient-rich soil,” Leif adds unsympathetically.



“Now who’s deep in thought?” I say jokingly. I give Leif a jolt on the arm to break him from his concentration.

We both glance around, taking notice of how far we’ve walked and how close we are getting to the center of the colony.

“You know, this is how they’ll remember us, Pollo, as the plant geniuses!” Leif says. “What if cycle 17 saves—whoa, look out!” Leif yells, pointing behind me.

I turn just in time to see a lone hover bot making its way toward me. It flies just over my head and around Leif, forcing him to back away from me. The robotic craft spins for a moment and comes right back toward my head. I barely duck out of the way, jerking wildly to coax it along.

“What the heck is it doing?” I yell.

The bot circles relentlessly around my head, beeping erratically and flashing blue and green lights in fitful spurts. It appears to be inspecting me, scanning me suspiciously. Its telephoto lens extends obtrusively toward my face. With each passing moment, the bot seems to grow more inquisitive of my existence, forcing itself closer into my view.

Leif stands aside, awestruck by the bot’s obsessive behaviors.

“Leave me alone!” I shout, taking a swing at the bot as it continues its mania.

Then the bot spins up into the air, beeping loudly and spinning rapidly out of control. It continues to spin and bleep high above me as sparks begin to spray out of its top, and it plummets straight to the ground. A cloud of smoke rushes out on impact.

“Did it malfunction?” I ask. “These bots never act up like this.”

I walk toward the mangle of metal on the ground, disturbed at what might have come over the estranged bot.

“Pollo, what’s going on, that was really strange?” Leif asks, as he joins me in examining the damaged bot.

“I’m not sure,” I reply, half under my breath. The lights on the bot flicker and snuff out. “Let’s get out of here before someone sees us,” I say, wanting to get as far away from the situation as we can. There are a few suspicious eyes that witness the commotion from afar.

“Irma!” Leif announces, throwing his hands over his head. “We’re going to be late for the party!”

We double our pace back until we hit the moving walkway, making our way to the front of our living quarters together.

“Are you coming over now?” Leif asks, as he opens his door. Several conversations pour outside, as the celebration is already underway.

“I’ll be over in a bit. I need to invite the others,” I say, as I enter my quarters.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Walking through the door to my quarters, I expect a bombardment of questions from Phoebe about meditations, or stories from Thad about his first day of lessons, but the house is quiet.

“Hello?” I say, heading upstairs, searching for anyone who might be home. I haven’t seen them to invite them over to Irma’s party. The house remains still; I push out a few messages as I walk upstairs.

Perhaps they are running late from their first day of new cycles. But what if they aren’t? Disturbing thoughts come over me, as if something bad has happened to them. They are fine, I remind myself. I am sure they will be home soon.

Entering my room, my paranoia drives me to check on the Moon watch after the strange series of events that have been unfolding.

I shuffle to retrieve it from its hiding place behind the vent. Phoebe’s gift is still a mystery to me. The round globe is now divided. Half is as black as the night sky on the left side, and half is as white as these sterile walls on the right side. Quarter Moon.

The Moon watch is something to marvel at. It’s mesmerizing to me, as if it’s really reflecting the light of the Moon.

Continuing to stare at the watch, I make my way to the edge of my bed and sit. Why is Phoebe so keen on hiding this gift from everyone but me? Is any of this connected to my dream? I still can’t get the dream out of my head. More like I can’t get the girl with the raven hair out of my head. Who is she? What is she trying to tell me?

I try to remember how long I'd been meditating before she appeared in my head. How long was I lost in a trance wandering around the fields? It couldn't have been as long as Leif said. That would have been half the day.

She is so beautiful, but I've never seen her before. At least, I think she is beautiful. Actually, I don't remember her face at all. Just her presence and the way she beckoned me to her. She had to be real. I could just reach out and...

*Bang, bang, bang!*

A loud knocking came at the front door, jarring me back to the present. Who could that be? No one ever knocks at our house without having been invited.

I dart from my bed and quickly hide the Moon watch back inside the vent, making certain it is hidden from outsiders.

*Bang, bang, bang!*

I run downstairs as the rapping grows louder, demanding my attention.

I open the door and stare in absolute disbelief. The bot that confronted me earlier now hovers outside. A single circular lens is staring me in the eyes. Without consent, the bot pushes inward forcing me to step back as it enters the house.

This time, thankfully, the bot begins to beep happily, as if it is pleased to see me. The green and blue lights on the top of the bot blink brightly, indicating a much friendlier encounter. The bot flies around me in circles, beeping and the top-half spinning, as if showing off for me. "What are you doing here, you silly robot?" I say laughing.

The bot zooms high in the air and collides with the ceiling, not realizing how low the structure is and makes a clatter.

“You’re not supposed to be here!” I say. “You have to get outside! You’re going to get me in deep trouble.”

I scurry for the exit. The bot follows, continuing to beep happily, and buzzes after me. I lead it outside, away from the quarters, and scan the streets. Luckily, I don’t see anyone in the area.

Not sure what to do with the bot situation before me, I decide to make a dash back to my front door. My sprint back is useless as the bot speeds ahead, stopping me in front of the doorstep.

In anger, I swat it away, yelling, “What do you want from me?”

The bot floods my face with a blinding light, and a low rumbling sound emanates from the hovering machine. It shakes violently, generating heat and a terrible burning stench. Gray smoke billows from within, pouring out wildly. Then, out of nowhere, the bot speaks in robotic tones.

“Three days,” a low robotic voice says, and once more, “Three days.”

The gray smoke turns black, and then the lights and sounds all snuff out. Just as it happened earlier, the bot collapses to the ground with a rattle of metal. A displaced part slips off and rolls down the hard street surface.

I back away from the scene. *Three days.* What does that mean? The bot’s warning is haunting. I lean against the side of the house to collect my senses, watching the bot, lifeless on the ground. I can barely breathe, and my nose filter glows red from the lack of oxygen received.

The door opens from the next quarters over. The gathering of Irma's party is underway.

"Pollo!" Phoebe cries, as she flashes a smile into the house, then steps outside. "Where have you been?" she asks, her tone hushed, snapping her hand to demand me over.

I keep my eyes on the ground but peek back as I walk toward her. Phoebe glances in the same direction and notices the bot on the ground behind me. Then, as if a bolt of lightning struck it, the bot jolts off the ground and scuttles away from the scene fitfully.

Phoebe and I exchange looks before I reach her. Her posture means, *we'll talk about this later*. I take the hint as we walk inside. I am speechless.

The party is overflowing through the living quarters as I enter.

"Uh, hello, everyone," I say waving.

"Hello, Pollo, where have you been?" the smallest person in the room says loudly. It is Irma, who I've never met, but her size has no connection to the volume of her voice. She says, "I've heard all about you!"

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I'm in amazement at the petite human in front of me, unsure of what to make of her declaration. I can barely function, but I need to try to diffuse the situation while the entire party of onlookers are staring at me.

"Y-you have?" I ask, tongue-tied.

"Yes! Aaannd, I know your secret too!" Irma says, adding emphasis. A few members of the audience share in with an "Ooooo." Irma makes her way toward me, and bodies move out of the way to let her through. "Excuuuuseeeee me," Irma says, bobbing her head as she makes her way, until she is toe to toe with me. I notice she is only half my height. Still, if she really does know my secret, her size won't matter.

"Didn't you hear me?" she says, raising the volume on her vocal cords even more. By far, she is the sassiest newling I have ever met.

"I know your secret, and I'm going to tell everyone!"

I look from my miniature attacker to take in the surroundings. A dozen or so others are in the room, all staring at me. Every eye and ear is waiting for my reaction to this cute but feisty newling, who is now tapping her foot in front of me.

I swallow hard. This must be some kind of joke. What could she possibly know?

"But, I don't have any secrets, Irma," I say, in a sing-song voice, trying to match her attitude. I do a poor job of staying confident.

"Oh yes you do!" Irma giggles, flashing a sly smile.

What kind of six-year-old is this? I look around the room, waiting for someone to rescue me from this insubordination, but everyone remains silent.

Irma continues, “And when I tell everyone, the authority might even come and take you away!”

My heart pounds in my chest, and I rapidly feel hot flashes. *Oh no!* This is not happening.

“Pollo’s secret is that, every night, he goes into his room...”

*Oh no!* Does she know about the Moon watch? How could she possibly know? Even Thad doesn’t know about Phoebe’s gift.

“...and every night, he secretly... asks for *HUGS* before going to bed!” The last few words are barely out of Irma’s mouth before she collapses to the floor in a fit of laughter.

I let out all of the breath I am holding in. The whole room explodes in laughter, and I see Thad enjoying it wholeheartedly in the corner. Catching his eye, I let out a chuckle too.

“Oh yeah, hugs!” I say sarcastically. I turn around to Phoebe to give a fake hugging motion, which makes the room laugh even harder. Everyone enjoys Irma’s prank. Everyone except for Maive, whose glare reaches Thad, across the room.

“Thank you, everyone, for coming to the festivity,” Cetus says, addressing the room. His tone is deep and somber. “Might we wrap up the party now, Irma?” he asks. “You’ve had enough fun for an entire cycle. You now have studies and more lessons to focus on.”

No one questions Cetus as he makes a kind gesture, and most begin to leave.



“I bet you two think you’re pretty funny, huh?” I ask lightly, as I approach Thad and Irma, who are huddled together.

