

the world, even if that place was one that couldn't hold still. Rasika read the missive again and again. The ship was turned homeward for now, but Ria would always be a child of the sea as well as her daughter. Rasika walked down to the slowly drowning beach long abandoned by the rich, where the village children were splashing in the water. The great cliff reared over the island; over it seagulls flew in wide arcs, calling. This sea, this very same sea that washed her ankles, was carrying her child home. She said aloud, 'Why have I been so afraid?' She felt a tidal pull, a call like that of the seagulls flying above her and knew with a sudden exhilaration that she was no longer stuck; she, too, was moving, like the restless seas, toward some great change. *Freedom is neither static nor exclusive; we are knit together across space and time.*

As Gyana's ants had discovered, to wander and then to return to the origin point, which is always shifting, never still – that is as close to experiencing infinity as we can get. Rasika, remembering that all ocean currents were closed loops, thought that perhaps the choreography of life might also be composed of great, looping, intersecting arcs. She thought of the wooden chest containing the Gyana documents, freed by the rising seas, making the journey from the place where Gyana had lived, if she had lived, sailing the sea-drowned pathways hundreds of years later, under the same stars as the woman who had known infinity.

THE LIST

GAUTAM BHATIA

The stars, he'd always thought, were the fireflies that chose to stay.

Once – long ago – there was an arched bridge. A breeze danced upon their skin. Laser lights, amber-coloured, flickered in and out of existence.

'I want the ones that never go out,' he said.

'I couldn't bear such permanence,' she came back.

They laughed. There had been so much laughter in those days.

'But they don't stay, the fireflies,' she continued, 'because they choose not to be labelled – or listed.'

'You and your dislike of definitions.'

'Oh, I may suffer your definitions – sometimes, but –' she placed a finger on his lips, 'there are other worlds now, love.'

Beneath their feet, below the bridge, the valley dipped away into darkness and they heard the faraway laughter of the river.

He raised his arm, tracing pathways with his fingertips in the sky, pausing at each planet. 'Hauder, Sikar, Xolon – human, too human.'

She joined her index finger to his and then angled it away from Xolon. 'Madi – viriconium mines – barely human.'

From Xolon and Madi, their fingers travelled towards each other and met at a shimmering point of light. 'Unbar,' they said together. 'Not human at all,' she finished. He knew from her voice that she was smiling.

'You really think that you can outrun the algorithms somewhere out there?' he said. 'In the mines of Madi? Among the Deva and their Collective? On a human planet?'

Saira turned to him. He saw starlight in her eyes, the colour of copper, which had become so rare on Terra. 'Space is room enough.'

Then she was running, across the arched bridge and into the tended woodland, and he was running after her, through the transitory corridor that the fireflies wove around them, and they were laughing.

'Captain Jatayu!'

The voice lasered through his memories. On the observation deck, Jatayu tore his gaze away from the stars, and from the pale rim of Xolon, a few hours away.

'What is it?'

'We've been hailed.'

'Banner?'

'The Collective, Captain. It's a Deva ship.'

Jatayu sucked in a breath. 'Well, got no choice now, have we? Set up the line.'

The window before him grew opaque. The stars yielded to a blank screen. Behind him, Jatayu felt the crew of the *Terran Sky* gather around to watch. Then the screen came to life and the Deva was before him.

She had chosen to appear in humanoid form. But there was no mistaking the too-clean symmetry of the bones, the eyes that danced, and the faint halo that never let him get a clear look at the face.

'Greetings, Deva,' he said tonelessly, 'from Captain Jatayu and the crew of the *Terran Sky*, and greetings through you to the Collective. How may we assist you?'

'Greetings from the Collective, Captain,' the voice sang to him. He forced himself to concentrate. 'I'm Deva Unbar-na-Gheroun, and my ship ...'

Jatayu summoned his memory banks. The information sped through his neural circuits: Unbar, the diplomats' planet; Gheroun, one of the High Families, ambassadors to Terra in the days Terra had still meant something. He took a deep breath. Beneath them, Xolon hung in space.

'... so I hope you won't mind if I ask,' her voice cut into his thoughts, 'where are you going, Captain Jatayu?'

'To Xolon.'

'Your purpose?'

'Trade. I transport skins along the Xolon-Sikar route.'

Even as he answered, he knew that his brain activity was showing up in a monitor in front of the Deva, transmuted into a probability figure along a truth spectrum. Jatayu stilled, mentally reciting the meaningless jingle that Saira and he had memorized all those decades ago when they were playing at surviving a Deva interrogation.

