# Mote Amid the Stars

## Part 1–From Bad to Worse

Total Mission Elapsed Time: Generation 3, Year 16, Day 210

Sitting down behind his private communications console, Commander Harrison Collins hesitated before booting it up. His hope that a return message was waiting for him felt as dim as the light reaching his ship from the background of stars light years away. Steeling his resolve, he cold-started the system, waited for it to come online, then clicked the inbox.

No new message received.

The ever-growing gulf of space between his vessel, Kairos, and mission control sucked any trace of hope he'd had, dread filling the vacuum it left behind.

Clicking on the last communication from mission control, received on the secured emergency channel six days ago, he re-read the simple yet demoralizing message, thinking perhaps doing so for the umpteenth time would uncover a clue he'd missed.

"War begun. No stopping. You're now deemed mission…" The message abruptly stopped.

Every day since receiving the message, Harrison had held onto the hope that the lack of reply was only temporary. That mission control, as well as humanity, still existed and just needed time to get vital systems back online. But with this last unsuccessful attempt, logic told Harrison that all those aboard his ship were more likely the last remnants of the human race.

Cutting an imposing figure, he leaned his six-foot four-inch frame into his plush commanders chair, the muscles of his sharp jawline clenching as he gnawed at the problem of the protracted silence.

This is no time to panic, he reminded himself.

Turning his attention away from his emotions, he forced himself to focus on logic to countermand what his gut was telling him.

“You’re now deemed mission what?” Harrison mumbled aloud.

There were only a handful of adjectives he could think of that would follow, but each had vastly different courses of action, so knowing exactly what mission control had said was critical.

While working the problem, he sat forward and ran yet another diagnostic on the communications system. All were operating normally. The problem was not with his ship.

A buzz from the ship's internal intercom system was a welcome distraction.

“Yes,” Harrison answered.

“Sir,” his XO and best friend, Drake Dupris, said over the intercom, “please report to the lab ASAP.”

Known for his loose interpretation of ship protocol, especially when addressing his superior officer, Drake’s formal manner chilled Harrison’s blood.

“Problem,” Harrison replied, shuddering.

“Ensure you’re not followed. Recommend you use secure passageways and use the back entry to avoid detection.”

That told Harrison all he needed to know.

Things were about to go from bad to worse.

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## Part 2–End of the Line

After taking the circuitous route through the ship, Harrison punched the code onto the wall next to the lab's back door, then placed his palm on the glass plate inset next to the keypad. A slight warming sensation as the scanner read his palm and fingerprints did little to melt the frost gripping his body.

Seconds later, the door hissed open. Stepping into the back of the lab, Harrison spotted Drake and the head of the genetics lab, Dr. Miles Bennet, standing close to one another engaged in hushed conversation.

At hearing the door open, they both stopped and turned toward Harrison.

Harrison wondered to himself, "Why is it that scientists all look alike?" You could spot them a mile away. Even if they wore designer clothes, there was a 'look' about them. While Drake was in his duty uniform, Miles wore casual clothes. No white lab coat, no pocket protector, but there was a slightly disheveled look about him. His hair was a mess, and wire-rimmed glasses sat askew on a hawkish nose protruding from a skinny face. He seemed jittery, like the 18th cup of black tea he'd just drained was one too many.

Coming to a stop next to Drake, Harrison said, "Alright, gentlemen. What's with all the secrets? What've you got?"

Uneasy silence hung in the air, neither man knowing who should talk first.

Not wanting to hear a frazzled and overly-caffeinated scientist spewing technical jargon he wouldn't understand, Harrison looked at Drake and said, "What's this all about?"

"Sir, we've got a major problem. Miles has run the preliminary tests on all Gen 3s who are of age and…". He cut off mid-sentence, shifted his weight and turned to face Harrison more

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directly, but finding it too intense, he turned back. "All those aboard who are of age to reproduce, well, sir….."

"Drake? What are you trying to say?"

"Sir, all Gen 3 males and females are sterile."

Harrison heard the words, understood them, but was rendered mute.

"I've checked and rechecked the test results," Miles began, "even resorting to manual microscopic observations of sperm motility and counts as well run the tests on all the blood work and hormone levels on the females aboard. Each time, the result is the same. All are sterile. In addition, ultrasound tests confirm the uterine linings of all females are abnormally thin or in some cases nonexistent. Cause unknown."

The ramifications concussed Harrison's brain. How can I, he thought, maintain order of this generational star cruiser with the last 180 souls on board? How am I to carry on the mission to colonize another world if we cannot conceive a new generation?

Dizzy, he swayed back and forth before finding his balance and his voice.

"I'm assuming," Harrison said to Miles, "you've followed protocol and have at least two embryos in cold storage from gen 2?"

Miles leaned back, his face contorted as if the question carried a foul odor. "Of course, sir. Two healthy embryos from two different parents. One boy and one girl."

Switching gears, Harrison then asked, "Okay, what about the older Gen 2s? Have they aged out?" Harrison asked.

"We were just discussing that," Miles replied. "And while embryonic implantation remains a possibility, I don't see that as a probable solution."

"Why?"

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Drake took over. “Well, sir, there’s the physical issue of late-life pregnancy and all the complications and risks to the mother, as well as an increased risk of birth defects. The doc here could speak to that better than me. My other concern is one that has more immediate implications.”

Harrison knew where Drake was going. If the older Gen 2s had to undergo unscheduled testing, there would be questions. Questions that had no suitable answers. And once a spark of concern caught, rumors and panic would spread through the ship faster than a pure oxygen fire.

“Understood,” Harrison said. Turning to face Miles directly, he asked, “No other lab personnel has been privy to this information?”

Lifting a nervous finger to readjust his glasses, Miles replied, “No. We have strict cross contamination protocols. As such, I was the only one who performed the testing to determine fertility at the beginning of last week. When I saw the first results, I suspected something was amiss, so I planted a virus.”

“I’m sorry,” Harrison interrupted, “did you say you planted a virus?”

“I explained I’d been exposed to Basillia variant 2, and therefore I needed to remain isolated. While the staff took the samples for fertility testing, I remained isolated here in the lab since I’d been the only one in here.”

Despite the circumstances, Harrison couldn’t help but crack a smile. “Clever. How long does the isolation last?”

“We have until the end of the week. The lab will be back up and running by the first of next week.”

Harrison considered this, pondering the next steps.

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After several more seconds, Harrison said, “Alright. Good work keeping this potential catastrophe contained. I don’t think I need to tell you how critical it is that we keep a tight lid on this until we figure out the next steps.”

“Yes, sir,” both said in unison.