“Thad couldn’t resist telling me,” Irma announces, adding one more chuckle.

I push a generous thought Thad’s way, encouraging him to say goodbye and get home.

“I hope you save that moxie for your classmates, Irma,” I say, kneeling to her level. “Just don’t let the older kids get you in trouble, okay?”

“Thanks, I won’t,” Irma replies, making a goofy face as she twists back and forth. Changing her tone, she says, “You know, these few days are my first memories.”

“Is the light at the ceremony the first thing you remember?” I ask, recalling memories from my first days.

“Yes,” Irma replies, “It’s the same for all of us.”

“Well, all of us too,” I assure her. “I’m glad you’re here with us now! Welcome to the Moon, little animal!”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I step outside from next door, half expecting another deranged bot to crash into me. Luckily, that isn't the case. I'm glad no one is around to witness my cautious escape across the doorstep.

I stop to enjoy the seemingly rare silence. The lights fade over the colony, casting our large pyramid home in a soft, warm illuminance of artificial twilight. The huge angular walls meet so far beyond the mezzanine level, it is impossible to see the peak as the lights grow dimmer.

It's time for our nightly routine, and I really need to go inside now. I am sure my tardiness will frustrate Phoebe. I can't bring myself to go in quite yet, though. A moment away from everyone means a moment some new disaster might not happen. The worst part is, I can't tell anyone what's going on, and I'm surely showing something is wrong by the way I'm behaving. I need to tell someone about these messages. I need help.

But if I tell someone, what if they don't believe me? Or worse, what if they think I am insane? I might be kicked out of the colony. Even if they do believe me, I'm putting them in danger if the *glitch* is contacting me. No, these secrets have to stay with me, for now.

I gaze into the fading nightfall across the colony. The last glisten goes out in the quarters far above me as shadows fall.

My only hope is I'm not the only one receiving these messages or dealing with the deranged bots. I can't be the only person, right? If I am alone, then why? Why me?

First, I'm told to trust the messages, then I'm told to keep them a secret, and now I am being told three days. Three days until what? Not to mention, the strange dream with the raven-haired girl. It's clear they're all connected. But how? By whom?

I can't understand why this is happening to me. There has to be some greater meaning behind all of this. But what is it? And is it a purpose I want to help serve?

Darkness is cast over the colony. Maybe I am interpreting my situation the wrong way. What if something is trying to hurt me or harm our community? By not asking for help, am I enabling this *thing* to use me to advance its mission over the mission of the colony?

If I don't bring this forward, I will surely be punished by the authority if they find out what is happening. These messages aren't natural, and the colony doesn't like secrets. Yes, if I keep this to myself, it will be drastically worse, and there is consequence outlined in the creed for the betrayal of our mission.

In the morning, the elders will hold their meetings at the speakeasy in the center of the colony. I will go there in the morning and ask to speak with them, so I can confess what has been going on. Perhaps I will even be rewarded for coming forward to help solve the *glitch* mystery.

Regardless, I know this is the right thing to do. I can't risk my return to Earth by keeping this to myself. I am already in way over my head. The elders are my only option. I turn back to the house, my decision to meet with the elders in the morning set.

As I walk to my doorstep, taking in the vastness of the situation one last time, a new feeling sets in. This time, it isn't hope as it was so many times before.

This time, it's *fear*.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Good morning, Apollo. Your tunic is ready for you by the laundry chute,* the house emulator says the next morning.

But I am already awake, up, and dressed in my tunic for the day. Out of habit, I check to ensure the Moon watch is still safe, before slipping out the front door without waiting for anyone to leave with me.

I make my way to the moving walkway, heading straight to the center of the colony, and make my way to the second underground level, the speakeasy.

I walk into the massive open hall, furnished with long wooden tables and benches sprawling endlessly throughout the room. Here, the adults of the colony join various conversations about what mission is going on for each individual cycle. Off the main hall, there are large breakout rooms that fit hundreds of people, some fitting up to an entire cycle. These rooms are reserved for the elders to relay progress of the 50s back to the lower cycles. The elders have to explain the basics of the missions, because the lower levels have the information filtered.

As I make my way through the high-level conversations, I hear the hum of chatter but can't make out any of the words. Classified information shared between the higher levels scrambles with the assistance of Direct. I can see, however, how active and animated the conversations are between the members in higher cycles. Images and information are constantly pushed around to people in the conversations, making them quite lively. Even if I could hear what they are saying, I doubt I would be able to keep up with the content.

I continue walking until I get to the last room of the speakeasy. There are fewer people here than in the main hall, and they are much more scattered, as if the space between them will protect the secrecy of their conversations.

I won't hide my secret from anyone any longer. I need to turn this information over to the elders, so they will alert the authority.

There are a few people wearing pink tunics, a few wearing teal tunics, and a scattering of people wearing yellow, brown, and purple tunics. But I don't see any gray tunics for the elder cycle I'm looking for.

I continue to walk through the speakeasy, looking for gray tunics, and end up passing a table of maroon tunics, whom I recognize from my cycle.

One of the members from cycle 17 calls me, although I can't tell who in the crowd. All I can focus on right now is talking to the elders. "Pollo! We're glad you've come down to the speakeasy! Come on over! We could use your opinion on the solution we are working on."

I wave them off without regret and continue down another row of tables and chairs to find the elders.

I finally spot two elders dressed in their proper gray tunics on the far side of the room. They hardly acknowledge when anyone else is in the same vicinity. The elders largely keep to themselves and rarely pause to speak to anyone outside of their cycle. Still, I need to try to get their attention, lest this secret will get the better of me.

I cautiously approach them amid their conversation, careful not to offend them. I wait patiently awaiting their acknowledgment of my presence. I continue existing, only hearing the static from their encrypted conversation for entirely too long, and I am starting to feel uncomfortable.

“Ex-excuse me. I, uh, I have a very important discovery,” I say, trying to sound important.

The static continues back and forth between the two elders, and I attempt to interrupt them one more time with my hands as the older gentleman with white curly hair breaks the conversation with his female counterpart to address me.

“Excuse me, are you lost?” he asks, making it known he is thoroughly displeased with my interruption. “Cycle 17, is it? They should be congregating over in that far area,” the man says, pointing toward my maroon-laden mates. I consider leaving, but the gravity of the situation is pressing.

“Excuse me, I have an announcement to make to the authority. It is of the highest importance they know this information,” I say. This time, I interject without stuttering and hold eye contact with the white-haired man. I will not be ignored again.

“Okay, what is it, kid?” the woman asks, clearly aggravated I didn’t remove myself.

I bravely say, “I must notify the authority that I have been contacted, and I have a message to deliver. The message is—”

I can’t get another word out. I am frozen in time. *Why can’t I speak?* There is a force paralyzing me.

“I see you have met my progeny, Apollo,” Phoebe says, from behind me. She flashes a dramatic smile to the two elders.

She clenches my shoulder, retracting me from them and positioning herself between us.

“You’ll have to excuse Apollo,” Phoebe says, keeping her fingers firmly on my shoulder. “He hasn’t been able to stop talking about his decision to pledge as a progeny parent at cycle 18 since he learned about it. He wants to notify the authority right away. I am very proud of him.”

I what? *I can’t speak*. Phoebe has a lock on my actions techno-pathically.

Phoebe squeezes my shoulder harder than I believe is possible, with only two fingers. She smiles at the elders, who are now very confused. The woman says nothing before turning to walk away. Her reaction is so bitter, it might ruin the rest of her cycle.

The white-haired man eyes me with suspicion, before I see his scrambled response to Phoebe. She nods as if to acknowledge what the white-haired man says to her.

Without turning around, Phoebe pushes instructions for me to walk away and join my cycle 17s as she releases me.

Why would Phoebe stop me from sharing my secret? I was just about to announce the *glitch*.

I wander defeated back to the group. “Pollo, over here!” Leif’s saving voice emerges from the group, which has grown. Leif pulls me aside from the others. “Pollo, you’re as white as a ghost. Why are you shaking? What’s been going on with you?” he asks, lowering his voice.

“I skipped nourishment this morning,” I say, finally able to think freely with an alibi.



“Yep, that will do it!” Leif says, as he jabs my shoulder, which is still numb from Phoebe’s grip.

“Listen up, everyone. Pollo’s here now to tell you his idea for our mission!”

I look at the whole group of maroon tunics giving me their undivided attention.

“Go on, Pollo,” Leif encourages. “Tell them!”

I wipe my sweaty hands on my tunic, leaving dark handprints across the maroon material.

“Sure,” I say, swallowing hard, attempting to process what is going on. “We talked about... ummm...we talked about...well, I’m sorry. I’m not feeling like myself this morning.”

I nervously clear my throat, because it’s as dry as a bone.

I choke out, “It’s just like Leif said. We were walking and...umm.”

“SNAKE PLANTS!” Leif cries, leaping with excitement. “Pollo mentioned snake plants!”

I’m thankful for his interjection, as my vision starts to get a bit flashy. White hazes pass in front of my eyes, becoming larger and larger, and I feel very off balance. I attempt to take strides forward to sit, but instead, my vision construes only white.

I feel the embarrassment but can’t do anything about it as my body weight collapses forward. The last thing I remember is the sound of me crashing on the hard surface in front of everyone, which is not a good way to impress my peers.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I hear faint whispers and far-off babble, but I can't make out any of the voices. I roll over on my back and feel someone grab underneath my arms to drag me to my feet. My head rolls forward into my hands, and I am able to rub my eyes to see more clearly.