Chandu ke chacha ne

Chandu ki chachi ko...

There was a human heartbeat of silence. He thought the Deva would ask to board. But when Gheroun spoke, she only said, 'Saw any other ships en route?'

'Just yours, Deva Gheroun,' he said. Then, bolder: 'Why?'

'Xolon's actions are bothering the Collective, Captain. The List ...'

'Ah yes.'

'Barbaric,' Gheroun cut in undiplomatically, 'this practice of offworlding.'

'An internal matter surely, Deva?'

'We respect human planets' rights to determine world membership, of course. But all this suffering – so much of it – troubles us, Captain.'

'Naturally, Deva. The Collective's values are universal. Do you need help? My ship stands ready to assist with rescue ...'

'You can stop being so human.' Her voice did not change, but he felt it lash against his skin. 'You know the Collective's code. We can't intervene, much as Xolon's actions pain us – unless there are smugglers lurking around, waiting to pick up the offworlders and transport them to the mines of Madi...' She left the rest of the sentence suspended in the air.

'I understand,' Jatayu said politely. 'That's why I suggested rescue, Deva – the offworlders may need to be saved from the smugglers as much as from their own planet.'

There was a long pause. The Deva's dancing eyes had stilled, and she was looking directly at him. Jatayu felt a single bead of sweat trickle down his spinal cord.

'Trying to live up to your name, Captain?'

'Deva?'

'Your name. Terran, isn't it?'

'Yes, Deva.'

'Named after a figure from Terran myth – a rescuer, is it not?'

'One who tried to rescue someone and paid for it with his life. I didn't choose my name, Deva.'

'Very well, Captain. If you insist.' Her voice became brisk, and Jatayu let himself relax. 'I – and the Collective – wish you luck in your trade to ... Sikar. May you have better luck than your namesake.'

The screen went blank.



Fire, she'd always thought, was a sunflower that faded too quickly.

There was a blaze that leapt and crackled. Xolon's night flared like an algorithm's pareidolic dreamscapes: hues of pink and gold and orange clashed with one another, shapes and silhouettes in the night, tongues of dancing flame. Then, there was a burst of heat that warmed them all – Listers and Non-Listers – in the sunless cold.

Crack, crack. The walls of her house crumbled in a shower of sparks.

She thought she knew the moment her papers burnt from the sputtering noise of the flames. Almost as if the fire regretted the destruction of lifetimes of work.

She reached into her memory banks for reassurance, sending out mental feelers to where her research existed in non-corporeal form.

She found emptiness.

Her worlds were gone from her.

She sank to her knees, eyes closed. She reached again.

Nothing.

After threatening to do it for so long, just when everyone had stopped believing that they would ever really act on their threat, they had finally cut off the Non-Listers' access to the memory banks.

Her fingernails dug into the singed ground. She struck out with her mind a third time, a swimmer flailing at a reed. A moment ago, the galaxy had been a thought away. Now, there was nothing but her own memories. As if they had taken the knowledge of language from her, leaving her to grasp at the shadows of words.

She heard her breath come in sobs.

She opened her eyes again to a world that was shorn of its colours, where the only sound was a dull ringing in her ears. Red spots danced across the curtain of her gaze.

Rulda lurched to her feet. She would have stood there until the flames took her as they did her research, had it not been for the group of fleeing Non-Listers who had passed her, recognized her by her newly-vacant eyes, and dragged her away with them, through the roiling streets of New Colucan, through its seething buildings and, finally, away from Xolon's capital city.

Burned by memory, Rulda's unblinking eyes opened in a Xolon twilight. They walked. Without the memory banks and the maps of Xolon they'd held, they navigated by a long-stilled instinct and a nameless sense of direction. Glades, glens and trees glimmered in the dappled light of three moons. The forest grass was springy beneath their feet.

'What were you – back home?'

One of her companions had noticed her eyes come back to life. Rulda struggled with the question, trying to locate home. She realized after a while that for this conversation it meant New Colucan.

'Oh, I – I was a linguist. I studied the Deva High Language.'

'The Deva...?'

'Yes.' She let herself smile. Her mind seemed suddenly to have too much space for her own memories, as though they were little rocks rattling against the sides of a half-filled jar. She sifted through them, discovering what remained after the loss of the memory banks.