“Alright. Miles, I know the Gen 2 women on board have aged out, but I need a list of the youngest in that group. Pull their medical histories. We want candidates with minimal risk, no abnormalities, no medical conditions that could jeopardize implantation. Let me know. Use only the secure direct line to my office quarters. Voice only, no data transmission. If I’m not there, do not leave any messages. Save it until we can connect.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Drake, report back to your duty station. We have our regular meeting planned in a few hours. Meet me in my office then. Hopefully by that time, we’ll have some answers and can start to wrap our minds around this.”

“Yes, sir.”

With nothing left to say or do, Harrison turned and walked back to the door he’d entered. As he waited for the lab door to slide into the wall recess, he couldn’t help but shake the notion that humanity was facing the end of the line.

### Part 3-The Immense Weight of Expectation

Back in the small office adjoining his duty quarters, Harrison stared at the blank communications console once more, trying to formulate a plan. With critical pieces of information still missing, he fought the urge to jump from one idea to another and instead focused on the information he had.

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A light rap on the outer door brought his attention to the present and the meeting he was going to have with Drake.

“Come in.”

The door slid open, and Drake stepped in, looking like he’d aged 10 years in the past few hours. Short but stout, his shoulders sagged under the immense weight of keeping the bad news secret. His dark hair, usually neatly groomed, was tousled.

“All duty stations report normal, sir,” Drake said while taking a seat across from Harrison.

Leaning forward, Harrison steepled his hands together, wrestling with whether to tell him to drop the formalities, or let it ride.

“Very good, thank you,” Harrison said. It was better to let Drake do what came naturally rather than give him something else to worry about.

“Any word from Miles?” Drake asked.

“Nothing yet, but it’s only been a few hours.”

A pause hung in the air, and with it, the heavy pall of uncertainty.

“Drake, what I’m about to share with you is level 1 classified. I don’t think I need to tell you how precarious our situation is with the recent findings, but that’s only a part of the potential catastrophe we may be up against.”

The color in Drake’s face drained away, but trained since birth of his place alongside Harrison, he maintained a placid countenance.

“Yes, sir,” he acknowledged.

“Now, please understand that while I’m not fully certain, I believe something terrible has happened back home.”

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Harrison let the sentence hang, allowing Drake to absorb the news is small pieces instead of dumping the entire load on his plate.

Knowing more information was coming, Drake nodded his head.

“Six days ago, I received an unscheduled, partial communication from Mission Control, and my replies to that partial message have gone unanswered. Despite repeated attempts at reestablishing communication, all efforts have failed.”

Although his facial expressions did not change, Harrison knew he was running through all the possible scenarios that would answer why there had been radio silence.

After a few beats, Drake asked, “The message was unscheduled, and you say it was only a partial message?”

“Correct.”

“What was the partial message?”

Harrison had printed the message onto a small card, which sat on the edge of the communications console. He slid it off and handed it to him, then sat back in his chair.

Drake’s quivering hands betrayed his stoicism.

Harrison said, “I’ve attempted to reestablish communication on five different occasions using all network frequencies.”

Drake looked up from the note, but his stare, vast as the space surrounding the ship, looked into nothing.

Harrison remained quiet, allowing Drake time to process.

After several minutes, Drake said, “So, the prophecies in The Book of Lineage have come to pass.” He sat silent for several more seconds before continuing, “But what about us? The prophesies mentioned nothing about a remnant.”

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"Correct," Harrison replied.

"And now, with this generation being sterile…"

There was nothing else to say. Drake was up to speed. Again, Harrison remained quiet until Drake had sufficient time to gather his thoughts.

"What are we going to do?"

"Exactly what we set out to do several hours ago. We'll let Miles come to us with information regarding the best chance we have for IVF. There's got to be at least one remaining Gen 2 onboard that has a decent chance of carrying the embryos to term. From there, we determine the best plan of action."

"And what about…"

"Regarding the immediate concern. You, Miles and I are the only ones aware of the sterility issue. You and I are the only ones aware of the possibility that this ship carries the last vestiges of humanity. Until we get more information and formulate a plan, we're going to keep that news under wraps. We don't need mass hysteria and rumor spreading like a virus through the ship."

Drake nodded his head in acknowledgement.

The communication console chimed, and both men snapped their heads toward the screen. It was a secure inter-ship communication.

Pressing connect, Miles filled the screen.

"What've you got?" Harrison said.

"Not good news, I'm afraid."

Feeling icy dread flow through him, but keeping himself in check, Harrison interlocked his fingers and rocked forward.

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"What've you got?" he repeated.

"Well, sir, I've pulled every medical record from all Gen 2 women. As you're already aware, there are currently 60 Gen 2 women on board. Of those, only 8 are even prospective candidates. Of those 8, only 1 has a slightly better than 50% chance of successful term and birth. And by slightly better, I'm talking about a fraction of a percent."

Harrison heard, but didn't look at Drake, who gasped at the news. Instead, he leaned even closer to the screen.

"Who is she?"

Miles adjusted his glasses, cleared his throat, and swallowed hard. "It's Mae, sir."

Upon hearing his wife's name, Harrison recoiled back from the screen as if electrocuted. He slapped back into his chair. His hands, having gone limp, fell into his lap. His ears rang, his blood turned to ice, the air sucked out of his lungs as his throat clinched. He couldn't inhale, couldn't catch his breath.

Feeling the future of the entire human race crash upon his shoulders, he slumped down, his spine pulverized by the immense weight of expectation. An expectation that very well might not include a future with Mae in it.

## Part 4–Almost Everyone Onboard

The two other men remained silent giving Harrison the space he needed to rebound in his own time. Fighting back the buzz of emotion, Harrison compartmentalized and shifted his focus to paring things down into smaller portions.

After several minutes, Harrison stiffened. "Miles, please send your findings to me electronically using the standard encryption protocol. Then, I need you to determine whether the

sterility of the Gen 3s was because of an external issue or inherited. I also want you to check to be sure the embryos in cold storage remain viable. We will connect again once we have a plan in place or you have your findings."

"Yes, sir," Miles replied.

Harrison disconnected the feed.

"So, to summarize," Harrison said, "One. As far as we know, war destroyed our home world and humanity. Two. The occupants of this vessel represent the last human beings in the known universe. Three. The current generation that was supposed to give birth to the generation destined to reach our new home is sterile. And finally, the only person onboard that has a fifty-fifty chance of successfully carrying the emergency embryos to term is none other than my wife."

"Yep, that about sums it up," Drake replied.

Harrison appreciated the attempt, however weak, to lighten the heaviness of their predicament.