I see a tall man in front of me, with dark hair and a thick mustache. He wears a light purple tunic. Something about him is oddly familiar, but I can't place it. He is telling everyone to back away and give me some space to regain my senses.

"I am here to help," he says, to the group, that is still huddled close by.

"Easy, Pollo, take a deep breath," the man with the mustache says calmly. "It appears you are experiencing one of the side effects of misalignment with Direct. You just need to reconnect. I've seen this before."

The man's hands press against my back and chest, which keeps me steady. Turning to the group, he explains he has training. "Pollo is going to be just fine."

He motions for everyone to return to what they are doing. "Go on about your day. I'll have him back, discussing the mission, in no time." Turning back to me, he says, "Come on, now, Pollo, let's get you checked out."

I hear Leif leading the group away in conversation.

"Thank you for the help," I say. The man gently guides me out of the main room. As we turn the corner, he seems to be in a bit of a hurry as we make our way toward the outer rooms. "I'm

much better now, thank you,” I say. He insists on helping me along, his hands on my waist and elbow.

I’ve never met someone in a light purple tunic before. Which cycle color is that? Twenty-four? No, I can’t remember.

“I forgot to take my nourishment this morning,” I say. “I think that’s why I passed out back there.”

“We’ll take a look at your arm readouts just as soon as we get you inside this next room,” the man responds.

We walk to the end of a long hallway and turn the corner, stopping in front of a less-used breakout room.

“How does this one look?” he asks, Directing me into the space. We step into the large empty room, and he closes the door.

“Thank you for your help,” I say, turning back to acknowledge his generosity.

As soon as we’re alone, the man lunges at me! He drives his shoulder into my ribs, causing me to double over in pain, and pushing me back against the door. He pulls me up, only to grab me and slam me against the inside wall. I taste blood as my nose filter flashes red, letting me know I just received serious skull trauma.

In shock, I attempt to face him, hoping to fight him off, but he has me by the throat. Both of his hands wrap tightly around my neck, choking me to the point where I’ll surely pass out again.

Kicking at him, I can't make a sound, and I realize I am being lifted off the ground. I attempt to thrash against the crazed man, but he is too strong.

"Next time, listen to me, or you're going to get us ALL KILLED!" he screams, dropping me onto the floor in a heap.

I scurry up, but my legs give out from under me, and I fall on my back awkwardly. My lungs are full of fire as I gasp greedily for air. The man is pacing, his hands balled into fists. What did he mean, I need to listen to him, or I'll get us all killed? I stare at the man in horror as he looms back toward me, wondering what kind of torture he is planning on putting me through next.

"What did I do to you?" I desperately cry.

Then the realization hits me. The man before me, dressed in a phony tunic, is not an advanced cycle at all. He isn't in any cycle. The man is the creeper who grabbed me from the walkway and warned me to *trust them*.

"This is your only warning," he says. "You were going to tell the elders. We only have one shot at this, and if we fail, we're all dead, and none of us ever sees Earth."

The man moves closer to my face.

"I will take you out myself before I let you ruin everything we've worked so hard for," he says through gritted teeth. "Do you understand?"

"N-no...no, I don't understand at all!" I ask, "What is happening? Who are you?"

The man runs his hands through his hair, clearly deliberating his next move. He turns abruptly to address me again, opening his mouth to speak, when there is a loud knock at the door.

*Bang, bang, bang!*

In a hurry, he brushes me off and adjusts the collar of my tunic, trying desperately to smooth out the wrinkles and put me back together.

*Bang, bang, bang!*

This time, the pounding is even more insistent. The man walks toward the door, before turning to face me one last time. I stand still, mortified.

“You have your instructions. In two days, you’ll be told what to do next. Don’t mess this up, or you know what will happen,” the madman says. He turns his scowl into a slight smile.

As he does, someone busts through the door. A woman joins us in the room.

“Maive?” I say, with more confusion. She is the last person I want to see right now.

The man and Maive make eye contact but don’t say a word. Instead, she turns to address me.

“Pollo, I heard you fell, and Phoebe isn’t anywhere to be found. Come on, I came to take you home,” she says, reaching out for me.

I’m not sure what I should do. Should I tell Maive the man standing next to me just tried to kill me? I don’t want to involve Maive. This guy is too unpredictable.

I don’t need anyone’s help. “I’m fine,” I say.

I walk out, then Maive, then the man. I glance back in time to see Maive and the man exchange suspicious glances before we all go our separate ways.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Reaching the surface, I hardly feel my legs walking out of the speakeasy. The surface light is blinding, as I realize it's not yet midday. What a morning; not at all what I expected. I check my arm readouts. They are all over the place, but I'll survive.

I'm emotionless as people pass all around me, forming a sterile crowd. I can't bear the thought of talking to another person. It feels like someone scrambled my brain. Is this the folly my life has become? I need a plan desperately.

I decide to walk to the fields.

If I walk far enough into the fields, no one will be able to see me, and I'll be able to think this through on my own. I make my way deep enough to see the outer wall. I turn to take in my surroundings, ensuring I am truly alone, before kneeling to the ground and allowing my hands to make contact with the cool grass below.

I once learned that when you place your hands on something solid, it is a grounding technique. It is an old cognitive exercise once used on Earth, to help people who suffered from what is called *anxiety*. It helped them when they felt out of control. I shouldn't be able to feel emotions this radical with Direct, but nothing seems to be normal anymore. I add a new feeling as well...

*Loneliness.*

I've never felt this helpless, and I know now the consequences of telling anyone about these messages.

I feel my eyes fill with tears and decide to let them flow freely. No one else is out here to see me weep, or to turn me in like a crazy person. I decide not to hold them back. I can't believe how hollow this feels. The shame I experience knowing this kind of despair is banned feels equally insurmountable.

In two lunar days, whether terrible or glorious, something monumental is going to happen, and I can't do anything about it. A new question is, who do I trust anymore?

*I am so lost.*

Part of me thinks Phoebe was just trying to save both of us from the embarrassment when she pulled me away from the elders earlier, but she knows me best and is always one step ahead. I wonder if Phoebe knows my secret. She saw the bot on the ground too.

My assailant this morning was watching me the whole time, and he knows more than I do. If Maive didn't find me, maybe I could have found out more, or maybe he would have changed his mind about letting me keep my life. It's hard to listen when you're being beaten to a pulp.

Blaming my nutrition is a lie, too. My passing out had nothing to do with nutrition, and everything to do with my body rejecting Direct. I am losing connection with the system, one of the first signs of a fail.

I run my hands through the grass and take in my surroundings. I see the far wall and one of the outer doors in the distance. That's where the fails go, the people who become creepers. Eventually, they all walk out those doors and accept their fate. In time, they have no names, no homes, no nutrition, and become nobodies. That's where I am going to end up. I can feel it happening already.



This emotion must be what it feels like to drop out of the mission. For the first time, I understand why someone might want to step through those doors. If you can't be helpful in our return to Earth, the colony doesn't need you anymore. You aren't missed or even remembered. You are nothing in the end. In two days, it won't really matter.

I wonder if I should just accept my fate and walk out that door right now.

Maybe it would be better. I look up and catch a reflection of myself off in the distance, on the glossy exterior walls. I feel more tears welling up in my eyes, but this time they feel different. I clench my fists and rip the grass out of the ground, allowing the anger to ripple through my body.

“Grrrrraaaaaahhhh,” I growl, as tears flow.

I am not going to be pushed around this way, and I am not going to give up. I can't believe I thought about walking out the outer doors. This is my life. I need to take control of it.

I need to fight to protect the things I believe are right. If I can't control what's going to happen to me in two days, it is at least my responsibility to protect those I love.

I can't let Phoebe and Thad get hurt.

*Thad.*

The most important thing to Thad is his desire to see Earth one day. If anything happens to his wish, I will never be able to forgive myself. Thad is so honest and deserving, I need to do everything I can to protect his chances of returning to Earth.

My tears dry up, and I get to my feet. I feel more inspired to take on whatever lies ahead.

I start my walk back toward the center of the colony, contemplating my next move. Off in the distance, I hear a familiar beeping sound. I search the fields for the source. “Unbelievable!” I cry.

The malfunctioning hover bot spits and sputters its way along the rolling terrain toward my position. The bot moves to its own beat, shifting haphazardly back and forth as it continues onward. I am just happy to see it is no longer smoking.

All its lights are flashing as it joyfully lands at my feet like a falling star. “You know what? I’m gonna call you *Crash!*” The bot rests for a moment before it spins excitedly to my eye level.

“Do you like that name?” I ask. “You were trying to tell me something before you imploded last time.”

A hatch on the top of the bot pops open, and a long, thin arm springs out to reveal multiple needle-thin points. Light rays spill out precisely from the tool, weaving intricately together to create an image floating in the air in front of me.

It is an image of the girl with the raven hair.

My eyes can’t believe what they are seeing. It is exactly the same gesture as the dream. She is beckoning me to come to her.

A cracking sound comes from within the bot, followed immediately by what I imagine is her voice.

“Please, help save us,” the girl says, as clearly as if she were standing in front of me.

The bot repeats the message on a loop for a few moments, as I look on in awe.

“So, she is real?” I ask.

The bot confirms with a *bleep-bleep* once more, before powering down the projection.