'They let you do it? The Authority?'

'They never knew. Formally, I was only studying Terran dialects for Xolon's trade missions.' She thought with a pang about Noroon, her partner-in-crime, and those long nights discovering the Devas' linguistic galaxy – until the List had come, its strokes of algorithmic ink separating them into different worlds.

'But why?'

Their companions were silent and Rulda felt the weight of their attention. She looked at her feet as they walked, trying to make sense of memories that had lost their anchor.

'I wanted – I believed – that High Deva and our human Galactic Standard have a common origin. I wanted to prove that there's no warrant to divide the galaxy into Deva and human – to making it...smaller.' She smiled again. 'I called it the Grammar of Harmony.'

One of their companions rolled his eyes. 'You just wanted to break Deva exceptionalism, didn't you?'

'There was low laughter around her. They still remembered mirth.

'That may have had something to do with it,' she chuckled.

'And did you?'

'The List came before I could.'

Xolon is not room enough.

The voice came back to her as she spoke, beamed into her home – hers and Noroon's – and into every home in Xolon.

Xolon is not room enough, and so we must have a List.

The List, which would first be logic and then life itself.

But because we are a corrupt planet, the List cannot be prepared by corrupt human beings.

They walked in silence now, the five Non-Listers who had escaped the fires in New Colucan, and who still remained.

A little way away, the forest dipped into the great ocean that circled Xolon. Above them, they heard the whining noise of a drone.

'Let's thank our former fellow Xolonians,' said Fani, their leader, from the head of the group, 'for stripping even the chips from us so that the drones can't see us now. Law of unintended consequences – but the Authority will not be happy.'

Laughter. Ugly laughter. They walked.

Rulda felt the breeze upon her skin, felt it bring memories of other evenings and other worlds. She opened her clenched fist and let the writing upon the crumpled piece of paper in her palm travel to her eyes.

Write down

I am a Xolonian...



'Can you believe it?' she said once. 'There was a time when Terra was the only planet we knew. Can you imagine that feeling? Instead of space opening up before you...' She spoke the words as they lay on the woodland grass, tracing the sky-paths again, their favourite pastime together, 'the sky would press down – because this would be the only home that existed.'

'Terra is still home, you know.'

She turned teasing eyes upon him, the glint of copper in them moving and shifting in the starlight. 'Didn't your namesake – Jatayu – try to fly to the stars once?'

'Oh, hush, you!'

Their fingers parted and her tracery grew quick and dizzying, joining the Deva and the human planets in a pattern whose web only she knew.

'All of it is home,' she said, 'as Jatayu knew.'

'Really? The Deva? Or Madi? Isn't home where you're let in, Saira? Or which allows you to leave if you want to?'

She sighed. 'Someday, the Collective will be gone, the Deva will open up their planets, and the mines of Madi will run their course and become caverns to play hide-and-seek in. Until then we have our human planets, at least.'

To be human in this time, to choose your home world, or even to choose a life on a ship. There was space, so much space, in the galaxy. Jatayu felt Saira's words enter his blood and send a tingling sensation through him.

'You expand the world,' he murmured to her. 'Like the rim of a planet that keeps receding as you go in search of it.'

She entwined her fingers in his. 'As long as we find things on the way.'

First there was Saira, he'd thought then. And then there was space.

Now he wondered when the order of things had reversed itself, when the glint of starlight no longer needed copper eyes to be magical, when the rhythm of deep space became more soothing than the Terran dawn they had stayed up together to welcome.

'Captain?'

Jatayu found his hands pressed upon the deck of the bridge. He was looking down at his shoes.

'Captain, what was that about?'

Mara was quick. Fourth in command, but he always believed she'd succeed him on the *Terran Sky* once he was decommissioned.

'A Deva patrol, Third Officer, even though they wouldn't admit it. They're looking for smugglers.'

'That I heard.'

'But why would passenger runs to Madi worry the Collective, Captain?'

'Figure it out, Officer.'

'Because they aren't passenger runs at all, are they?' Mara said slowly.

'There's no reason anyone would take people to Madi – unless it was to sell them as cheap labour and disrupt the Collective's Internal Market. It would make for extremely profitable business, wouldn't it?'

'Well done. These smugglers don't smuggle cargo.'

'Only – where will this labour come from?'

'Good question, Officer. They,' he gestured in the vague direction of Xolon, slightly closer now, 'are making the List now.'

'List, Captain?'

