

Though he willed himself to not cry today, Benny was distraught most of the day. Near midday, he was coming down from a tantrum when the sky literally opened up and air ships fell from the clouds. The children were frightened and scattered in all directions, crying and screaming in terror. Teachers tried to round the children up and lead them into the school buildings, into shelter, but chaos ensued.

Doors in the ships opened and uniformed agents poured down surrounding the school. They were dressed in grey uniforms and helmets, sliding down ropes extending from the air ships; they were Peacekeepers. They landed and marched into the school, demanding the children be gathered up in the halls, all rooms emptied. The leader walked into the headmistress's office and sat down on her desk. Keepers closed the door behind him.

“Well, well. Here we are at last. You have managed to elude us for years but we finally found you, Jerika Ano. Headmistress, huh? And what a fancy place you have here. All sorts of violations. Unregistered empaths, missing children, unchipped adults with all sorts of disorders. I don't even know where to begin.”

The headmistress closed the book she had removed from the bookcase nearest the door. She stared at the Peacekeeper. She could not see through his grey helmet but she could feel the cruel curl of his lips as he relished the opportunity to renew their acquaintance. She knew him well, knew his despise for anyone 'different' or 'special'. He liked the mundane, the conformist, the easily led. He loved power. Now he flexed this power as his army held her school captive.

The headmistress walked toward the leader and sat in a nearby seat. She arranged the folds of her skirt around her, smoothing the vintage cut clothe. She sighed and looked up at the Peacekeeper.

“Commandant Oslo Ravinow. So you found us. Now what?”

“Now I take your precious protégés and have them chipped like they should have been after birth. You criminals get your due. There is plenty of room for you in the penal colonies. I hear there is a new one on old Jupiter. That should be fun with the perpetual storm on the Red Spot.”

Headmistress Ano smiled. She knew a terrible fate awaited her and her staff, trauma for her students. She took comfort in knowing most of them would be returned to their families after being chipped and evaluated. However, a few were bound for orphan colonies, those who had been abandoned by their parents for being different. She also hoped that some had escaped when she opened a tunnel below the school by removing the book near the door. She held the book in her lap, Parable of the Sower by Octavia Butler.

Ravinow signaled to the Keepers and they came to escort the headmistress out to a waiting ship. He smiled as the other ships were being boarded by the staff and students under the watchful eyes of the Peacekeepers. Once the school was empty, he boarded his ship and sat across from his prisoner. He stared at her, and refused memories of rejection. He once thought her beautiful, intelligent, worthy of his affections. She would not entertain his attentions and when he found out she was an Empath, he turned her in. But she escaped capture some how. She knew before the agents raided her living quarters. She disappeared from their surveillance system. A near impossible feat.

“Your years are telling on you, Jerika Ano.”

“And your position is telling on you, Oslo. Perhaps you should consider retiring. Your health is not as well as it used to be.”

“My health is fine. Not your concern. You should be more concerned about those children you’ve been toying with. Teaching them bad habits, listening to people’s thoughts and manipulating their wills. You will be dealt with harshly for your crimes. I will see to that.”

“You always were such a kind gentleman.”

Commandant Ravinow scowled and stood to retreat to the pilot’s cabin. He sniffed disapprovingly and walked away. He would make sure his recommendation was for the harshest of punishment, maximum years to life in a penal colony, perhaps Jupiter or the Cone Nebula.

Jerika Ano closed her eyes. She felt emotionally tired. She allowed herself to relax and her mind to stretch out. She felt the distress of her students. She reached further. She was uncertain but thought she sensed Corben, or Benny as the other children called him, with a teacher. She hoped. She rested.

In a dank cave under the school, a teacher huddled with several children and waited. She held Benny’s hand. She could not hear but could feel the army above them. She waited for an escape route to open up.

Corben had been in his Logics class when his emotions gave way to a full tantrum. His teacher, Inja Pyr, sat beside him and talked him down, while the other students continued to work on their problems, though sympathetic to his plight. They had all experienced similar difficulties when they arrived. They had learned to control their empathy to a degree that made it less debilitating.

The class was being conducted in an outbuilding from the school. Pyr had decided the children could stand a change of scenery today. She took them to the shed and placed several brightly colored logic games around the room for them to solve.

When she heard the commotion outside, the teacher shushed and gathered all her students near the back wall. She guided them through a trap door in the floor, careful to close it back above them. They waited in the earthen cavern until a small door slid open before them.

The class crawled through a tunnel that snaked downward around thick tree roots. After a while, they found themselves in a larger cavern with water running through it, lit only by faint lantern charms the teachers carried about their wrists. Other children and teachers were coming from tunnels around the cavern. These were the remnant of the school who managed to escape the Peacekeepers.

The small group sat on the ground and drank from the clean stream flowing through a bed etched into the rock. Here they would stay until nightfall. Or at least for several hours, according to the timepieces each teacher kept to start and end classes.