“It’s okay. I know you must be drained,” I say. “But if she is real, how do I find her, to help her?”

The bot sinks to the ground and rests. It heaves out a sigh of a low-range noise, at my feet.

“That’s all you know, huh? It’s okay. You did good,” I say. “I will find her and help her. I promise.”

With those words, the bot spins wildly and excitedly into the air, as if it is celebrating. Then, without warning, the bot races off across the field. Slipping and sliding over the hills, until it is far out of sight.

“But, wait!” I yell after it, wondering its next appointment, but the bot is too far off in the distance.

“I’m going to find her,” I say, as I start back in the direction of home.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I finally return home and walk into my quarters to find Phoebe, Maive, and Thad all seated around the table for the evening meal. No one talks, and the silence is deafening. I can't help but wonder what they know. I walk to the table, extending my arm to receive my nutrition. "What's there to eat this evening?" I ask, attempting to sound as casual as possible.

"Same as yesterday," Thad responds aloofly. "Protein cubes and veggies, but you weren't here."

Thad takes another bite of food, chewing slowly. It appears he is mulling something over in his head, but I can't be sure what he's thinking.

"How did your lessons go today, Thad?" I ask.

"I heard you fell today at the speakeasy," Thad says. From his tone, I can tell his concern.

"Oh, that? I wasn't feeling well. Be glad you weren't there for me to embarrass you," I reply.

"After jet propulsion class, the kids I walked home with said their older siblings saw you fall, and they were telling us how hilarious it was," Thad says, almost spitting his food with laughter. "I bet they make a safety poster about you! It would say, 'Eat your nourishment or fall on your face, like Pollo!'" Thad erupts like a geyser.

I can't help but smile; He did help ease the tension around the table.

There is no reaction from Maive, but to my surprise, Phoebe is smiling too. Perhaps today isn't so bad, after all.

“Thaddeus, Apollo had a long day, and he’s going to need his rest tonight. Let’s continue to remain silent throughout our meal. We need our strength to focus on our mission,” Phoebe says.

Chewing through the cubes of food, I realize it has been two lunar days since I last ate. Food was the last thing to worry about, the past few days. Thinking about skipping meals, I wonder if there is anyone who takes more pleasure in eating than Thad.

Phoebe interjects with an announcement: “Apollo has decided to add his name for consideration to the early progeny list before he gets to cycle 18!”

I swallow hard and allow my eyes to dart around the table. After asking us to remain quiet, Phoebe makes the announcement now? I guess she is staying true to what she told the elders this morning.

Maive snaps in frustration, clearly because of the announcement, “But that isn’t for another cycle! Why would he announce that to the elders right now?”

Her reaction is justified, for once. Phoebe brought up the topic, knowing Maive went through the progeny process and was denied several times. I believe it’s the reason she harbors resentment toward me and Thad, and probably the same toward Phoebe, too.

Going along with it, I say, “I want to learn how the process works early, so I can prepare myself better for when my application cycle comes.”

Smashing his biscuit back into the capsule, Thad says, “No, Pollo, if you become a progeny parent, it means you’ll move out to join a new household with your progeny!”

Phoebe reassures him, “Not necessarily, Thaddeus; Direct does all the arrangements, so everything remains in harmony.” She continues, “It is already decided. Pollo will come with me and meet with the elders to announce his intention officially tomorrow morning.”

“No, Pollo needs to be at the speakeasy with his cycle tomorrow,” Maive adds, nervously.

Phoebe begins to explain with an even tone, “Pollo has already given cycle 17 quite a bit of research to catch up on. His idea about the snake plants has already sparked new hypotheses that will take the group a while to explore.”

Maive raises her voice, clearly seeing this as outlandish. “But Pollo needs to be working on the mission, and the speakeasy is the best place for that! This is not the time for him to be off gallivanting with the elders.”

“I’ve already made the arrangements, Maive,” Phoebe says assertively.

“I didn’t know you wanted to do that, Pollo,” Thad says quietly.

“I’m willing to do whatever is necessary to help us get back to Earth,” I tell Thad, wanting him to see my dedication.

Phoebe adds, “I now want each of you to keep the compasses I gave you in your possession at all times. It is imperative you keep them hidden inside your tunics, so they are not easily identified by anyone else. I received word the authority is increasing the search for the *glitch*. The activity of the messages has increased, and the authority is sending out manned patrols from the mezzanine level to search living quarters. I don’t want any of you attracting attention. The compasses are safest if they are with you.”

“When will the manned patrols begin?” Maive asks, attentively. Her tone has drastically changed from a moment ago.

“An announcement will be made in the morning, but our quarters will be prepared for it already,” Phoebe answers. “Now it is time for our nightly routines.”

All four of us close our meal capsules in silence, wondering what one another is thinking, and slide the boxes into the middle of the table.

*Thank you and good evening,* the emulator says, before the lights go dim in the dining room, leaving us in the dark.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The next morning, I remember to hide my compass away inside my tunic as I dress. Before I do, I stare at the metallic cover. I see my reflection in the silvery metal, and my purple radiation coating is glistening from the shine. I notice the purple tint to my skin tone is a nice complement to my maroon tunic.

I glance around my room, double-checking to ensure everything is in order, and decide to check on the Moon watch. I walk over to the vent and pull the Moon watch from its hiding space. The white Moon on the face of the watch is now three-quarters of the way full. I only allow myself a second to observe it before quickly returning it to the vent. If the authority does send manned patrols to check my room, it will be almost impossible for them to locate it.

I head downstairs and see Phoebe waiting in the common area. She looks regal in her gray tunic, with her shimmering, light purple skin tone.

“Good morning, Apollo,” she greets me as the Sun would to warm the planets.

Maiven walks down the stairs after me, also in perfect condition. Her golden tunic makes her olive skin look a slightly different shade than the rest of ours, but perfect nonetheless. Her dark hair is tied back into a sleek bun that draws the corners of her lips upward, making her look almost cheerful.

Thad descends the stairs last, still fussing with his light green tunic. His hair is still a little matted from sleeping, but he is assembled on time.



“My dear children, I hardly recognize each of you sometimes,” Phoebe says warmly. “You three are my proudest achievements, and in my heart, you are my brightest stars.”

The four of us stand together in a rare moment, waiting to receive the morning message from Direct. I can't help but wonder what today might bring.

What could possibly happen next?

The alert flashes and the morning message projects through our vision.

“Members of the colony, the recent rogue messages have become more frequent and increasingly more threatening. To assure your safety and the security of the colony, the authority will send patrol officers to the ground level, and armed patrol drones to seek out threats. Any leads must be reported to the authority immediately, or the consequences will be dire.”

The message subsides.

“Come now, everyone, and go about your day as normal. If you do this, we will all be fine. Please, stay out of mischief. I couldn't bear to lose any of you,” Phoebe says. She opens the door to greet the day.

Thad shoots off in the direction of his classmates as they make their way toward the walkways. Closing the door, I turn back to look for Maive, but she has already disappeared into the crowd. I can't help but wonder what is going on in her world sometimes.

Phoebe and I walk together toward the center of town, on our way to announce my intentions for an early progeny known to the elders. We follow the same path as we normally take, when I feel a slight redirection push from Phoebe.

“Pollo, we are going to take a different path today,” Phoebe says, with a great deal of importance in her tone.

“I need you to say very little to the elders we encounter.” Phoebe allows her voice to trail off as a new patrol bot flies past, stealthily scanning. The patrol bot is sleek black, with angled wings, and much larger than the hover bots.

These warning messages are getting really serious. I need to be incredibly careful and not take any chances. Another patrol bot flies past from behind us, and I can’t help but think about the friendly hover bot and if it will know to hide. I need that bot to survive—it may hold the secret of my dream.

I glance around and realize we are headed for a part of the colony I have never visited before.

“The next zone is for higher levels only. We need to be scanned in order to enter,” Phoebe tells me quietly.

I trust Phoebe with all my heart, so I hope she hasn’t decided to turn me over to the authority herself. After all, there are greater things at play with the elders, and one person cannot be allowed to jeopardize the whole system.

Phoebe turns into an inner entrance, away from the center of town. If I’m correct, we’re going the opposite way of the meditation fields. This is the furthest in this direction I’ve ever been.

A glass-wall entrance appears, and Phoebe raises her forearm to scan us into the zone. I follow the details of her every move. Phoebe reconfirms on the screen that I am her progeny and guest for the day. The glass door slides open, and we enter.

What impressive architecture, with the purpose of housing both the archive and shrine of all the missions to Earth. It is the same sterile-white color as the rest of the colony, but with hefty glass windows that allow light to flood in. Huge floor-to-ceiling display cases line the walls with archived files, and the expansive floor contains relics commemorating many of the Earth missions from the past three hundred years. There are other rows of display cases and an assortment of pedestals housing larger relics.

As we enter, my sensors almost overload from the amount of information surrounding me. “Stay close, Pollo, and don’t touch anything,” Phoebe says.

“What is this place?” I ask Phoebe, in awe of the remnants, which still seem functional and spill out of every fragment of the space.

“It’s a museum of sorts, and Direct’s historical record,” Phoebe says. “It contains all of the knowledge of the physical missions to Earth.”

“Why did you bring me here?” I ask, still moving slowly through the room, taking in all the knowledge I can. Phoebe hesitates to respond.

“We aren’t having a meeting about me taking an early progeny, are we?” I ask, already knowing the answer to the question.