'A List of Xolonians.'

'I don't follow.'

'Which is your home world, Third Officer?'

'Hauder.'

Jatayu allowed himself the ghost of a smile. 'Should've known, from how you make competence look so bloody effortless.'

'You learn to be efficient, Captain, when home is a few idle moments recovering from one electrical storm and preparing for the next. It's why we're so good at space.'

'You could've migrated.'

'I...didn't want to.'

'Ah well. So tell me, Officer,' he said, 'ever felt that Hauder wasn't room enough?'

'An entire planet? No, of course not!' Her response was quick, natural. 'And there's always space.'

'Well, the Xolonians disagree,' he gestured again. 'They believe they've been too generous. So now they are atoning for their history.'

'I don't understand,' she said, careful now. 'It's a human planet. Like Hauder, like Sikar, like – Terra. So what do they mean?'

'You know that every human planet's human population has a median that is ever so slightly different from the others, don't you? Blood composition, bone structure and density, and so on. The Xolonians devised an algorithm that would work out their median. They have a range of permissible deviations from it, and then – they draw their line.'

He sensed her shiver. It soothed him, the very human reaction.

'I see,' she said.

'And to be Xolonian is to – only – be on the List.'

Mara chewed her lip. 'I think I understand. There will be those outside the permissible range of deviation. They will be put on ships back home.'

'But where's home, Mara, if no planet claims you back? What if you're no longer of Xolon – but of nowhere else too?'

There was stillness, before she understood. 'Offworlding,' she whispered. Jatayu smiled. 'Unless there is a ship, undetected, at the right time and place...'

She breathed. 'Skins, captain?'

He looked away.



She had lost her memory banks, but not the sight of his quizzical look that she had loved so well, or the slight tremor in his voice as he tried to bring himself to believe.

'You really think this is going to work? That the Deva will abandon speciesism because you, one Xolonian, discover a commonality in our languages?'

'Eventually, Noroon.'

'You know, before the stars came to us, Xolon was parcelled into bands of people who separated themselves from each other? Not just a common language, all humans. And yet...'

'But then, the stars came to us and we became one world in this galaxy, didn't we, love? We needed space to realize how small we had made ourselves. It can happen again.'

'The Deva are so different from us, Rulda.'

She smiled. 'In your head. We don't have to always...define things, you know.'

'If it's in everyone's head, then it is real.'

'Until it isn't. Let me start with you.'

When they walked home together that night, they heard the chants for the first time. 'One world. One blood. One bone.'

Home, she'd always thought, was a library, a view of the winding streets of New Colucan, the sight of the stars, requited love.

You loved a world, and it was enough.

Until it wasn't.

One world. One blood. One bone.

They walked. She heard her blood sing to her. The wrong blood for this world.

They walked.

Who knew that just beyond New Colucan, there were deep woods that stretched to the sea? Of course, the memory banks would have told her had she asked about her own neighbourhood rather than about the geography of Unbar, but she never had. Was home a place where you could spend lifetimes without needing to know what lay beyond the doorstep, she wondered.

From time to time, they heard the drones overhead. A thrill passed through her, each time, as they all took cover. But without the chips and underneath the forest canopy, they were invisible. Any moment now, she thought, it would be footsteps that they would hear from behind, coming from New Colucan. Footsteps from which the forest would not hide them.

After the last round of the drones, they started joking about which of them could be sacrificed, if needed.

'The oldest?'

'Right, because a few years matter so much when we've all lived decades. Do better.'

'Most valuable career?'

'As if there's a career left, after the List. As if there's anything left after the List.'

'The order in which we were designated Off-List?'

'What's the point, we're all Second Rounders anyway.'

Rulda, listening idly all this while, pricked up her ears now. 'What's a Second Rounder?'

They stared at her, and even Fani seemed surprised.

'How do you not know this? Second Rounders are those whose names were in the List but got dropped because someone objected to their inclusion. and the Authority decided to redo the tests. Anyone can object – and someone must have done it for you. You do know that, right?'

'Oh!' She struggled to remember, but the wiping of the memory banks had been efficient. Glimpses flashed before her eyes, but nothing coalesced, apart from vague recollections of having indeed taken the test twice.

'You mean someone complained and had me thrown off the List?' she whispered, almost to herself. 'Someone who knew something that could get the Authority to order a re-test for me?'

'Not long now,' said Fani from ahead, her voice dry. 'Thirteen of them had set out from New Colucan on the night of the tall fires. Now there were five. 'Where are we going?' she asked.