"Okay, let's break this thing down and get a plan together."

Drake nodded his head. "Nothing a little deviation from standard operating procedure can't cure."

"I want you to take over trying to reestablish communication with Mission Control or anyone else back home. There must be an orbiting space station or something of that nature. Use all bands, all frequencies. Anything you can think of. I've performed multiple diagnostics on our comms, so save yourself the hassle."

"Yep, got it."

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“I’ll worry about the fourth problem and talk to Mae. While waiting for answers from Miles pertaining to the third problem, I’ll dust off the process and procedure manual and see if there’s anything in there that may touch on the scenario we’re facing.”

“I dunno,” Drake said. “I can’t recall reading anything that touched on something like this.”

“Me either, but it’s been years since I’ve read anything from it, so you never know. I need you to head out and do your rounds at all duty stations. Act like everything is normal. Let’s plan on not meeting again until our next scheduled briefing at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow. Unless it’s critical or an emergency, let’s save it until then.”

Getting up, Drake straightened his jacket. “Very good. Good luck…” he didn’t finish but let the sentence hang.

“Drake, regardless of what’s going on, despite whatever challenges we’re facing, from this point on, we’re friends first. Harrison is fine. No need for formality when it’s just us.”

Drake’s shoulders relaxed, and he exhaled. “Got it. Thanks, Harrison.”

After leaving, Harrison settled back into his high-backed chair and allowed himself to slump into it. Alone in his quarters, the cacophony of his thoughts juxtaposed against the silence unnerved him. Why did it have to be Mae?

While mission parameters had laid out who he was to marry and have children with, he was so grateful she’d been the one. He knew she felt the same way. Not all couples aboard were genuinely in love with one another. Still, having to tell her she was the singular hope for the continuation of humanity was a conversation he could not yet fathom.

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Pushing those thoughts aside, he typed his password into his secure computer, independent from the ship's mainframe. He next went through multiple layers of verification before he could get to the main screen. Once there, he pulled up the mission protocol manual.

Staring at the table of contents, Harrison realized how long it had been since he'd had to consult it. Because this was a unique situation, instead of looking at every line item, Harrison instead pulled up the drill-down search feature of the manual.

He first typed in 'Mission Critical Scenarios'.

The computer displayed a single box with the instruction, 'In as much detail as possible, describe critical scenario.'

Harrison typed out, 'Loss of contact with mission control. Believe war has destroyed home planet and humanity. Generation 3 children are sterile and cannot conceive a fourth and final generation.'

He paused, not wanting to type the next part, steeled himself and finished. 'Of the Gen 2 crew, based on age and health parameters only one has a fifty percent chance of successful implantation of the emergency embryos, pregnancy, and birth. However, from an operational standpoint, she is well outside of mission parameters.'

He reread his entry, pushed enter and waited. Usually, the computer could crunch the data and spit out mission guidelines in less than a second. One second passed, then two. Then five.

Ten seconds passed before the computer displayed, 'Top Secret Alpha protocol now in effect.'

Top secret alpha? Harrison thought. He'd never seen or viewed this level of security. After 10 minutes of secret code entry, retinal scans, and the computer accessing the onboard

CCTV system to ensure Harrison was who he said he was, not under duress, and truly alone, the screen showed a timer that started at five seconds and counted down from there.

Once it reached zero, the screen went black and only then were the mission guidelines displayed. Harrison could see they comprised only three quarters of the page. Word by word, line by line, he read.

When he reached the next-to-last sentence, he recoiled back in his chair, eyes wide with shock, mouth agape with disbelief. Upon reading the final sentence, he shot up from the chair. He stood wavering. Unable to find his equilibrium, he fell to his knees.

How can I? he wondered. How can they expect me to murder almost everyone on board?

### Part 5–Bigger Than Life Itself

Although the personal quarters assigned to a commander were no different in terms of size or layout, the one advantage of being in charge was that it offered a secured door and private passageway that cordoned it off from the rest of the living quarters.

As Harrison walked past the doors on his way to that boundary, he felt the obligation to carry out his orders warring with his training to do his utmost to protect the crew and keep them safe.

He knew each and every door and almost everything about those who lived on the other side of them. Jones, Smith, Bradling, Rowe, and Conner. The details of each family he could enumerate and they knew almost as much about him and his family. Almost. Harrison and Mae had been there for each birth, saw the joy in every one of their eyes as their little one came into the world composed of this one ship hurtling toward destiny. Saw them glow with pride knowing their child was now a part of history just as they were.

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The memories, not only of the births, but of birthday parties, adult get-togethers and the multitude of casual conversations over quiet dinners, directly opposed the orders he'd read from the mission guidelines less than an hour ago. If only they knew the orders to plan, and then carry out their 'retirement'.

Until hours ago, inculcating an environment of collaboration and of family was tantamount. Not only of the individual bloodlines, but how those bloodlines played a critical role as part of the greater ship-wide community. The inner confines of the ship were all any of them had ever known. While mission success was the goal, the only way to achieve that goal was through a powerful sense of connection, passed down from generation to generation.

Reaching the secured door at the end of the passageway, he paused before placing his hand on the reader plate. He needed to gather himself for the upcoming challenge. It was now time to think about his own family.

Taking a deep breath, he placed his hand on the plate scanner. The door slid open, and he entered his private hallway. Walking in, the aroma of vegetable soup permeated the air. He stopped and inhaled, wanting to capture the warm feeling of home, taking it deep into his lungs. Nobody was in the living room, but light and sound came from the kitchen and dining area. Like a moth to a flame, he felt himself pulled, despite the inner resistance holding him back.

He came to the opening, still undetected, and captured the scene in front of him. Mae stood at the counter, her back facing him. Her long brunette hair flowed in waves down her neck. At the small round table, his son, Kai, sat hunched over a book.

Despite the terrible knowledge locked inside his skull, knowing the painful truths pulling at his heart, looking at his family now, he felt the love he held so dear deepen. He inhaled once more. He vowed to savor every moment he had left.

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"Hi guys," Harrison said, careful to keep the volume of his voice low.

It didn't work. Startled, Mae jumped and spun around, her brown eyes wide with fright. Kai didn't flinch, raising a hand in his general direction and saying, "Hi Dad."

"Sorry," Harrison said. "Didn't mean to startle you. We really need to get a bell, and I'll wear it around my neck as soon as I get home."

Recovering quickly, Mae put down the spoon she'd been stirring the vegetable soup with and walked toward him, a warm smile replacing the look of shock on her face.

"No husband of mine will walk around wearing a bell."

"No? No bell?"

Now standing in front of him, Mae tilted her head up, eyes beaming. "No."