“No, we are not,” Phoebe admits. “We’re here because I’m going to join the cycle 50 elders early, Apollo.”

I was not expecting that answer.

“Wait, is that even allowed?” I ask, jarred by her stark confession. Phoebe doesn’t respond. Instead, she briefly embraces me and then steps away.

“But, Phoebe, that would mean...” I quickly realize what she wants me to understand. “No!”

“I must, Pollo, and this will be my last cycle,” she says. “I have to find the solution to the questions that remain,” Phoebe explains, holding my gaze to emphasize her desire for why she told me this information privately.

“But you have many cycles left!” I plead. “Why would you forfeit that?” Feeling desperate for some other answer, I continue, “You will have more time to do more research here.”

“Because the problem with the *glitch* is growing, and our lack of progress on Earth is dire,” Phoebe explains. “I don’t believe we have many cycles left, and I need to find a safe path for you and for Thad. This is not about my destiny.”

Phoebe’s eyes look glossy, as if she might cry, but I can sense she is not going to let it happen.

“What about Maive?” I ask, realizing Phoebe left her out of her reasoning.

“Maiven is on her own path. Please, Apollo, you are old enough and intelligent enough to handle information that most are not ready to accept yet,” she says.

“And where will Thad go, until he at least reaches cycle 16 to be an independent?” I ask.

“I have already made arrangements with Cetus to foster Thad, so he will move in with Irma and Leif.

“We’ll, I trust you with everything,” I reply.

“For now, I need you to observe the historical accounts of this room. All of them, because some day you will need to recall the information—from the first colony mission, to the expansion of the pyramid seven times over, to the last cycle 50 attempt. It’s important you do this,” Phoebe demands.

“I promise,” I say.

“Start here. This is an original record of the events leading up to Earth’s evacuation.” Phoebe hands me a document she has pulled out of a secret locking compartment in the wall. It is handwritten on a real piece of paper. “Be very delicate with it, Pollo. This is the most complete account of history I have access to,” Phoebe says. “It’s very important that you are able to recall every word of this letter.”

In the year 2088, natural resources and precious metals became depleted from the Earth’s crust. The limited commodities were not enough to sustain the world’s population, and humanity turned to space to explore near-Earth asteroids for mining. Billionaire investor corporations funded the first explorations. A skeptical world did not foresee the instant results in riches. Soon after, all major countries launched mining missions. For decades, technology advanced and the world benefited as new reserves of

iron ore, gold, platinum, and silver were replenished. Soon, interspace trade routes were formed and the first interspace mining station, Kepler 1, was constructed.

Competition on the interspace trade routes, however, became fierce. The main contenders emerged as the United States, Japan, Russia, China, North Korea, and Australia. The less powerful countries merged to form alliances for greater profits. Eventually, rogue vessels broke away from the main fleets and began pirating cargo ships with deadly force. The main powers launched armies into space to protect their nation's precious cargoes. Battles broke out in space, causing increased pressure on Earth.

Political action emerged on Earth, and the main fleets and armies were reassigned to quadrants along the interspace trade routes. The first space elevator, designed to transport materials to space, was soon completed, and construction began on the surface of the Moon for the first international lunar base. Just when order had finally been established, a poisonous gas was discovered in deep space. The purple transfiguration of mercury-hydride, nicknamed *deathshade*, was transported back through the airlocks of Kepler 1. The outbreak was contained, but not before thousands of casualties and several levels of the facility were lost. Samples of the toxic gas were recovered and safely stored for research within the mining station.

With Earth's biosphere threatened, the majority of Earth's population rioted to cut off Direct contact with Kepler 1 and stop the advancement of space mining. Fearing a catastrophic event, world leaders negotiated for the relocation of the *deathshade* lab to the soon-to-be-completed international lunar base on the Moon.

Then, the unthinkable happened...

A terrorist group destroyed the space elevator's ocean platform and hijacked the elevator cables to space. They took control of the *deathshade* research lab inside Kepler 1. The terrorists demanded full control of the mining operations and that all space armies return home, or they would release the *deathshade* into Earth's atmosphere. All the main powers met these demands, but the army of the United States would not withdraw. They surrounded Kepler 1, trapping the terrorists inside.

Quickly, an alliance was formed between Russia, China, and North Korea, declaring certain war on the United States if their forces did not stand down. Tension rose on all sides as the stalemate ensued.

However, it was too late...

Kepler 1's automatic defenses locked down the facility, in an attempt to combat the breach. The terrorists panicked and, in a ploy to escape, launched the *deathshade*. Without warning, Kepler 1 neutralized the threat as it escaped, and violently destroyed itself to prevent external contamination. The self-destruction was so violent and instantaneous, it vaporized the entire quadrant, including most of the surrounding army of the United States.

Seeing only massive explosions in space, and all communication lost, North Korea fearfully acted first, by launching nuclear missiles at the United States. In response, the United States fired back with vengeance toward the allied countries as Russia and China retaliated.

When the dust cleared, all was ruined. The only human survivors were those in isolated locations on Earth. With no evacuation plan, mankind completed the international lunar base on the Moon, named Copernicus 1, and the privileged fled Earth

in two transport ships. A greenhouse bomb was ignited, in a parting attempt to reset life and help restore Earth's atmosphere.

The survivors of Earth, now refugees on the Moon, rely on the supercomputer Direct to guide future generations for Earth recolonization. Humanity continues in the colony, Copernicus 1.

My eyes fill with tears. "This whole time, Earth was destroyed by mankind's greed and struggle for power?" I ask.

"Yes, Pollo, and we have to never let that happen again," Phoebe says. "There are many things you will learn in time, but for now, you will have to trust me."

I carefully return the document to Phoebe. She replaces it with care and says, "One thing is for certain, there aren't enough answers even here to ensure the survival of the colony. I am doing this so you and Thad have a future." Phoebe's voice is calm and even, so I know she is true to her word.

I remain silent. Phoebe gives space and keeps her distance as we weave through the maze of displays. Each station has an etched story, outlining every detail of the particular mission. I glance around and realize there are thousands of more accounts I will need to learn about.

"Can the authority hear us in this room, Phoebe?" I ask under my breath, unsure of the answer.

At this point, if I know it is safe, I am willing to tell her everything from my encounters.



“No, they can’t hear us in here. This is a sacred place,” she responds. “But you don’t need to tell me anything. I brought you here today because the speakeasy is being raided for *glitch*-related messages as we speak.”

My jaw drops. I realize what she is protecting me from. Was I going to be used as someone’s scapegoat without Phoebe removing me from the speakeasy?

“I barely got you away in time yesterday, and I couldn’t take that risk today,” Phoebe continues. “You don’t know everything, Apollo. But you aren’t the target of the *glitch* transmissions.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY

I continue to walk the shrine of missions. Trusting that Phoebe has a plan, I must respect her high position. She's saved my skin twice now. The hall seems to continue forever as I see the past accounts of the artificial gravity advancements, radiation shields, and previous versions of our supercomputer, Direct. I pick up one of the wires that used to plug into a person to upload information from the archaic version of Direct. It is thick rubber and heavy. The tangled wires and metal plugs are what I imagine a science experiment to be. I'm very thankful that we can connect through the light now.

Phoebe catches up with me as we near the end of the shrine. In the last room are the most impressive items to witness: actual spaceships and crafts from mining operations, from over three hundred years ago, which still appear operational. They survived from long before the Great War and the first reset of life on Earth. There are cargo ships on display, with the records of the first mining and military quadrants; I always imagined they would have been all but lost to the abyss.

“What do you think it was like to live on Earth, or in the first space station during that time?”  
I ask.

Phoebe replies, “It was very dangerous, Pollo, and those were the worst of times, when humanity was driven by greed, and Mother Earth was destroyed in the process.”

I approach a most illustrious spacesuit with a long cable that attaches far across the room to the back of a small spacecraft. The shrine holds the following explanation of the suit's relationship to the shuttle:

By far, the most dangerous job in space was that of the *retriever*. This suit helped a person survive for half a day outside of the ship in deep space, to perform the task of attaching asteroid fragments securely to the cargo containers. The lead line attached served the purpose of keeping the suit within one thousand meters of the ship, and was the life source of the operator. One key feature of the suit is that the cable became a lifesaver, with the ability to auto-retract back to the ship at sudden notice. As space mining became profitable, mining operations became victims of space pirates. The auto-retracts saved the lives of the retrievers when deadly attacks happened. Additionally, if the ship was stolen, the suit provided a half a day's timeframe for the person to be found in the abyss of space and be saved.

Phoebe says, "Very brave people wore these suits, and their lives depended on a single wire." She runs her outstretched hand along the thin, braided cable.

"Phoebe, why would people risk their lives just for riches? What good is treasure if you don't live to enjoy it?" I ask.

Phoebe replies, "Pollo, many who seek fortune and fame never know what to do with it if they ever do catch it."

"Is that why we can't have possessions here, and why we should keep the compasses a secret?" I ask.

"Pollo, now that you know I will be joining the architects, I want you to know that the compasses are trackers. While we are apart, I want to know that the three of you are safe, and I can locate you when I need to," Phoebe says.

"So I need to keep it with me. I understand," I say.

Then a door that I am unaware of, opens across the room. Phoebe also is startled by it. It is two elders whom I not seen before. Phoebe pushes a message to me: “I’ll handle this, stay hidden,” but it is too late; they are immediately aware of us and approach curiously.