Fani didn't turn. 'Where we can start the world over again,' she said. 'I promise.'

Xolon is a promise.

Her words unlocked memories of more words, like the interstellar drive opening pathways to the galaxy.

Xolon is a promise.

Until it wasn't.

She walked.



*Love, he'd always thought, was more permanent than the stars.
Until it wasn't.*

The fireflies went out, but the stars remained. He went to space. Time passed, bringing with it other worlds and other loves. Sometimes he thought of the old days, when humans didn't live beyond a few decades. And he wondered about the foolishness of those who discovered the cure for ageing but forgot to invent a cure for memory.

'Captain Jatayu?'

'Yes.'

'Xolon incoming.'

'Put them on.'

A voice crackled over the line. 'Identification for the *Terran Sky*.'

Smoothed into stony nonchalance by the current of practice, Jatayu intoned a series of letters and numbers. *No damn truth spectrum here.* But his heart thumped until the voice came once more: 'Clearance granted.'

There was a stir behind him on the bridge as the crew eased into action. But before they could start moving, he felt a bump that sent little shivers through the ship.

'What's that?'

Mara, looking at the surface video feed, said, 'We have boarders, Captain.' Jatayu rested his palms on the bridge. 'Identification?'

Mara fed the footage into her memory bank. 'Xoloni Offworld Police.'

'Oh, Terra!'

Somewhere underneath the ship, a hatch opened.

'I'll handle this.' Jatayu moved quickly off the viewing deck and down into the *Terran Sky*'s reception chamber. He stood in the middle of the cold, spare, domed hall, amidst the red-and-gold Terran banners that hung from the walls, and waited.

After a few minutes, the wall in front of him parted, and he saw two of his crew flanking a third man. He was short and unremarkable to look at, wearing a steel grey uniform that matched the colour of his hair, neatly parted in the middle. A name card flashed at Jatayu.

Pusa

Inspector General, XOP

'Captain Jatayu.'

'Inspector General Pusa. Welcome aboard the *Terran Sky*.'

'This is a routine inspection.'

'At your service, Inspector.'

Pusa strolled around the chamber, looking at the Terran banners without a word. After a while, he stopped and looked at Jatayu. 'Well?'

'Follow me, Inspector.'

Jatayu took the inspector up onto the viewing deck, and then out again into the interiors of the ship. They walked in silence.

'Your business, Captain?' Pusa asked finally, as they went through a corridor, dimly lit in blue.

'Skins to Sikar. Surely you saw my record when you granted clearance, Inspector?'

'Just asking. Who knows who's really behind a screen?'

Jatayu allowed his voice to tremble. 'I should say that in all my time captaining the *Terran Sky* I've done this route more times than I can remember, and *never*—'

Pusa spread out his arms. 'I understand, Captain. Believe me, our hands are tied. There are Deva patrols just beyond the exosphere...'

'We met them.'

'Well, there you go. If they catch an outgoing ship with offworlders – and we've heard there are now full-blown secret rescue missions ongoing – we've had it.'

'Rescue missions? By whom?'

'Who do you think?'

'Sikar?'

'Who else? They're funding this.'

'I understand, Inspector. Maybe you could consider alternatives to offworlding? You'd at least not have the Collective breathing down –'

'And give in to that snotty, overcrowded little planet playing the moral conscience of the galaxy with its Open Gates policy?' Pusa stopped and swung around to face him. Jatayu stopped as well.

'Where are you from, Captain?'

'Terra.'

'Oh? I'm hearing it's not in the best shape.'

Jatayu didn't twitch. 'I wouldn't know – haven't been back in more than a century.'

'You'd do better if you made the List, Captain,' Pusa said softly. 'Every planet needs one. To know who belongs. It is the human...condition.'

'Thank you, but I suggest you propose that to the Terran ambassador – which, I believe, your representatives already have. I hope you've enjoyed your time on our ship, Inspector, and now if there's nothing more –'

'One moment, Captain Jatayu.' Pusa jerked his thumb towards a set of black panels in the wall to their left. 'What's behind that?'

'That's the hold.'

'I'd like to see it – just so I can formally sign off on my report.'

'The hold's off-limits to everyone but cleared crew members, Inspector.'

'Is that so?'

Jatayu didn't know how – or when – it happened, but there was a laser gun in Pusa's hands, pointed at him.