Smiling, Harrison bent down to kiss her. He tried to keep his emotions in check. Mae could detect any aberration within him immediately.

She came away from the kiss, looked up at him and said, "What is it?"

"Tough day."

That was the code phrase that told her it would have to wait until Kai had gone to bed.

"I'm starving. Although I didn't know it until I walked in the door, I'm famished for some veggie soup."

Knowing not to push, Mae nodded her head in understanding. "Good," she said. "You came to the right place. It just so happens that's what I have ready."

Harrison acknowledged that the information he carried in his head was skewing his perception, but he didn't care. He savored every spoonful of soup, all of his senses attuned to the present. He stared at Kai. Instead of focusing on the fact that he was sterile, he took in every detail as Kai talked about his day.

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After dinner, all helped with the dishes, and then played a game before it was time for Kai to head to bed. Harrison and Mae changed into their pajamas in silence. Mae had noticed Harrison acting differently, and although being fully in the present was a good thing, it was the reason behind it that had her worried.

Once settled on the couch, Mae's curiosity boiled over. "Alright," she said. "What's going on? What's wrong?"

Instead of trying to soften the blow, knowing she could handle it, Harrison replied, "Kai and all the other children aboard are sterile."

It was a brutal statement, and Harrison allowed her the space to assimilate the information.

She was quiet for several seconds, stunned by the news before finally asking, "Are you sure? How?"

"Dr. Bennet confirmed it during the usual tests that all generations undergo. He's double and triple confirmed the results. As of now, we don't know the cause."

"So, the mission, what does this mean? What does mission control have to say?"

"Yes, Kai's children would be the generation to arrive and colonize. Obviously, that will no longer happen. As far as mission control," he paused, "I haven't reported it."

Mae got up from the couch and paced. Her nervous energy electrified the room.

Leaving her be for a few moments, Harrison finally said, "Mae, sit down here next to me."

She did. He took her hand, relishing the softness and smoothness of her skin. "Mae, what I'm about to tell you is beyond top secret. I know I can trust you, and by me saying that does not imply in the slightest that I think you'll run off and blab the news, but what I'm about to

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reveal is," he trailed off looking for the right words, "difficult not to be affected by so that those close to you will detect something is amiss."

Harrison could see a veneer of fear layered on top of the uncertainty in her eyes. He squeezed her hand in reassurance.

"I don't want to know then," she said.

"I wish it were that easy, and believe me, if I had another option, I wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation."

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath before opening them again. The fear and uncertainty were still there, but she'd added a thin sheen of resolve.

"That's my girl," he said. "Truth is, I haven't reported this to mission control because I have every reason to believe mission control and the rest of humanity no longer exist. I received a secure message simply stating that war had started before the message cut off, and I can't reestablish communication back home. Drake's working on trying to contact alternate sources, but all channels and frequencies have, to this point, garnered nothing."

As he spoke, each word ratcheted Mae's grip tighter and tighter.

"So, all of us…"

Harrison said nothing to help or fill in the incomplete statement. It was vital she finish her thought.

Her hands released their grip on his, and he had to hold hers to keep them from falling into her lap.

"We're all that's left? But with Kai and the rest of the children sterile, we're doomed. Not only you and me and Kai and all the rest of the poor families on board, but humanity. We're doomed. That's it."

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Tears pooled in her eyes, then fell down her cheeks.

"There is one hope," Harrison whispered.

She sat unblinking for several seconds. Harrison thought perhaps she hadn't heard him and was going to repeat himself.

Still staring into nothingness, dazed, Mae asked, "Yeah? What's the one hope?"

"You."

Mae stared at him, exasperation shrouding her fear. "Sure. Me?"

Harrison sat staring at her, his eyes serious, unwavering, penetrating. Despite the insanity of what he'd just said, she knew he was serious.

"Me," she repeated.

Harrison was stone silent.

"How? Why?"

"According to Dr. Bennet, you have the best statistical odds of a successful implantation of the emergency embryos and then carrying them to term."

She looked around the room, looking at everything, seeing nothing. Lost, she tried to find something, anything, that would ground her to what she knew.

Harrison gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I know it's a lot to take in."

She looked at him again. "When?"

"I don't know. We're still gathering information. The only people who know besides us are Dr. Bennet and Drake. Until we have more information, we've got to keep a tight lid on this."

"What will happen to Kai and the rest of the children?"

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Harrison had prepped for this question. Still, keeping his face passive took every ounce of energy he had.

"Uncertain. Again, until Dr. Bennet has more information and Drake and I are briefed tomorrow morning, I'm keeping all options on the table."

While not a lie, he didn't want to tell her the whole truth either. Until he knew the exact course of action, he wanted to keep her focused on the information that was certain. There was enough to worry about without adding to it unnecessarily.

"For now, we're going to take this one hour at a time. Once I have my briefing tomorrow morning, I should know more. As soon as I do, I'll be sure to share with you. Until then, let's just enjoy this moment."

Still perturbed, Mae snuggled into him, her head resting on his shoulder. Harrison wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. They sat back on the couch and remained still. Harrison counted her breaths until they became calm and even.

In the stillness of the moment, with her nestled in, even the enormity of all that had transpired dissolved. Harrison allowed himself to be carried away by the grace and tranquility that comes with sharing his life, however tenuous, which had become bigger than life itself.

## Part 6–Academic to Practical

"He's late," Drake lamented.

Harrison glanced at the clock inset on the wall opposite his place at the head of the small conference room table.

"Only by a minute, he'll be here," Harrison said.

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Moments later, the door slid open, and Miles walked in carrying a notepad. “Sorry, I’m late,” he said, taking a seat to Harrison's left and opposite Drake.

“You’re fine,” Harrison said, looking him over. He looked exhausted and frazzled. His hair was oily, and the eyes behind the streaked lenses of his glasses were bloodshot and tired. “Have you managed to get any sleep?”

Miles looked over the top of his glasses at Harrison. “Surely you jest,” he replied. “No, I’ve not slept. How could I?”

“When we’re done here, you are to report to your quarters. I’m ordering you to take a sleep aid and get at least 12 hours of rest. That is a direct order. As much as I appreciate your efforts, the last thing we need at this point is an avoidable error. Do I make myself clear, doctor?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Any news?”

“Not much, I’m afraid. While I don’t have an exact cause, the sterility issue must’ve been external. I reviewed all the tests that were run for the gen 2s, and there were no mitochondrial errors detected, which you would expect if the next generation were to have an issue. No mutations, no coding errors, nothing.”

“So, you’ve ruled out heredity as the cause?” Harrison asked.