“Greetings to you, Phoebe,” the tallest one says. By the gray tunics, they are two elders in their mid-forties who are close to Phoebe’s cycle. As they enter, their gray hair becomes more apparent. They are both males, and now overly interested in our business.

“Phoebe, we haven’t seen this youth before, and he’s not allowed in here right now. Did you receive special approval for today?” the shorter one asks.

Phoebe addresses them very confidently. “Hello, Able. Hello, Canter. Let me introduce you to my top progeny, Pollo. He is the highest in cycle 17 and seeks special arrangements from the elders to be selected for early progeny. I am showing Pollo this shrine to inspire his mission. We are just leaving.”

The men take several steps closer. Able says, “If so, we can call the authority to make sure that is true. They are questioning everyone at the speakeasy now for information about the *glitch*, so they can check your story at the same time.”

Canter adds, “You see, we can’t be too careful these days. There is a group of individuals involved with the rogue messages being pinpointed by the authority. So we have to be sure you two aren’t part of that group.”

Phoebe pauses and follows with a loud, deep laugh that I’ve never heard from her before. She adds a higher-level salutation that is scrambled to me as they laugh together. Phoebe gestures for

me to follow. "Come on," she says. "We are done here anyway. Why don't we all walk to the speakeasy together?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The four of us make our way to the exit. I catch Phoebe's glance while exiting, so I know she is attempting to stall them, so I can find a way to slip away. Phoebe is overly chatty and asks many questions to the men as we walk, all in the high-level language that is a scrambled mystery to me. I wish I could have hidden from the elders in the shrine behind the mining display. This could become problematic.

Then Able asks me a question. "So, Pollo, if you are so advanced for your age, why aren't you leading them today at the speakeasy? The authority is collecting the best ideas from each cycle; yours won't be considered."

I overreact by animating my body movements and giving a snarky answer: "Then I need to get back! If the authority wants each cycle's best solution, I am the only one in my cycle who can deliver it. I need to go now!"

"Wait just a moment," Able says. "You're not going anywhere until you tell us what your idea is."

Phoebe interjects, "Pollo already gave them a head start with his second-best idea yesterday. Snake plants, and when they do the research correctly, it will lead them to the better solution, which is his first idea that he kept to himself. Even if they present his second-best idea, they need Pollo to lead them on the mission."

"And what is your first solution?" Able asks. I pause, not certain if Phoebe wants me to actually tell them something.

Canter seizes me by the arm. “Just as I suspected, you don’t really have one.”

Phoebe stands by nervously.

“Hybrid snake grass!” I gasp. “Fast-growing, grow-in-the-dark strains.” I’m not even sure that makes total sense without the calculations.

Able laughs, “Fascinating! You are very creative, at the least! The authority is going to applaud that idea.” Canter releases his grip, shaking me in approval.

Phoebe smiles proudly. “You see, that’s my top progeny.”

We are just steps away from the glass doors that lead us back to the center of town. We land in a familiar place when we pop out of the alley. It’s bustling, and there is commotion among the crowd.

In a moment, Direct pauses everyone in the colony for an important public broadcast. “Children of Copernicus 1, thank you for your cooperation during the speakeasy investigation this morning. The *glitch* has been captured and has been taken into custody. Please return to your quarters until further notice. This will conclude shortly.”

Able says, “Okay then, there you have it. I apologize for our questioning. The authority has found their culprit.”

Phoebe replies, “That is quite all right. It’s for the good of the colony.”

Canter interjects, “Pollo, we will still be stopping in the speakeasy tomorrow to check on you, to see how your solution goes over with cycle 17. You have our attention now; We’ll be seeing you soon.”

I don't need the extra set of eyes on me, but at least I am off the hook for now. I give a look of relief to Phoebe, and I know I am free to go. Looking at the ground, I bow out of the conversation.

As I turn, several youths race past us in light green tunics.

"I can't believe they found the *glitch* in cycle 9," one cries.

"I know, our cycle. Who could it be?" says the other.

I look back at Phoebe with urgency. Her telling wince is all I need before I race off. Cycle 9 is Thad's cycle.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I scramble to the center of the colony. The patrol bots fly overhead still by the dozens. They repeat the message to return home and to report any *glitch* interactions to the authority. I avoid their scans and dodge through the crowd. People are walking frantically back to the walkways. I have to find Thad. He will be shaken if one of his cycle mates was taken from lessons today. But Thad would go straight home; there is no way I will find him in this crowd. He always does what is right.

I change my plan. I need to find Leif to see what happened at the speakeasy today. Any information could help, since I don't know who was captured. I continue toward the underground entrance, searching for maroon tunics, until I finally see a few females in my cycle. "Have you seen Leif? You know; tall, red hair?" I ask.

"He's still in the speakeasy," she replies. "But you're supposed to go home, Pollo."

"I will, thank you," I say. I fight the stream of people going the opposite way, until I can see the entrance. It is heavily guarded by the authority, and they're turning people away. Maybe I can find Leif. He's taller than most; I could get lucky and spot him.

Scanning the crowd, I lock eyes with the creeper from a distance. The man dressed in light purple, who mangled me before is now disguised as the mangy creeper in the streets again. He has a bead on me, with fire in his eyes, as he fights through the crowd in my direction. I quickly turn, knowing the consequence of encountering him again. Without making a scene, I scramble away in the opposite direction as the creeper pursues me. Why couldn't the authority catch him? I struggle sideways through the crowd, looking back to see if the creeper is gaining on me.

I squeeze between people, but something grabs my wrist and pulls me backward. It's Leif! What a relief to find him. I drag Leif in a safe direction, toward the outer circle. I see the creeper fighting to find me in the wrong place. "Keep moving, Leif," I push to him.

"Pollo, are you in danger?" Leif asks. "The man with the mustache came back and asked about you today. Then the patrols asked about you, and they have you on a list of people to investigate. They asked me about your whole household because I am next door."

"Leif, did you say anything?" I ask.

"No, I don't know anything, so I have nothing to share. Today is really scary," he says.

"Leif, did they find the *glitch* in the speakeasy?" I ask.

"No," he says. "It isn't anyone from the speakeasy. They said it is a youth from lessons."

"Okay, it will be fine, thank you," I say. "Let's split up. I'm afraid we're being followed. Be well, my friend. I need to go the long way home to Thad."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I go far around the normal route of the walkways, to be sure the creeper isn't following me. Curiously, I travel past the windows of several frantic residences. The patrols are a first of their kind, and the investigations are not going to stop until the *glitch* conspirators are eradicated. I reach the platform outside our quarters, peer around, and finally enter. "Thad, are you here?" I push out a message to him, but I receive no response.

My heart races, and I go upstairs quickly. Finally, he responds faintly from upstairs, and pushes a message back. "Pollo, I'm scared because no one is here." I find him hiding under his bed.

"Pollo, they were scaring kids at school. If we didn't help, the patrols, they said we would be taken away," Thad says.

"It's okay now, Thad. They caught the *glitch*," I say. "There's no need to be worry."

"But, Pollo, the authority said they caught the *glitch* from cycle 9, but none of the students were taken from my class. Did the authority lie?"

"I don't know why they would say that," I say, I don't know anything for sure anymore.

Thad asks, "Have you seen Phoebe or Maive yet?"

"Phoebe is fine," I say. "I was with her all day. I don't know about Maive."

I remember Phoebe saying Maive is on her own path now. I trust Phoebe is in a high enough position to protect herself, but I don't know about Maive or her daily whereabouts, so I don't know for sure if she is safe.

“Thad, do you still have your compass?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says.

“Good, keep it close to you as a sign of hope from Phoebe. She has a plan for us, I know it.”

Thad asks, “And Maive, too?”

“I think Maive can handle herself, as she always does. Come on, let’s have dinner,” I say.

The three-day warning looms, as does the threat on my life from the creeper if I don’t follow the messages. Maybe if the *glitch* is caught, everything will return to normal.

*Normal.* I can’t remember what that is anymore.

The good news is, with the newly added attention of Able and Canter at the speakeasy, as annoying as it might be, I will have added protection until the creeper is caught and thrown out of the colony. Time is on my side. If I am patient, this will all go away.

Thad and I reach the main floor in preparation for our meal. The lights are dim inside. “Do you think we should wait for Phoebe and Maive to eat?” Thad says.

Just then, a patrol drone’s lasers scan outside our front windows. “Get down!” I say, pulling Thad behind the table.

“But if we didn’t do anything, why are we hiding?” Thad says.

“Thad, we don’t know what they are looking for,” I say. “It’s better to be safe.”

The patrol drone passes. The searchlights scan elsewhere as we stand from behind the table. Then Direct pauses the colony with an update announcement. “Children of Copernicus 1, until further notice, the school and speakeasy will remain closed. Stay inside your quarters until the authority has completed the searches. All involved with the *glitch* will be put to justice.”

“Lockdown!” Thad says. “What are we going to do inside, and how long is this going to last?”

“Thad, let’s just have dinner. It will be best to continue our nightly routine as usual. I’m going to look outside for Maive. Why don’t you inspect what we have to eat?”

I reach my arm out over the table. Thad does the same, and the vacuum tubes activate. I walk away from the table and peer out the common room windows. I can see the scans of the patrol drones down near the walkways, herding anyone remaining back to their chambers.