'Come on, Captain. There are far, far too many stories of a do-gooder Terran playing interplanetary saviour and taking Offworlders to fucking Sikar. I know that couldn't possibly be you – so open the hold, please.'

Jatayu measured the distance between them and the steadiness with which Pusa held his gun.

'Don't try it,' Pusa said quietly.

'You Xolonian bastard,' said Jatayu, just as Mara rose up like a shadow behind Pusa. The Xolonian crumpled to the floor without a sound. 'Well done, Officer,' he continued. 'Right place, right time.'

'Thank you, Captain. I figured he wasn't here for a courtesy call.' Mara kicked Pusa lightly. 'Fucking Offworld police. What do we do with him?'

'Into the hold,' said Jatayu. 'Since he was so anxious to see it, he can wake up there. We'll dump him on Eldor when we make our pick-up, and he can walk back to New Colucan.'

He realized he was sweating again.

'Understood, Captain. Are we going on with the trip?'

'We are,' said Jatayu. 'We already have clearance, and everything else is taken care of – we just need to fly to Eldor – and hope that our pick-up is already there. Not a second to spare now.'

Mara looked at the floor.

'What are you thinking, Officer?'

She said it just as it hit him. 'We can't do this ever again, can we?'

Jatayu bit his lip, tasting blood. 'You're right. The *Terran Sky* won't fly again. You'll have to find another ship after this, Officer. A regular trade ship. I'm sorry.'

Mara shifted. 'Now that I know what it was for – I guess it was worth it, Captain.'

Jatayu nodded. 'Then let's ensure we make it so – there's still a mission to complete, and we still have to dodge the bloody Deva on our way out.'

He turned and strode back through the ship to the viewing deck.

'All stations, let's go.'

Down through the atmosphere, the planet's pale blue cover rushed up to meet them. He had escorts, he knew. But he also knew that the most unbending of puritans were the easiest to corrupt – and what was true of humans was true of planets as well. As he'd expected, nobody raised the alarm when he gave the order to bank to the west, away from New Colucan and the galactic centre of the medicinal skin trade and towards the island of Eldor.

They flew low, piercing the cloud cover. As ever, Xolon reminded him of Terra, only with a vaster – and more fragile – sense of space. The long Xolonian twilight was shimmering on the rim of the horizon, the planet's three moons risen in the sky.

'Let's promise now,' he heard Saira's voice from a long time ago, as they'd gazed at a sky poorer by two moons, 'that everything we do will be to make

the world larger – and we'll do nothing to confine it, nothing to force it to cup in our hands, like these bio-domes that cup us here.'

Jatayu set his teeth.



In the antiquarian videologs that Noroon and she had watched in the Public Library of Xolon – before the time of the List – there had been musings by ancient Xolonians, before the stars came home, before the Devas and the economic empire of the Collective, before the interstellar drives. These writers and composers had speculated that when Xolon reached the stars many of the ideas that structured their world would be washed away like spring rain washed away sweat.

The idea of limited, bounded space, for example.

Only, they hadn't.

When stars came to them, the world had only grown smaller.

On the edge of a tor, the ocean rolling and crashing beneath them, the five Non-Listers rested. Fani was the only one with the energy left to stand.

'Any moment now,' she said. 'We'll see it on the horizon.'

'Where will they take us?' Rulda asked.

'Does it matter?' Twilight wreathed Fani's face in shadow. 'To a place that we will call home.'

'Will we get out memory banks back?' Rulda blurted out. Strange thought. Of all the things the List had taken from her, this was what she wanted back. *Home is where you can know the galaxy.*

Fani was still. 'I hope so. Only the Xolonians are so barbaric as to cut off access to the memory banks.'

There was hope. Her work would continue. Without Noroon...but it would continue. Somewhere in digital space, her notes, with their dream of a universal language, the Grammar of Harmony, to break the taxonomies that rimmed the galaxy –

The whine of drones pierced the air once more. They flattened themselves on the soft grass. They knew it would do no good, but they did it anyway.

Runaway Non-Listers.

The words bounded and rebounded off the porous walls of Rulda's mind, making little squelching noises like wet balls hitting the mud.

Runaway Non-Listers.

Six drones came screaming through the evening from the direction of New Colucan, their insignias – Offworld Police – stark in the dim light.

By agreement, no one said a word. Fani's moment, it seemed, had come – and gone.