“While I cannot offer a definitive conclusion, statistically, it's nearly impossible for no errors to be found in any Gen 2s and every single Gen 3 to be suddenly sterile.”

“What about radiation?” Drake asked.

“While that would be the most likely source, the ship is heavily shielded. In addition, we have sensitive detectors that would’ve picked up something.”

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The three men sat in silence for a moment.

“Is it possible,” Harrison wondered, “the ship traveled through a wave of radiation so intense the sensors didn’t record it? If the rads were so high, could it have short-circuited the sensors entirely?”

Miles was quiet, thinking through the question before answering. “Possible, but not probable. If that were the case, I would think we’d have received some kind of error message or failure alert. Then again, I’m not the expert on the ship's systems.”

Harrison glanced at Drake. “Run a historical diagnostic.”

Drake began typing out instructions on the tabletop screen. While Drake was busy with the diagnostic, Harrison asked, “Since the likely cause of sterility is external, what are the chances the Gen 2 embryos are damaged?”

Looking up from his notes, a tired smile creased Miles' face. “Finally, some good news. I successfully tested the two embryos, and neither has any mitochondrial issues. The cryo tanks have their own lead lining, so if radiation is indeed the culprit, they had the benefit of added protection.”

“So, the thread of humanity remains intact,” Harrison whispered.

“Indeed,” Miles said. “It goes without saying, I’ll need to do a full workup of your wife, Commander.”

“Yes, about that...”

“Got it!” Drake said, cutting off Harrison. “Found it. You were right on the money, skipper. While I cannot tell at this early stage, it seems we suffered a high radiation spike some time ago, which saturated our sensors. They could not recover between pulses, which caused artificially low readings, which therefore didn’t trip any alarms.”

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“Did you self-test?” Harrison asked.

“Yes, sir. I hit the test chamber with 6 grays of radiation, which would cause sterility in both males and females, and the test sensor only picked up 1.7 grays.”

“There you go,” Miles said. “Confirmed. We have our answer.”

“Yes,” Harrison said. “Drake, I want you to take the lead on the forensic analysis of the event. Not that we can put the toothpaste back in the tube, but I want to know how long ago this happened. If it was quite a while ago and Mae is still healthy, I’ll feel a lot better about our chances than if this were a recent event.”

“I agree,” Miles said. “From reviewing all her medical files, everything appeared normal during her last physical, which was only a few months ago. That’s encouraging.”

“If she is in top physical shape,” Harrison asked, “what are the probability calculations of successful implantation, pregnancy and birth?”

Miles flipped through his notepad looking for the page. “Yes, here they are. Should she check out, and to your earlier point, should the radiation event be older, I’m confident in saying a successful implantation of around 80%. We’ll be able to perform a human chorionic gonadotropin test soon after to confirm pregnancy. However, her chances of successfully carrying them to term remain below minimum standards.”

“And should that happen, it’s a normal pregnancy from that point forward?”

“Yes.”

Harrison sat back. He couldn’t help but think back to the mission guidelines that he’d read yesterday. Thoughts moved like a specter through the dark troughs of his mind.

“Doctor, before I continue, I need to emphasize the level of security here and what’s at stake. While I cannot disclose why I may be asking certain questions, it’s imperative the answers

you provide are not biased. Additionally, please resist the urge to jump to conclusions that might otherwise be natural based only on the questions I ask. Do you understand?"

Both Miles and Drake looked at Harrison. It took several moments for Miles to acknowledge he understood the directive.

"Now then, while I know you're well versed in cryogenic freezing of embryos, how familiar are you with performing the same procedure with adults?"

The fatigue that had creased Miles' face pulled it taut in shock and surprise at the question.

"Adults?"

"Yes, adults."

Miles snapped his head toward Drake. Although more constrained, he could tell the question had affected him just as much, but he knew better than to say anything.

Turning back to face Harrison, he said, "Well, I'm as familiar as any geneticist regarding the freezing of embryos, but all the advancements of cryogenic freezing or hibernation made in the last 180 years has only been through articles and papers I've read about back home. Obviously, I have no real-world experience. All the knowledge I have is academic at best."

"And if ordered, is this ship capable of performing cryogenic hibernation of an adult?"

"Sir, if I may," Drake said. Harrison cut him off with a raised hand.

"Miles, please. Is the ship capable?"

Miles' head swam. Although the commander had asked him not to, it was impossible not to draw the obvious conclusion.

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“The short answer is yes, it’s possible. But I don’t know how that will affect both Mae and, if the pregnancy should be a success, how that would affect the fetus or fetuses. That has never been done.”

Harrison leaned forward, laser focused and asked, “But is it possible?”

“Yes, sir. Technically speaking. But again, all my knowledge is purely academic.”

Unblinking, Harrison leaned more onto the table. “Well, Miles, after your ordered rest period, I urge you to begin converting the academic to the practical.”

### Part 7–A Good Pot of Tea

Moments after Miles’s dismissal, Harrison sat back in his chair. Drake leaned forward, resting his arms on the tabletop. “Well, that sure was an interesting line of questions. Do you mind telling me what that was all about?”

Harrison leaned back, reached down and retrieved the briefcase he’d brought with him. Once he entered his passkey and pressed his thumbs against the reader plates, he opened the case, and pulled out the mission guidelines he’d written from memory yesterday.

“Here,” he said, passing the document to Drake. “Some light reading taken from the mission guidelines I read yesterday.”

Harrison sat back and watched as Drake read through it, observing his eyes moving back and forth across the page. When he was about three-quarters through, the page in his hands shook just as they’d done the day before. After he finished reading, Drake threw the paper toward Harrison as if it were laced with poison.

Shaking his head, Drake said, “I can’t believe mission guidelines dictate we retire the crew.”

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Harrison nodded his head in agreement. “I know. I was just as horrified as you. However,…”

“However?” Drake cut in. “Don’t tell me you’re planning to go through with it?”

“Let me finish. After thinking about it overnight, I see the logic behind it. If the news leaks that all Gen 3s are sterile and the mission is doomed to fail, the entire crew will no longer have any purpose. As you worried about yesterday, the entire ship may fall into complete chaos, and we could lose our ability to govern with no way to regain order.”

Harrison let the harsh reality soak in for a moment, then continued. “With no order, with no purpose, it’s more likely we would eliminate ourselves. Look no further than back home. Despite all the technology and advancements, we still managed to annihilate ourselves.”

The room fell into silence, each man submerged in his own thoughts.

“What about Mae?” Drake asked.

“I’ve talked to her. Told her everything except the part you just read. We’re the only two at this time with that knowledge. And until you and I agree upon a plan, it’ll stay that way.”

