

Chapter 2

They Were Flying Over Gentle Crimson Hills

They were flying over gentle crimson hills dotted with orange shrubs casting long violet shadows in the brooding light that announced the coming sunset. The air was perfectly clear and a brisk wind from the southwest shook the treetops in the woods at the foot of the hills, the tiny leaves shimmering in a broad swath of vibrating color, now yellow, now purple, now maroon, as the wind turned their different surfaces toward the watching eye. The undersides of the leaves were at their brightest yellow when the wind brandished the branches against the sun.

They were traveling north, almost along the planet's shadow line. At dusk, they had to increase altitude to clear a mountain range. And then the sun was back, tingeing with pink the immaculate snowfields and the plumes and pennants of clouds floating from the highest peaks. And where the sun failed to reach, the snow was blue and violet in the shadows, much like on Earth.

For a long time, Helias stood rapt before these breath-taking landscapes, forgetting all the problems and questions crowding his mind.

Only when darkness finally covered the land below and the first, brightest stars began to appear in the purple and green sky, did he turn from the porthole. Removing his glasses, he looked around the spaceship, his eyes growing accustomed to the dim white light. It was an eight-seater. Two rows of two seats per side, with an aisle down the middle. At the back, the baggage hold, at the front the cockpit with the two pilots. The door to the cockpit was ajar, and from his seat in the first row Helias could see the profile of the serious man, Mattheus, busy in the captain's seat. He was talking into the tiny mic of his 'cell', a miniscule earphone clinging to his earlobe and an invisible rod that supported the mic just to the right of his mouth. He was almost whispering, in a strange dialect. A few more words, interspersed with pauses as he listened, and then what seemed to be a goodbye of some kind and the conversation came to an end.

On the other side of the cabin, in the second row, a blond girl was drowsing. Hadn't he seen her before, somewhere?

Helias fell back into his own thoughts.

He had been ‘called’, after more than a year on the waiting list. He’d had himself put on the list right after he got his PhD. Shortly before, his girlfriend had left him. He had told her about his plans to leave Earth, and that he wanted to take her with him. She seemed reluctant to go: too attached to her family and her own habits. For her sake, he might even have decided not to leave. But as it turned out, she took things into her own hands, and made the decision for him, telling him it was over—just before his final exam. She didn’t feel she should have to wait until he finally made up his mind, and in any case, she certainly didn’t want to have to blame herself if he gave up his dreams of the future for her.

For his part, he had no family left. Or almost none. There was a sister, somewhere in the Austrian Alps. They had never had much to say to each other, and from the time she married and moved to Austria he had never found the time—or the inclination—to go visit. They heard from each other from time to time, birthdays or holidays and things like that, but nothing more.

For the few times he permitted himself a vacation, he preferred the Swiss or Italian Alps. The high peaks and the eternal snows, with his girlfriend. Or Corsica, which he’d always loved, ever since he went, as a boy, with his parents.

His parents were gone, officially declared missing. They had been two prominent scientists, who worked at the transmitting station orbiting Mars.

He hadn’t seen much of them, since he started college and was living on his own. They would come and go, staying for a while, busy with their studies, and then leave again. Once they had taken him with them. It was during the school break, and there was an extra seat available on the spaceship. He was sixteen, and he remembered it as the best period of his life.

Since then, he had had fewer and fewer chances to see them, since they spent increasingly long periods on Mars. Until two years before he finished his PhD. They didn’t come back from their last trip. He never heard from them again.

Helias’s eyes filled with tears, and his throat tightened.

But this was no time to get sentimental. And he was used to pulling the plug on his feelings, and pushing everything back down, deep underneath.

He allowed himself one small liberating sob, and slowly took control of his thoughts again.

He turned for a moment, glancing back at the seats behind to see if the girl had heard anything and was watching him. Nothing, she seemed completely absorbed, her eyes half closed.

For good measure, he pretended to cough, just to belie any suspicions.

He turned again and gazed at girl’s face, as her lips seemed to move almost imperceptibly. It was an oblong face, though not too much so. The eyes seemed narrow, maybe because they were half closed, almost like an Oriental. Despite the fact that they were blue, and despite the fine blond hair that fell to her shoulders. She had a goodish figure, on the tall and slender side, though the loose coveralls made it hard to tell. Not his type, he told himself, though he couldn’t deny a certain attraction.