“Pollo!” Thad says. More insistently again, he shouts, “Pollo!”

Turning to Thad, I see his face is white as a ghost as he look down at the food. “What’s wrong, Thad?” I ask, taking a step back towards the dining room.

Then, crashing through the door is Maive.

“Maive!” I say, surprised. “What happened to you?”

She is limping noticeably, and her yellow tunic is blood-soaked across her shoulder and back.

Pushing the door shut, Maive cries, “Get upstairs, now! There is no time to explain!”

“Pollo,” Thad says again, frozen.

I try to help Maive into the quarters, but she pushes me away toward the table.

“Don’t worry about me, Pollo. Take Thad upsta—”

Two large patrol guards barge in from the night, clad in dark armor from head to foot.

The guard’s deep voice says, “We received an emergency call for a *glitch* interaction just now from this location.” Maive backs in several steps, turning to hide the blood on her tunic.

“No one called from this location,” Maive says. “There has been no *glitch* interaction here.”

The armored guards move further into the house, and two more assemble inside our doorway right behind them. Each guard holds a long, thin club. “I’ll check again,” the guard replies.

“Yes, the location is confirmed as this exact residence,” the guard says. “Who placed the call to the authority about the *glitch*?”

I glance fearfully at Maive, and she eyes me back openly.

We didn’t. It could only mean...I turn to Thad.

Thad yelps, “Pollo, I didn’t know what to do. They said at school if we see anything and don’t report it, we won’t be allowed to return to Earth!”

The guard speaks, raising his club, “Last warning, who made the call?”

I know I can’t let Thad be harmed for my doing. I step forward. Maive turns and stops me with a force that makes me step back.

“I did!” Maive says. “It was me.”

I cannot believe what is happening. The guards grab Maive, and she does not put up a struggle. As they pull her toward the door, her compass falls on the floor with a *clank*, spinning to a stop.

“What is that?” the guard asks. “And why are you bleeding?”

The guard closest to me stomps down on the compass, mangling it on the floor. Maive says with a growl, “I needed that!”

I quickly turn to Thad. He is still frozen in his expression, looking at the food on the table. Thad whimpers, “I’m sorry, Pollo.”

I look at what holds his gaze, in the meal meant for me. Carved into a bright orange biscuit is the instruction, *RUN!*

I look at Maive. She cries, “Pollo, RUN!”

A thick black cover goes over Maive’s head as two guards wrestle her out the doorway, into the dark. I dart for the stairs, and the other two guards move after me. Thad screams, “Nooooo,” and runs into the legs of the closest guard. They toss him out of harm’s way unscathed, chasing after me up the steps. I sprint upstairs to my room.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I scramble up the stairs to the second floor and make the sharp turn down the hall, with the guards close behind me. I slam my door shut just in time, but I know it won't hold the guards for long. I hear them crash into the door. It almost caves on the first impact. Immediately, the guard yells downstairs to leave the younger boy alone and go get the hover bots. Thank goodness they aren't interested in Thad, but I need a plan if I'm to survive.

Without thinking, I use all of my strength to pry the delivery system vent from the wall. I pull the Moon watch from its place behind the vent and secure it to my wrist.

*Bang, bang, bang!*

The door buckles under the pressure of the guard's heavy pounding. My time runs out. With no escape, my only option is the ventilation shaft.

Kicking off my nightstand and the wall, I dive head-first into the wall chute that delivers my clean tunic every morning. I barely fit, but luckily can slide forward as the guards break their way into my room. The first guard sees my desperate escape route and grabs for my feet, just as the second guard joins swiftly with his club drawn, reaching just beyond my crawling distance.

They miss me! The guard cries, "Come back here if you know what's good for you!" It echoes terribly down the metal shaft. "The authority will take no mercy on *glitch* conspirators!"

My relief is short-lived. I can't look back, but I can hear the guards trying to follow me into the chute. One of them gets a high enough jump to start in, but from the racket he makes, his armor prevents him from fully entering the vent.



“We will find you, kid!” The screams continue after me. “You won’t make it very far!”

I slide further into the darkness, away from the screams of pursuit. I pause and hear the guards quickly making their way back down the stairs.

“Leave the youngest,” the guard says. “He made the call but is not involved with the *glitch*.”

I need to survive now or I will never see Thad again.

“Send the hover bots into the wall,” the guard commands.

That’s all the motivation I need to get far away from here, and fast! I have no idea what will eventually lie ahead of me, as this shaft potentially connects the ventilation of all the residences. I try to get onto my knees for better movement, but my back hits the top before I can get my legs underneath me. I’m going to have to stay on my stomach and crawl my way forward. There is no turning around now.

The path I’m on now is truly my own. Like Maive, and Phoebe, and even Thad.

If I keep moving in the same direction, I will be heading away from the center of the colony. If I can go far enough, I will hit the outer wall.

I hear a rumbling in the vents far in front of me, in the absolute darkness. I won’t be able to see anything coming. It’s dinner time, so the rumbling is likely the delivery of evening meals. If I’m lucky, I won’t have a meal capsule smash me in the face. Well, oddly enough, at least I could get a meal that way.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I continue straight ahead until I estimate I've gone beyond the living quarters. There have been no openings in the ventilation in any other direction yet.

I listen for another moment as metal on metal scratching sounds begin to grow. The sound of the vibration hums, which is now more like a chorus of sharp screeches that make the few hairs on my arms stand on end.

*Hover bots.* I have a terrible realization. The bots are in the ventilation system now, and there are a lot of them. My only saving hope is that the much larger patrol drones don't come after me. They will tear me apart.

I double my speed. My only choice is to escape somewhere ahead. I have no way of telling where they will enter or how quickly they will find me.

***BANG!***

My head hits into a flat, metal wall with so much force, I discover a constellation bursting in my vision. The pain of nearly knocking myself out is nothing compared to the fear of being stuck in a dead-end tunnel. *I can't go backward!* The vent ends; I'm at the far wall with no exit to the right or left. It's a dead end.

"No!" I scream aloud, echoing far behind me. I pound my fist against the wall in front of me. "NOOO!"

The hover bots' vibration is growing all around me. *This is bad.* I start kicking the walls to the side, hoping for a miracle way out of this. *I'm going to die in here!*

*So stupid!* I lift my head up hard, expecting to feel another impact that I deserve. But there is nothing there. Nothing above me? *UP!*

Reaching my hands above my head, I realize I've crawled beneath a top vent. I must move vertically, but I don't have time for any analysis. Getting anywhere but here is key to my survival.

The vent is narrower straight up, but I'm able to bend and wiggle myself into a standing position.

Pushing my feet off the sides in short bent motions, I'm able to get my arms above my head, so I can feel around for what's above me.

*Clank!*

The sound is enough to make me jump before I realize it is my metal watch contacting the vent. Of course, *the Moon watch!*

Activating it, I allow the light of the Moon to illuminate far above me. Its soft, warm glow brings with it a sense of calm.

The Moon on the watch is nearly full now, except for a small, black sliver to the far-left side. It has changed so much since Phoebe gave it to me. In fact, it is nearly the opposite in appearance from the day she told me to hide it.

The light of the Moon allows me to see that the shaft above me is about twice my height, and then it opens into a new grid system at the top. I bet I can find a way out.

Pressing my back as hard as I can against the vent wall, I use my feet on the opposite wall to force myself up, sliding myself in short bursts of movement.

My living quarters are on the lower level of the colony, but there are houses upon houses above our level. All these vents will undoubtedly lead me into other quarters—a trap I can't set for myself. I need to get to the top.

My only choice is to keep moving up, and the openings in the vents on one side make helpful footholds for climbing.

I wonder what Phoebe would think about this daring escape of mine.

A flash of bright, white light darts across my vision as I stare down the ventilation shaft. The light begins to strobe before it breaks into a symphony of flashing white lights, one after the other. I look up only for my stomach to sink. The clanking and beeping of the hover bots are coming from above me as well. *Time to get out of here!*

I climb one more vent when a hover bot bursts out from above me, detecting me immediately! I cringe away from it, fearing what it might do to neutralize me, but it stops abruptly, just short of my head.

The bot zips erratically with excitement! Its blue and green colored lights flash to communicate its familiarity.

“Crash!” I say. “It’s you!” I can’t believe it. “Boy, am I glad to see you!”

“Three days,” the bot’s voice projects.

“Yeah, I know, three days. That’s tonight, but what am I supposed to do?” With fresh motivation, I exclaim, “Get me out of here!”

Without hesitation, the bot projects a hologram map, showing me the entire grid system above. The bot highlights my route to safety, and I notice a mapped out route along an alley with a flashing yellow *X* at the end. “Is that where I need to go?” I ask. The bot reacts with a squeal and a show of rainbow lights, confirming my escape plan.

The white lights swarm up from the bottom of the shaft. “They found us!” I say. “Fly!”

The bot zips above me, leading the way to freedom.

Finally, pulling myself to the top, I stand on top of a large, echoing space.

Looking down the shaft, I see the glow of the hover bots spiraling upward to end me.

Darting away across the top of the ventilation system, I’m cautious of my footwork, so I don’t fall to my death. Glancing back, I realize that the friendly bot is trailing behind me, putting itself between me and the swarm of hover bots.

The hover bots break into the open space like a pillar of buzzing seekers ready to execute their orders.

Turning back, as I run for my life, I see the faithful bot is trying to save me.