The drones circled overhead, and then they hung – suspended – above the ocean. If Rulda had dared look up, she would have thought the scene to be a human painting. She didn't, waiting instead for the incinerating white beam to strike them.

It didn't.

The drones banked once and then turned westwards, into the ocean, away from New Colucan, away from them. The air filled with a deeper hum, a heavier sound.

Fani leapt up and waved at the horizon. 'They're here!'

From the south of the continent, the *Terran Sky* sailed the air towards them at a slow yet steady pace. 'What are they waiting for?' Fani screamed raggedly. And then she was running, through the tall grass, and they were running after her, all short gasps and stumbling steps, towards the ship.

The *Terran Sky* drew closer by degrees until at last the hatch opened. A warmer light – that did not come from a fire – bathed them, and they heard the urgent human voice: 'Up, up. We have no time!'

Rulda found herself pulled up into the womb of the *Terran Sky*. The last thing they saw beneath them was the ocean of Xolon, upon whose dark surface little lights flickered in and out of existence.

Like fireflies, she thought, on Terra, before she'd left because Terra was not room enough. The fireflies that she had described to Noroon, translating words and images into a language that did not possess them, on the day she'd decided that he would be the only human being who would know that she had come from elsewhere, that she had chosen Xolon instead of being born to it, in the days before 'One world, one blood, one bone', when difference did not yet matter.



Saira had never liked definitions. But that had not stopped them from trying to define home, in the days of Terra, stars and fireflies.

Now, at last, he had another meaning.

Home is the person you remember to miss after a century and a half.

And after 15 decades in space, he was ready to go home.

Only to find that Terra had changed its laws, and more than a century in space meant an automatic revocation of Terran membership.

He could re-apply.

Re-application was expensive, more money than a ship's Captain had saved in all these years.

But home was the person you remembered to miss, home was the flash of copper eyes under a Terran sun. And although they had not spoken of it when he left, they both knew that home was not an idea that eroded with time.

He began looking for missions that could do with an experienced human captain, missions that carried a reward that matched the risks he was willing to take to return – home.

Through the transparent floor beneath his feet, Jatayu watched as the five Non-Listers were brought into the reception chamber of the *Terran Sky*. Regular Xolonians, by the looks of it, just unlucky to have ended up on the wrong side of an algorithmic line – not that he could ever tell the difference between a Terran, a Xolonian and a Hauderian from a distance.

'Captain Jatayu.'

'Yes, Officer.'

'Offworlders on board,' said Mara. 'And the inspector's been dumped on Eldor.'

'It's time then,' said Jatayu. 'One last flight.' He was turned away from Mara, looking up into space, his hands behind his back.

'Captain, is everything all right?'

He felt her words wash over him.

'Nothing, I just –' he felt his face crinkle into a smile. On an impulse he asked, 'Have you left someone behind on Hauder, Officer?'

'What – oh!' He heard Mara's breath catch in her throat. 'No.'

'Anywhere?'

'We'll...'

'Go on. I bet nobody ever asks you this.'

It came out in a rush. 'She's also in space, Captain. It's been two decades, but –' Light entered Mara's voice, 'we both keep the Hauderian calendar. Every Founding Day at midnight, wherever we are, we turn a telescope towards shining Unbar, and make believe we're watching it together, as we used to back...home.'

He turned back to her, quickly enough to catch the last wistful gleam in her eye before it faded into an embarrassed nonchalance.

'And that's why you didn't want to give up being a Hauderian, Mara?' She started. 'So your memory banks could retain access to Hauder's calendar.'

'Yes,' she whispered.

'Take some time off after this trip,' he said gently, 'I'll put in a word for you.'

'Thank you, Captain Jatayu,' she looked up at him. 'Why did you ask me this?'

'Oh, nothing,' he straightened. 'I think I'm ready to go home, that's all. On our way, Officer. Make sure we take all precautions to avoid that damned Deva patrol. The Collective shouldn't have a problem with rescue – it doesn't affect their precious Internal Market as long as we're not hauling off cheap labour to Madi – but who knows. Rather not have them laser first and ask questions later.'

'Yes, Captain.'

'Good,' he nodded at her. 'I'll go down and speak to the Xolonians then.'

At a gesture, the floor panels beside him opened up. Jatayu strode down the stairway and into the reception chamber.

'Welcome, Xolonians, to the *Terran Sky*,' he said, as they stopped to look at him. 'I know they have taken everything from you, but you're safe now, safe from offworlding, and safe from Xolon and its barbaric List.'