Drake nodded his head.

“This is what I propose,” Harrison said. “I believe Miles will figure out a way to put Mae into cryogenic hibernation. Once he does, we gather the entire ship’s company and we tell them the truth.”

What little color had returned to Drake's face flushed once again. “You can’t be serious.”

Harrison nodded his head. “I am serious. First, technically speaking, mission guidelines are just that. Guidelines. They’re not orders. Sure, we’ve lived our lives following orders handed down to us from our parents, and through that long lineage of military life, we’re accustomed to following orders. But these are not orders, Drake. They’re guidelines. Besides,

what's going to happen even if they were orders? There's nobody back home. We're it. This is it."

Drake slowly sat back into his chair. He intertwined his fingers and let his hands rest on the tabletop.

"Second," Harrison continued, "everybody needs a purpose. We just need to change that purpose. Instead of raising their own children to have children, the entire crew's new purpose will be to support this last chance to keep humanity from extinction. It's going to take the entire crew to be successful. This cannot be done with just you, me and Miles running around in top secret mode."

Drake began to understand where Harrison was coming from, saw the wisdom in his thinking. Instead of desperation, he felt a twinge of hope.

"So, what are the next steps?"

"I'm glad you asked," Harrison said. "Why don't you get some tea going. We're going to be here for a long time. I've got a plan that might work, and we're not leaving until we work out the details."

Without a word, Drake got up and walked toward the small alcove set into the far wall. Harrison watched as his second in command, at least for the time being, filled the carafe with water.

Although it was only yesterday, Harrison reflected, it seemed a lifetime ago when things had been normal. Yet, despite the cataclysmic news threatening humankind, Harrison felt the fatigue melting away. It's amazing, he thought, what good family, good friends, good colleagues, a good plan and a good pot of tea can do to stave off despair.

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## Part 8-Provide the Best for All

The stage in the auditorium was stripped bare, with only a lone lectern standing near the front. Although it was the largest single room aboard, it was packed to the gills, the din of anxious conversation filling the air. As long as anybody could remember, there had never been a mandatory, all-hands town hall meeting.

Standing at the back of the stage, Harrison, Drake and Miles stood looking out over the crowd that had filled every seat.

"You sure you want to go through with this without a small security detail?" Drake asked. "I mean, if this doesn't go well and we lose this crowd, we won't stand a chance."

Harrison, eyes locked on the crowd, smiled. "We can't ask for cooperation and passivity with a show of force now, can we? Have faith, my friend. We know these people. We need to believe."

Miles shifted nervously from one foot to the other, trying to keep his lunch in his stomach. "Public speaking is not my thing," he said.

"Don't worry," Harrison said. "If anybody has a question I'm unable to answer, I'll turn to you. You give me the answer, and I'll relay it to the crowd."

Miles smiled a weak smile.

"Okay, here we go," Harrison said.

Although still not convinced this was the right move, Drake followed his orders and gave the signal for the house lights to be turned down. He then turned on the power pack for Harrison's lapel mic.

"You're on," he whispered.

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Harrison gave his uniform a tug and stepped forward, the heels of his dress shoes clacking as he made his way to the lectern. The din of conversation hushed. Once at the lectern, he paused and looked out over the packed auditorium, knowing this group was the last tidal pool of human life in the vast ocean of the cosmos. He smiled, calmed his mind and began.

"Hope. Love. Community. These are the three foundational pillars on which this mission has been built. Hope. Love. Community. These are not just words. These three things are alive inside each and every one of us. They breathe. They have spirit. They motivate and inspire. They demand the best of us, so that we may provide the best for all."

He paused, making eye contact with as many as he could.

"But hope, love and community also have enemies. Despair. Hatred. Individuality. They want to snuff out and destroy. They are self-seeking and toxic.

And what pits these two opposing forces into battle? Adversity. Adversity is the catalyst that sparks a reaction. When adversity befalls us, how will you react? How will we react? Will we rely on hope, love and community or instead will we lean toward despair, hatred and individuality?

I say these things, my dear friends, because we face adversity far greater than any of you can imagine. My standing here before you is my first act of hope, love and community. My standing here before you, in defiance of orders and mission guidelines, is my reaction to adversity, and, as you'll soon learn, I will entreat each one of you to make the conscious choice to follow that same course of action."

He paused, wanting to give the crowd a moment to take in what he'd said, to let it marinate for a few seconds before revealing the hard truths.

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"All of you are wondering, 'What is this adversity'? The adversity is twofold. One, we believe there is a strong probability war has destroyed our home world. I received a message several days ago from mission control stating that fact. The message cut off, and we've not been able to reestablish communications with anybody since. It is therefore likely that all of us in this room represent the last of the human race."

A wave of murmurs and gasps rolled through the auditorium.

Quelling it before it grew, Harrison held up his hand. "Please, there's more."

The crowd fell into a hush that, to Harrison, felt more like a vacuum than anticipation.

"In addition, we've recently discovered we passed through an abnormally high wave of radiation several years ago and remained in this wave for a protracted period of time. The radiation was so high it penetrated our shielding and, unfortunately, rendered our alarms useless. Because of this protracted exposure, the current generation is now sterile."

Gasps and cries mixed with groans of anguish rose from the aisles. Harrison felt the pall of dread fall like a heavy curtain over the entire crowd.

Not wanting them to wallow, he spoke loudly into the microphone and said, "Do not despair, friends. Not all is lost. We have a plan. We have hope."

The crowd settled, but only marginally.

"Friends, please. All I ask is to listen. Just listen."

The crowd settled down, Harrison once more had the floor.

"There will be no decisions made tonight. No orders. Although I am the commander of this vessel and of this mission, from this point forward, we decide as a united group. As such, I will lay out our plan on how this mission as well as humanity as a species can succeed. But we'll need each other. After tonight, each of you will go back to your quarters and discuss within

your own families. Afterward, and from here on out, my door will always be open to answer any questions you may have."

With all eyes riveted on him, knowing they were at least interested in hearing what he had to say, he knew he'd been right. They would not turn on him and each other. He smiled.

"Remember," he reiterated, "Hope. Love. Community. These are not just words. These three things are alive inside each and every one of us. They breathe. They have spirit. They motivate and inspire. They demand the best of us, so that we may provide the best for all."

Thirty minutes later, the speech concluded, Harrison made his way back to where Miles and Drake stood.

"I wouldn't have believed it," Drake said. "You were right."

Placing his hand on Drake's shoulder, he looked his friend in the eyes and replied, "Deep down, you knew."