“Thank you for everything, Crash!” I yell to my noble companion.

The brave bot gives me one final squeal and a flash of colorful lights before turning to face the massive swarm of hover bots, which are onto my escape route. The small, erratic bot extends

two metallic arms outside of its body and charges at the swarm of hover bots. He waves his arms with jet-propelled speed as he breaks through the middle of the swarm, straight down the ventilation system we just climbed out of.

I can't bear to look back, but I hear the heroic sounds of metal-on-metal collisions from my brave bot buddy breaking through their ranks.

The explosions that follow shake the unstable steel I run across. Flames and smoke billow through the open spaces everywhere, covering my trail. The courageous bot's effort bought me just enough time to evade the swarms full onslaught.

I make it through the exit point in time and slide down a long way to the ground. I keep running off into the darkness to find a new place to hide.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I have no idea where I am, but I am alive. The surfaces here are unfinished and rough. I know, at least, that I've never been here before. Crash's map shows a long alley to follow. I need to keep moving to find it, or my result is still death. It won't take long for the hover bots to break out after me.

I run to the end of the dark alley and make a hard turn down the next opening I encounter. I take refuge behind an old pile of rubble. I shiver, thinking about where I am as I wait on my next move, the sweat dripping down my back adding to my chill.

I hear the bots burst out of the ventilation exit and spilling into the area, I just occupied. After what seems like an eternity, I hear their hums fade as they turn away from my hiding place, traveling in the opposite direction.

I decide to continue making my way cautiously down the narrow alley. I am now certain that this alleyway is part of the outer wall. The precise angle lines up perfectly with the renderings I observed in the archives yesterday, of the outer limits of the pyramid. I keep myself low to the ground, wanting to remain as undetectable as possible. It helps that my maroon tunic is now covered with the debris I just climbed through.

Just then, Direct paused our thoughts and made an announcement. How inconvenient! They are going to find me in an instant with the sound. *Children of Copernicus 1, Leif from cycle 17 has had a breakthrough in science for hybrid snake grass.* I gasp, O' no! They got to Leif too. *He will be taken to the authority to work on his fast-growing, grow-in-the-dark strains this cycle.* They even used my own idea against me to get to my best friend.

Another noise stops my thought of Leif. A very different sound flows through the dusty air—a sound I dread. I crouch even lower, wishing I could crumble into the surface. What I hear, far overhead is the result of the larger, stealthy patrol drones. Nearly invisible in the darkness, they zoom over in a deadly formation. A low-frequency *ssssssszzzzzz* sound emanates as they cut through the night. When they pass, I run as far and as fast as I can. They aren't going to stop until they find me.

After zigging and zagging through the shadows, my path brings me to a sharp angle in the alley. I can't stay here, but tracking the outer wall, I realize I am at the back corner of the pyramid, close to where Crash marked the X.

I hear clambering in the distance. I see the patrol drone platoon dive down deep into the alley far in front of my position. Their red scanners are menacing, and the *ssssssszzzzzz* sounds reverberate through the alley. It will only take a moment now for them to reach me. I scan for rubble and realize there is nowhere for me to hide this time. Their red scanners will reach me before I can mount a suitable escape. And when they do, they are made for killing.

I feel pressure on my shoulder from behind. I turn to investigate the cause of the contact. What stands behind me is horrifying...it's the creeper! He has stalked me here.

He wrestles me to the ground, forcing me to fall back against the outer wall. The back of my head hits the wall hard, and I buckle to the surface.

"You're not supposed to be here!" the creeper growls.

He keeps his weight on my chest, pinning me helplessly to the ground.



I drop my head to the side, terrified of the patrol drones progressing our way. They spot us because of the disturbance the creeper is causing, and their pace hastens.

“They’re coming for us—get off of me!” I scream, and thrash about.

I would rather die by the devastation of the patrol drones than at the hands of the creeper.

“We’re out of time, Pollo,” he says, in despair.

The creeper clenches my wrist and with the other hand exposes a sharp metal object. My forearm erupts from the explosion of pain, blood flowing out of the gash. I try to pull my arm away, but the creeper is holding me down with all of his might, continuing to cut into my arm.

“AHHHHHHHH!” I shout in agony. I try to rip free of him as he tears out a fistful of electronics that were only moments ago my arm monitor.

“What are you doing?” I scream in excruciating pain.

The creeper reaches over me for something above my head. *A door handle.* And the handle is to an outer door. I didn’t notice it there this whole time. He stalked me until I was next to the exit.

The patrol drone engine tremors are deafening now. I see the red laser dots mark our bodies. They make their descent, ready to shred us apart. The creeper turns the handle and kicks the door open. With all his might, he hurls me urgently through the door. The last thing I see as the door closes is the swarm of patrol drones overtaking the creeper. The door slams shut with an echoing *BOOOOM*. Then I hear the muffled, gut-wrenching screams of the creeper in his last moments. A terrible silence follows as I freefall into the void, wondering when I will hit the bottom.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

I have no idea how long I have been knocked out, but I awake on my back in agonizing pain. I feel a great distance from the push through the outer door. I attempt to move, but the pain is unbearable. “Aaaaah,” I grimace, the noise echoing loudly in the hollow space.

Getting up doesn’t matter; I feel the warm pool of blood surrounding my body in the freezing space. The pain rushes back to my arm as the memory of the creeper cutting out my monitor returns. I can’t see anything in the pitch black.

I close my eyes and allow the panic to take over. The creeper pushed me outside.

*I’m completely outside of the colony.*

But why? To save me from a drone death? That doesn’t make any sense. Anyway, it doesn’t matter; I’m as good as dead.

My nose filter burns red, and for a moment, I see my frozen breath. I’ll suffocate without an atmosphere now. Euphoria is beginning to set in. It is all going to be over soon. I’m lying in the outer trench between the colony and the surface of the Moon.

I attempt to take in another breath. My lungs feel as if they are lit on fire; the inferno travels up my throat, into my mouth.

I force myself onto my stomach, crawl forward a short distance, and collapse. My hand makes contact with something smooth and round. The cold forces my hand to stick to its exterior as I bring it close to my face, willing my eyes to take in enough to make out its appearance. It is a mistake. Two dead, black holes stare back at me from the center of a ghostly skull. I’m in the

den of the 1 percent. The skull is from one of those who tossed themselves out of the colony to eventually accept their fate. And now, this is my fate as well.

I roll the skull away and hear it clacking into a pile of more bones. I turn onto my back one last time.

I close my eyes and allow my thoughts to drift silently to the others.

Phoebe and Thad. The hope of the colony is with them now.

My chest protests the pain of losing oxygen with sharp spasms.

Thad...

My eyes fill with tears that freeze instantly to my face.

Thad will save them...

My fight is over. My last breath is invisible. There is nothing left.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT**

A faint red glow forces my eyes back open.

I look down and realize that my Moon watch is flooding the space with a bright, red light. I reach my hand toward the sky, and it shines above me warmly. How ironic. I will die in the moonlight of a full Moon.

I wheeze out one last breath as I leave this world for good. The bright lights shine above me, beckoning me forward.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

I open my eyes to a translucent fog hovering just above my head. Through it, I see the silhouette of a girl standing over me. Her long, dark hair blows gently in the warm wind that surrounds us.

I know, without seeing her face, she is the girl from my dreams, the one who beckons me to come to her. She is the *glitch*, the one who caused all this trouble from the beginning. I attempt to speak, but my vocal cords refuse to respond.

The raven-haired girl kneels before me. She brings her face closer to mine, but my eyes struggle to focus on her.

*Am I dead?*

I try to feel my heart beat in my chest, but I am numb.

I must be dead and on my way to the afterlife.

Behind her, I can see a most stunning red aura adding an extraterrestrial glow around her already stark-black figure. My eyes focus on a perfectly round circle behind her.

Air flows back into my lungs. I gasp for breath. The red, glowing circle lights up the night sky. A full-blood Moon.

*It's not possible.*

The girl leans closer.

“I’m alive?” I ask aloud, my vocal cords finally catching up with the fresh air.

“Yes, we barely got you out alive,” her angelic voice consoles me.

The girl with the raven hair becomes clearer. Her angled features glow against her deep-red lips.

“You are the *glitch*” I say.

My mind races to fathom it.

“I am on Earth.”

I reach for the surface under me with my left hand. It is not like the cold, rough formations I am used to. Instead, my fingers sink into it. Damp and soft, a granular substance is all around me.

“Let’s sit you up,” she says. Her warmth is overwhelming as her hands grip my left arm and shoulder.

I move my right hand underneath me to aid her in sitting me up. A searing pain rips through my body, sending me crashing back to the ground. A long, steel cable is wrapped tightly around my right arm, cutting into my badly battered skin.

“Get the retract cable off him!” she cries, gesturing to others in the distance.

“I am sorry, Pollo. It was the only way we could get you out in time. You were suffocating in the exhaust trench!”

I take in my surroundings and notice multiple shadows of children, all shapes and sizes, scattered behind her.

“Bring me the medical kit!” she cries.

They peer in interest as several of them step up to assist her in taking the cable off my arm.

“Don’t worry, we’ll fix you up,” she says.

Seeing I am okay, the children move in for a closer look. There must be a dozen or more of them, with painted faces, peering over me.

“These are my friends,” the *glitch* says softly. Her face illuminates with a broad smile.

“Welcome to Earth. We have a lot to tell you.”

*End of part 1.*