The girl turned toward him, and he looked away immediately.

And now he found himself in this strange, unexpected situation.

He had been directed to the Kusmiri Center, where, among other things, they did research into alien molecular biogenetics. And where he would have been able to catch up with the field and start something new.

The last concrete news he had about the Kusmiri Center and, in general, the planet Alkenia, obviously dated back some forty years, though he had heard it slightly before his departure. He hoped nothing fundamental had changed, even if he had to expect that there had been a great deal of progress.

The information exchanged between the two planets was always twenty years out of date, and was more of historical interest than of any value as information.

Above all, he knew he would have to assimilate forty years' worth of new biogenetic research, and he had no idea how much progress the discipline had made.

Back on Earth, there were simulations that described all aspects of social life and the organization of research on Alkenia in a certain amount of detail. They were based on successive transfers of personnel, information and plans that Earth sent at fairly close intervals, every few weeks or months. Naturally, the simulations were only relatively useful, since they were little more than forecasts starting from the planet's actual situation as it was twenty years earlier. And they could be confirmed or rejected only twenty years later.

Up to the time of Helias's departure there hadn't been any major surprises.

But in the meantime, forty years had gone by. And more than anything else, it was practically impossible to make predictions about the advances in research that used 'raw material' that didn't exist on Earth, except in the form of samples taken decades earlier.

According to the program he'd been given on Earth—every detail of which he had committed to memory—on leaving the station he was to take the shuttle to the terminal in the nearby city of Symiria, where he was supposed to take the first flight for the planet's capital, which wasn't far away. Once in the capital, he would have spent the night at the Hotel Starcross, taking the shuttle for the Kusmiri Center the next morning.

None of this happened. That serious-looking man had immediately blown a hole right through the entire program. He had barely introduced himself, without even saying who he was or what he wanted from Helias. To all appearances, he just seemed to be a nice man who wanted to give him a lift. But his caginess about offering any kind of explanation, and the strange circumstances surrounding their meeting had something mysterious about it that piqued his curiosity. And there was no denying that the man exerted a certain fascination over him, a kind of charisma.

Upon leaving the emporium, Mattheus had walked off toward the parking lot, without another word. And this attitude had irked him again. The man couldn't treat him like this, like a child that didn't deserve an explanation. He had been about to leave without even saying goodbye, but then he ended up trotting obediently along after him, because he 'felt' he had to get to the bottom of this.

The blond girl and the copilot were waiting on the spaceship. Embarking, his impulse was to sit next to the girl, if only in the hope that she might be more

talkative than Mattheus. But she hadn't even turned to see who was coming in and—no surprise—she also seemed caught up in her own thoughts. So he had given up and, a bit huffily, went and sat as far away from her as he could.

While he was waiting for the flight to arrive, Helias reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulled out his little portable, which contained everything that could be digitized, from his childhood memories to all of his studies and research. He glanced at the index of his scientific publications, thinking that by now they were all old, obsolete analyses. With a bit of nostalgia, he looked at pictures from when he was a boy, the favorite photo of his parents, his ex-girlfriend. Pensively, he thought about how everything fades away and disappears, now more than ever before. He had no chance of going back to Earth, but even if he could and had wanted to, what would he have found down there? A seventy year old sister, aunts, uncles and all his relatives long dead, his former girlfriend with white hair, maybe surrounded by half a dozen grandkids and the children from her second marriage. With her first husband's portrait hanging on the wall, the first husband who, irony of ironies, was lost in space. And almost no memories remaining of their jaunts in the Alps, still so vivid in his mind.

He was beginning a new life, in every way. With no ties to the past, nothing more than a jumble of memories, old ones by now, and a few pieces of research that had since become meaningless.

In the midst of these thoughts, a light from outside caught his attention. A star, brighter than the others, was shining out among the low clouds on the horizon. It was Nasymil, the nearest star, now reflected imperiously on the clouds below, as the spaceship climbed to hurdle the last mountains. It was still mirrored in an immense glacier, brighter than the full moon. Then the lights went out in the spaceship as it began its descent toward the Center.

This new light shining on his thoughts of a new and unknown life struck him as a good omen, and he cheerfully prepared for the landing.