The glint in Drake's eye told Harrison all he needed to know. His friend, his second in command, would be ready when the time came.

"Drake, when your command begins, please adhere to what was said tonight. Regardless of the adversity, if you lead with hope, love and community, we're going to be just fine."

Drake nodded his head in acknowledgment, then said, "They demand the best of us, so we may provide the best for all."

## Part 9–Anything is Possible

Despite looking every bit 9 months pregnant, Mae waddled into the lab with confidence. Although she didn't understand the nuance or functionality of the various machines and apparatuses, she'd had a hand in the look and feel of the lab. Instead of the typical minimalist

approach, Mae had painted the walls, hung art where possible, and even had laid a small area rug at the base of her hibernation chamber giving the space a more, what she'd described as a 'homey' feel.

Standing next to the chamber, Harrison watched her with a keen eye, happy and proud to see the confidence on her face. Seeing that, he knew she was in a good headspace. Breathing a sigh of relief, the pendulum of doubt swung back toward the possible.

It'd been a hard road to get to this point, he reflected. And now that the moment had arrived, he felt good.

Laying one hand on the hibernation chamber's lid, she asked, "You sure you know how to drive this thing?" She then rubbed her protruding belly. "You're got quite a valuable cargo here."

Harrison smiled. "Don't you worry. I'm as ready as you are. Besides, Miles will look over my shoulder every step of the way."

She returned his smile, but Harrison saw a hint of trepidation pulling at the corners of her mouth. He'd thought of this moment every day since the implantation procedure, wondering what he could say at such a critical juncture, and now here it was. Like every other day, he hadn't found the words.

Instead, he reached out and grabbed her hand, pulled her to him, and embraced her. He held her in silence, pouring his emotions into the embrace, pouring his soul through his hand running up and down her back.

They stood in the stillness of each other's arms, reliving the memories of a life already lived, as well as imagining the life that was to come.

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Several minutes later, knowing it was time, they separated. Miles entered, Mae climbed into the chamber, and after affixing various sensors and making sure everything was ready, he turned to leave.

He had taken two steps when Mae called after him.

"Yes," he said, turning around to face her.

"Thank you, Miles. For everything," she said.

He smiled a thin smile. "No, thank you, Mae."

With a flip of her head toward Harrison, she said, "Now please make sure he doesn't wreck this thing."

Despite the enormity of the moment, all three chuckled. "No ma'am. I'll be right there."

With that, Miles gave her a reassuring nod, then turned to leave.

Not wanting to delay any further, Harrison bent over and kissed her on the forehead. "You get some good, careful sleep. No shenanigans, no ballyhoo."

He pushed the button, and the lid of the chamber slid closed. Once the lights turned green, showing the pressure seal had engaged, he put his hand on top of the clear lid and mouthed, "I love you."

She smiled and mouthed 'I love you too'.

Instead of turning his back to her, Harrison walked backward toward the control room until she was out of the line of sight. Once in the control room, he was all business. He looked over all the instrumentation. Even though her pulse rate and respirations were high, they were within parameters.

"Doc. How do your instruments look?"

"Everything is green. Good to go."

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It had all come down to this. Once he clicked the initiate button, releasing the gas into the hibernation chamber, there was no going back. The entirety of mankind's past, as well as every future outcome, was riding on so many things going just right. Once more, Harrison was at a loss for words. The moment was just too big.

Without a word, he engaged the sleep sequence and turned his attention to the CCTV as the odorless gas discharged into the chamber. He watched Mae's eyes. He could see they were feeling heavy, and her fighting it. Finally, they closed. Her respirations evened out, and her pulse rate dropped until she was deep in slumber.

"Okay, Miles, she's all yours. Initiate cryogenic process."

Two hours later, Harrison looked over all the instruments, satisfied Mae had successfully entered stable cryogenic hibernation.

"Well done, Miles. Thank you for taking good care of her."

"It was an honor making history with you, sir."

Looking one last time at the monitors and instruments, Harrison gave a final nod of approval and only then did he turn his back on Mae. As he walked out of the hibernation labs control room, he acknowledged they'd cleared the first of many hurdles, but remained apprehensive they would have as much success with clearing the multiple hurdles that remained.

Still, there was a glimmer of hope.

And if there was anything the last 9 months had taught him, it was no matter how bleak the forecast, despite the darkest of fears, regardless of how long the odds may be, as long as the human spirit had hope, anything is possible.

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## Part 10–Near at Hand

A voice far off called out.

Although the voice was familiar, it was too far away to understand. In the ensuing silence, Harrison felt the blackness pull him back toward the serenity of stillness.

The voice called out again, this time closer, louder, but still indiscernible.

Once more the blackness tugged at his consciousness, but with less effort.

The voice called again. This time, Harrison recognized it as his personal AI assistant, Lacy.

"Sir, you're coming out of hibernation. Please remain still."

The silence and darkness turned to gray.

"Sir, you're coming out of hibernation. Please remain still," Lacy repeated.

Harrison wondered how long this had been looping.

The darkness released its grip and fell away. The gray light morphed to dull white.

"Sir, you're coming out of hibernation. Please remain still."

Harrison wanted to answer that he was awake, but he couldn't move his mouth. He wanted to open his eyes, but he couldn't.

"Sir, your vitals are coming online. I know you can hear me. You're unable to speak or open your eyes. Please be patient. The initial wake cycle will take several hours. Please remain still. We've successfully arrived at our destination. All ship systems are nominal."

Here they were. Lacy said they'd arrived. The ship's navigation and AI systems, designed and programmed with help from Miles and Drake, had successfully gotten them to their destination. They'd not only survived entry, but the programmed 112 years in cryogenic hibernation it took to get here. They'd pulled off miracle after miracle. The only miracle

remaining was Mae and the son and daughter of mankind surviving the wake cycle, then birth, to get humankind back to ground zero.

As Lacy had instructed, Harrison was content being patient. Besides, when compared to the 112 years he'd just survived, what difference was a few more weeks? The rebirth of humanity was near at hand.

### Part 11-Fade to Black

Leaning back in the galley's plush chair, Harrison rubbed his stomach, a tight grin creasing his face.

"Thank you for making supper." Mae said.

"One thing is certain," Harrison replied. "It was not nearly as good as yours."

"I don't know. Kai seems to like your butternut squash soup, wouldn't you agree, Kai?"

Kai, still hunched over his bowl, mumbled an affirmation, not stopping as he slurped spoonful after spoonful.

"Let's not get too excited. He's of the age that I could've put synthetic meat product in front of him and he'd devour it. Especially after a long hibernation sleep."