Corben felt extremely tired and lay his head on his teacher's lap. She rubbed his back to soothe him. Her other students all gathered close around her and she began to hum familiar songs for them. Some lay while others sat with their eyes closed in the dim light and waited.

After what felt like hours, the children became antsy. They were hungry and cranky, tired of sitting on the cold ground and being still so long. They began to play hand games and tech games on the few readers that they managed to smuggle out when they escaped.

The teachers had been trained in how to keep the students engaged in case of power loss or emergency, but they had not experienced this or tried it before. They decided to pool their resources and use their talents to entertain the children. One teacher who had very good balance performed a complicated dance to the sounds produced by another teacher, who created musical tones with his body. Next a teacher who was a master of deception, performed mesmerizing

tricks with found objects. Finally, a teacher who could use her hands to make puppets cast intriguing characters on the walls while telling captivating stories.

Slowly the time passed and finally the teachers' timepieces showed an hour late enough to expect darkness of night. They gathered their sleepy students and carefully made the climb back up to the surface. Upon reaching topside, they huddled closely, talking only in whispers when necessary.

First thing, they returned to the main school building. Shock registered on their faces at the ruin with seats turned over, screens smashed. The chaos disturbed the children and they began to cry. The teachers tried to comfort them but felt the dread themselves. They knew they were still in danger there and should move quickly to the safe houses set for them if they ever needed them.

The teachers nodded to each other and herded the children into the woods on the south side of the building, farthest from the green fields. They walked through the slender trees, carefully moving over fallen limbs and soft underbrush. Each group of children followed their teacher in a serpentine line, helping each other over the uneven forest floor.

Soon they arrived at a small housing structure, its inhabitants already in for the night, with lights shining in the pod windows. They climbed the stairs to the third floor and the leading teacher entered a code in the keypad to open the door to living quarters. They entered the room and found soft cushions on which they could finally rest after their harrowing journey. Still in shock, they slept together that night in the large living room.

The next morning was a late rising. Everyone was tired from the day before. Even the early risers continued to catnap until late in the day. Finally a teacher rose and everyone began to stir. The teachers gathered in the kitchen area to view the well stocked food options. Those

teachers inclined to cooking began to prepare a simple meal for everyone. The rest of the adults helped the children get washed up and found unisex clothing of different sizes to accommodate the youth and the adults.

Once clean and fed, the group began to clean up the mess they made coming in the previous night. They gathered the items they brought with them from the school, like the timepieces, blankets, cloaks, dirty clothes, and placed these items in cleaning solutions so they could be used again. They would be safe there for a little while, but a family unit of unrelated adults and children would soon draw attention. They would need to leave and travel onward to a designated location where they could get safe passage to a secret location where people like them live in peace. They would need to gain travel to the Exodus colony.

The group stayed for several days, resting, eating and sleeping. The adults prepared bundles for the next leg of their journey. One person was designated to venture outside and get a schedule for the next intergalactic journey available. She returned with a few comfort items and information that they would have to stay put for a few more days. Star lamps were in constant use but were a poor substitute for being outside. They took vitamins to supplement their simple diet of proteins and dried vegetables.

On the designated day of their departure, the group was excited but apprehensive to leave their shelter for the unknown. They entered the fresh air and headed for the nearest transport station. They clamored into the first open transport pod that arrived. The children marveled at the structures below them as they zipped along to the intergalactic rest station.

The docking station was enormous and noisy. The sound of people talking and walking resounded off the acoustic panels at turns in the corners of the station. The cacophony of sounds assaulted the children's ears and they clapped their hands to the sides of their heads to block it

out. As they walked to the bay holding the transport they needed, they became accustomed to the sounds and only noticed when someone spoke to them. They had to speak louder to be heard.

The transport was not open yet and they sat in a corral near the bay where the rusted hulk was docked. They could see the dings and scratches where asteroids had hit the vessel. Confidence in the steady flight of this outdated transport was a bit shaky in the adults. Yet they had no choice and were grateful to be so close to the most important part of their journey.

The adults kept watchful eyes on the children as they wondered around peering at the exhibits depicting space travel. Corben saw an exhibit further down the corridor and moved to it. As he took in the images, he began to feel them come to life. Each piece moved in its intended fashion. The little people walked around and worked at repairing the damaged transport. Doors opened and closed. Passengers peered out the windows. He giggled as the characters performed their roles. He did not hear the sounds of passengers getting on the real transport in the loading dock around the corner where he left his classmates.

After he mentally put the pieces back in place, he turned and felt a wave of panic upon seeing the other exhibits absent his peers. He hurried to the bay and dropped to his knees when he saw the sealed door and empty dock. He had been left behind. They didn't notice his absence and left without him. He was alone in a strange place.