The Center appeared suddenly below him, no longer hidden by the looming mountain. And he had plenty of time to admire the architecture as the ship looped around it before landing. In the cold light of Nasymil, which was reflected now on the roofs of the towers, contrasting with the orange and yellow of the artificial lighting outside the building. It was enormous, a stupendous castle overlooking the choppy waters of a lake.

Despite his good mood, even better after seeing that fairytale landscape, and despite his eagerness to disembark and throw himself into his new life, he decided to keep his feelings to himself, given the lack of interest his traveling companions had shown in him. He was all ready to leave, but stayed glued to the porthole—not that there was much to see anymore—waiting for the girl to go out first. He got down his luggage and—sulkily, to all outward appearances—followed his two fellow travelers, while the copilot remained on board. Nothing, not even a word. What kind of a way to behave was that? Mattheus had barely glanced over his shoulder to check whether he was following. He went first through an ordinary sliding door and walked toward the reception area. Oh! A miracle! Once through the door, the girl

seemed to slow down to let him catch up, and she was even turning toward him. With a smile!

“My name’s Kathia.”

“I usually don’t introduce myself, since people already seem to know who I am anyway.”

And he gestured with his chin toward Mattheus who had stopped at the reception desk.

They stopped too, a few paces behind.

She looked him in the eye and smiled. He felt himself thawing.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. ‘Usually-I-don’t-introduce-myself’.”

She held out her hand. He followed suit, and was about to shake hands when he realized that it clearly was not the custom here. In fact, she didn’t shake hands either, but remained with her hand outstretched and open. He brought his palm close to hers and felt something like a halo of warmth. Foolishly embarrassed, he snatched his hand back. She smiled again, almost maternally. She continued to look at him with an amused air, like someone bending over a new-born puppy, fuzzy but still clumsy. To hide his embarrassment, Helias asked, “Are you here for biogenetics too?”

“No, archivist.”

Nothing else? Why were people in this place so close-mouthed? Not that he was particularly loquacious himself, but these two had him beat by a country mile.

Mattheus came back to them with a couple of passes.

“These are temporary, the room number is at the top. They’re on the other side of the building. The registration office is closed now, obviously. You’re expected for the formal registration tomorrow morning, in the office alongside. The rooms should be in order. If you need anything, call Six. Rest well.”

Wow! What a spiel! And almost without stopping for breath.

Mattheus smiled. He looked at Helias with a penetrating gaze. Then he looked at Kathia.

They said goodbye to him, went out of the building and made their way toward the opposite side, with a little detour to walk along the lake.

“What a strange fellow....” murmured Helias. But he got no reaction.

“Had you already met him?”

“When?”

“Before today, I mean.”

A short silence.

“Yes.”

“Do you come from Earth too?”

“Sure.”

“What I mean is, have you just arrived, like me?”

“We were on the same craft.”

Four whole words in a row! He noticed she had an odd accent.

And so that’s where he’d seen her.

Why was it so difficult to engage her in a conversation? Maybe she had problems with the language?

“Where do you come from?”

“Sweden.”

With that accent? Nonsense. Why was she lying, her too?

He didn’t know what else to say, he was too discouraged. He threw out a stupid question, for lack of anything better.

“How did the ‘trip’ seem to you, the transmission, I mean? I was pretty excited....”

“I acknowledge that.”

I acknowledge that?! Craft?! What kind of a way to talk was that? His discouragement was turning to exasperation. A Swede with a Spanish, or maybe Portuguese, accent. To hell with it all! Fortunately they’d arrived at the entrance with the numbers of their rooms.

They went up four flights of wooden stairs. And through a number of corridors. From 331 to 335. It was hers.

“You’ve arrived.”

“Yes, I see.”

He made one last try, since a million questions were gnawing at him.

“You don’t have a Swedish accent. Tell me the truth, where do you come from?”

She smiled again, a disarming smile.

Then she half closed her eyes, put on a sober, level-headed expression and with a perfect European accent pronounced, “You will know in due time.”

A shiver ran down Helias’s spine and he felt that his hair was standing on end. It was a perfect imitation. The same words Mattheus had used.

The girl started soberly toward her room, but after a couple of steps, without stopping, she turned, winked at him, and swaying her hips disappeared behind the corner.

With the most idiotic possible look on his face, Helias stood as if nailed to the floor.

These people were teasing him.

He couldn’t stand it.

He really couldn’t stand it.

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