"Well, I'm just glad we're well stocked," Mae said. "Looking through the provision inventory, the crew…" she stopped talking, looked down at her napkin, ran her fingers along the edge, sadness coming over her face.

Harrison leaned forward and lightly set his hand atop hers.

"It's okay to be sad," he said. "And you're right, the crew did nothing less than an exemplary job ensuring we'd have every chance of success."

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Kai put his spoon down. “It's weird being on this big ship all alone. It’s weird not having anybody around.”

Turning toward his son, Harrison said, “Yeah, I know. I feel the same way. But when you think about it, they’re still around. You just need to know where to look.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“Well, take Mom’s observation of the provision inventory. While we were sleeping, it would’ve been easy for the crew to have eaten all the good stuff. Instead, it’s clear they rationed out the stores and kept the gardens going so we’d have the best of the lot. That’s their fingerprint. That’s how you can see them. Maybe not directly, but in the things they did and left behind.”

Kai looked at his father, his head tilted to the side with a bit of skepticism.

“You can also see it in the ship's condition itself. You can tell they spent their last days doing all they could to ensure the ship was in tip-top shape. They did everything to make sure not only we made it to our destination, but made sure all was in order so we could focus on the mission.”

“Besides,” Mae cut in, “the way we honor their sacrifice is by doing all we can to make sure the mission is a success.”

“That’s right,” Harrison said. “Tomorrow we’ll leave the ship and, for the first time in human history, we’ll set foot on another world. For the first time, all of us will know a world beyond what’s contained inside this ship. They made that happen, Kai. They live on because we live on.”

Satisfied, Kai nodded his head. “I understand.”

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Harrison smiled. “Besides, I have something special. Drake and Dr. Miles put together a little something for us to watch on the vid-screens.”

Both Kai and Mae smiled.

“Now let’s all get the leftovers stored, do up the dishes and see what those two have in store for us.”

It took less than an hour for them to put the leftovers away and get the dishes done. While Harrison and Kai got the vid-screens loaded up.

“Okay,” Harrison said as they all settled in on the couch. “We’re ready.”

He engaged the vid-screens and there, in crisp resolution, were the smiling faces of Drake and Miles, both aged considerably. While still neatly groomed, Drake’s hair was silver. What little hair Miles had left was standing out in all directions as if he were a conduit of static electricity.

“If you’re watching this,” Drake’s voice came from the speaker, “it means we’ve beaten all the odds and you’ve made it safe and sound.”

Upon seeing his best friend, Harrison felt a lump in his throat. It was so good to see him, but knowing he’d only have this video, his advice he’d given Kai a short time ago seemed pitifully weak.

“And if we’ve beaten those odds,” Miles said next, “we hope Mae has successfully given birth to a healthy boy and a healthy girl.”

“I have,” Mae whispered, unable to hold back the tears streaming down her cheek. “Thanks to you.”

“Total mission elapsed time,” Drake said, “Generation 3, Year 64, Day 192. As a bit of an update, most of the Gen 2 crew, having successfully done their part, have all retired and are

now worlds unto themselves. There are only four of us Gen 2s left. Myself, Miles, the mother of embryo alpha and the mother of embryo beta. The youngest Gen 3 crew member is 52. We've made the necessary arrangements for the last one to be auto jettisoned after retirement so the Kairos will be all yours."

For the next hour and a half, the three sat transfixed as Drake and Miles explained all that had transpired while they'd slept. Drake, having inherited the commander role, had gone above and beyond expectation, while Miles had worked tirelessly to ensure the non-military aboard supported the mission to their fullest extent.

Harrison, Mae and Kai wept. Although their friends' work and sacrifice were evident everywhere, it was beyond comprehension how thorough and meticulous each and every one of them had been.

"We'd like to conclude this video," Drake said, "with these final words. We never reestablished communication with anybody at any time."

"Statistically speaking," Miles cut in, "the five of you are the last remaining humans in the known universe."

"That said," Drake continued, "the prophesies contained in the Book of Lineage do not speak of a remnant. It is therefore vital you instill in the new iteration of mankind the lessons we've learned the hard way in order to avoid certain extinction. Last but certainly not least, demand the best of yourselves, so you may provide the best for all."

With that, the screen faded to black.

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## Part 12–A New World

Even if the view from the airlock's small porthole was limited, a lush and verdant world spread out before them as far as they could see. The inside of the Kairos was all they'd ever known, and although equipped with entire decks dedicated to greenhouses and agriculture, Mae, Harrison, and Kai marveled at the view outside. In their wildest imaginings, they could not have dreamed of a more beautiful landscape. Although their suite of space-bound telescopes had sent impressive photos of this planet and picked it out of the several contenders based on the chemical analysis of its atmosphere, they lacked the detail of the overwhelming, yet strange and alien beauty.

The sound of the newborns tore their gaze from the view outside. Harrison and Mae looked at the small bundles wrapped in their arms.

"Before we go out," Harrison said, "there is the matter of these two."

Mae nodded. "Having read the Book of Lineage before hibernation, I know."

"Although a little rusty on the details," Harrison admitted, "I read it as well. Besides the continuation of mankind, like Drake and Miles warned yesterday, it's imperative we instill the teachings of the book to avoid repeating what happened on our home world. Therefore, we must ensure they bridge mankind's violent past to its bright future that lies on the other side of the hatch."

Mae and Kai nodded their heads in understanding.

"As the first ever to land on this planet," Kai said, "we get to stake claim to the naming rights, correct?"

"Correct," Harrison replied.

"Do you have something in mind?" Mae asked.

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Harrison nodded. “As of this moment, I am resetting our mission timers. We are now Total Mission Elapsed Time: Generation 4, Year 0, Day 0. Are you ready to set foot onto our new home?”

“Yes,” both answered.

Harrison reached out and put his palm against the reader plate next to the ship's hatch. As he did, he caught sight of a single mote of dust floating in the shaft of light spilling through the porthole. He paused, watching it float in the invisible current of air. Such a tiny thing in such an enormous space. A mote amid the stars, he thought. That was how small and fragile life really is, and yet, with hope and love, mankind would survive and continue.

The door opened and a breeze, the first they’d felt not pushed through air handlers, tussled their hair. They looked at each other and smiled. Having overcome the enormous odds, they were about to do what no other humans had ever done.

Harrison swept his arm out toward the alien world that lay on the other side of the threshold. “Mae. Kai. It is with great pleasure I welcome you and the newborns to our new world. Although similar in many facets to our home word of Aris, this one is situated third from its sun, the perfect location for life to abound. A world that, as of this moment, is home to mankind’s new hope. A world I’ve named Earth.”

The End

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