He did not wait for a reaction to his opening, because he knew from experience that none of them would yet be able to speak.

'We're taking you to Sikar, your new home. For the duration of the trip, we're going to put you in the hold in a cryogenic sleep. This is just to save resources; the *Terran Sky* was never built for search-and-rescue.' Jatayu allowed himself to smile, and caught, as he always did, the ghost of one or two grins in response. 'I'm afraid you won't be seeing me or the crew again after this. When you awake, you will be home.'

'Thank you – Captain,' the one who seemed to be their leader, spoke.

He nodded. Flanked by two of his crew, the five Xolonians trooped past him, on their way to the hold.

As the last one passed him, she stopped and turned, catching his eye.

'Where is home, Captain?'

'Why do you ask?'

'When we fled from New Colucan, we were no longer of Xolon,' she said, her voice clear and frank. 'Every waking moment, I felt the sky press down on me. I want home to be a place where that can never happen.'

He shifted. 'What is your name?'

'Rulda.'

'What does that mean?'

'In Xolonian, it means traveller.'

'Apt. Well, Rulda, home is where you don't need to prove you belong. Is that enough?'

'Yes - no. Will I have my memory banks returned to me, Captain?'

For the first time, Jatayu understood why all the Off-List Xolonians he had brought on board looked like a part of them had been seared out of existence.

'I'm sure you will,' he said softly. 'It's not hard to plug people back in these days. Was there something you lost, Rulda?'

'A lifetime of work - on the Deva language.'

'You were a linguist?'

'I was. I wanted - want - to use language so I can make the world larger.'

He started, but Rulda was speaking again. 'Will there be a List where you are taking us, Captain?'

'Never.' Jatayu suddenly felt that he was being asked to complete a thought.

'Not all places are obsessed with achieving such... permanence,' he said, 'or with being labelled - listed.'

'And you, taking us there,' Rulda replied, her voice like the sound of running water, 'you do not like definitions either?'

'I would suffer someone's - sometimes,' he whispered.

She was looking directly at him. 'You really think there is a place out there where we can outrun algorithms?'

He already knew the answer. 'Space is room enough, Rulda.'

The four Xolonians - and their guards - had vanished into the hold. The two of them stood alone in the reception chamber, amidst the banners of Terra and the starlight creeping in through transparent panels.

He opened his mouth.

'A moment, please.'

But the voice that spoke was not his. Jatayu swung around. Mara had come down the stairway and was standing at the end of the chamber.

'Excuse me for just a minute,' Jatayu whispered. He took swift steps towards Mara, reaching her in seconds. 'Can't it wait?' he murmured, fierce and low.

'Captain, I need to speak to you,' she kept her voice low to match his. 'There has been a mistake.'

'What is it, Third Officer?'

'I checked our coordinates, Captain,' she said. 'We are taking a long route to Sikar. Through a detour.'

'I know.'

Mara stared. Silence hung between them. 'Captain,' she said slowly, 'The detour takes us to Madi.'

'I'm aware.'

'Madi is not on the way to Sikar, Captain.'

'I'm aware.'

'They looked at each other again.

'Apologies Captain, but...'

'Yes, Third Officer?'

'The same Madi, the planet of the viriconium mines? The mines of Madi?'

'What of it?'

'Aren't the *only* things on the planet the mines, Captain, the mines from hell - and the miners who can never leave, the ones the smugglers transport?'

'I don't know, Third Officer. I haven't studied the geography of Madi. Should I have?'

'I...'

She stopped. Her mouth opened and shut once. Then she saluted. 'Very well, Captain. My apologies.'

'Think nothing of it.'

She left.

Jatayu turned and walked slowly back to where Rulda still stood. 'I'm sorry. Where were we?'

She was looking directly at him again. 'You were going to say something to me, Captain.'

He did not speak.

'Is there something you want to say to me, Captain?'

He gulped - once - and then brought his teeth together with a click. 'I hope you have a pleasant sleep, and I'm sorry that I won't be seeing you again.'

She nodded and turned away - and as she walked past him at last, starlight glinted upon her eyes and they shone a rare copper.

Jatayu started once more, as though a memory had drifted in through the impermeable dome in which he had spent the first two decades of his life, upon a ruined, artificial Terra, looking at the stars that were pinned to the roof of the bio-dome.

He went back to looking at the space and at the fireflies that had come to stay.