**DOG STAR**

PROLOGUE

The whole thing seemed to happen almost by accident, like an elbow knocking over a carefully arranged stack of plates. One day Helen was expertly climbing out the window of her small attic room into the rustling branches of an apple tree, and the next she was carrying a rumpled duffle bag of belongings through the foggy autumn streets of Halifax on a course that would take her away from everything she knew—not just the sleepy town of Jordan Falls, Nova Scotia where she had grown up—but absolutely *everything*. She was leaving Earth. The entire planet.

Even though Helen had spent almost a year processing the idea, she still felt dazed, and the hugeness of the change was still impossible to hold in her mind all at once. She would never see her house again or her friends or her infuriating cousins Andy and Beth. Where Helen was going, she would only get to hear her grandmother's voice in video messages that would take weeks to arrive. She would never again get to splash in the muddy little creek behind the house or ride the snowmobile through the woods with her father.

For that matter, she thought, slowing her lagging gait even further at the sudden realization, she would never see the moon again. Ever.

And who would have guessed that such an immense journey could begin on a drizzly Sunday afternoon barely different than a thousand others?

All around, people went along with their early morning tasks as though nothing were out of the ordinary. A couple hurried though the misting rain into the opening of a tiny café. Across the street a heavily tattooed older girl turned the key in the door of a comic book store Helen had been in dozens of times on various visits to the city. Looking at these things for the last time, Helen dragged her feet behind her parents, grasping her bag in one hand and her dog's leash in the other. Helen was not generally a sullen girl—at the worst she might have been called introverted or aloof. She did have a tendency to let her mind wanderer, particularly when the weather was nice. “Head in the clouds,” her mother (and a few less forgiving teachers) had said—“Just lost in thought,” her father often put it, more kindly. Despite a tendency to withdraw at times, Helen always kept a small circle of close friends and was generally liked by those that knew her. But anyone who knew Helen for any time at all would be forced to admit that she had a distinctive obstinate streak—and a bit of a temper—that kicked in whenever she set her mind to something, no matter how trivial or odious the task. And for the moment Helen's mind was set firmly on taking in every last detail of the surrounding scene at the pointed expense of her parents’ tight schedule.

Finally, with Helen’s snail pace now bordering on the comical, Helen’s mother turned on her daughter with a raised eyebrow and a look conveying both amusement and annoyance. "Enjoying your stroll are you?" she asked her daughter dryly.

Helen snapped out of her daze, feeling only a moment of embarrassment before switching to a practiced defiance that had characterized her interactions with her mother for some months. "Yes," she answered, “I was hoping we might stop for a picnic.” Helen glared down at her feet with a fierce scowl before peeking back up to see her mother’s reaction.

Helen's mother raised her eyebrow even further and opened her mouth to reply, but before the words were out, Helen's father, always the peacemaker, placed a hand on his wife's arm. "It’s fine, Marion," he said. "Really. It's not as if they can leave without us."

At these words Helen felt a deep twinge of despair. She knew what her father said was true. Her parents were essential members of the expedition, and they wouldn't be left behind. *But maybe*, thought Helen, her heart giving a small leap of hope and her mind beginning to wander again, *Maybe they* will *forget us if we're late enough…*

But really she knew this fantasy was as pointless as her grumbling and foot dragging. They would be leaving. It was decided. And nothing would ever be the same.

So try as she might to delay the inevitable, ten minutes later Helen found herself walking through a cavernous hanger echoing with the excited voices of travelers. After that there was nothing left to do. Setting her shoulders, Helen followed her parents up the gangplank of the ship that would carry her away from her home.

For all her worry, Helen was becoming a space traveler in a time when space travel was almost mundane—people had long ago settled the moon and Mars, not to mention a multitude of space stations, some as large as cities.

But Helen had never known anything besides the drowsy seaside town of Jordan Falls. To her, the idea traveling to the far ends of the solar system seemed impossibly strange and—although she would never admit it—more than a little bit terrifying.

Until her parents had been chosen for the scientific expedition to the Illumina Space Station, Helen’s world had consisted mostly of fields and creeks, gnarled trees and wooded paths. Of course Helen’s life extended beyond the natural surroundings of her home. Like all kids her age, she had also grown up with technology—she had the requisite pair of virtual goggles and a modest collection of video games for those days when the weather was bad. But in reality she had always liked the outside world better with its earthy smells and animal wildness. She had always kept a collection of creatures in small jars by her bed—moths or toads or earthworms. These were typically respectfully freed after a day or two of captivity, but more than once Helen had gotten in trouble for releasing one of these "visitors" in the house to provoke a reaction from her mother.

And of course, Helen had grown up with dogs perpetually trotting at her heels—all excellent in their own ways—but none, she was sure, quite as excellent as her current dog, Blink. With Blink at her side, Helen felt herself the foremost expert in her small domain. She had perfected the art of exploration, forging secret passageways through overgrown hayfields and backyards and over frozen ponds. She lived, in short, more or less as the kids of her town had lived since the beginning of time.

But now, of course, all that was different. She was leaving—and not for one of the heavily manned colonies that some of her friends had gone to before. She and her parents would be bringing supplies and food and technology to an entirely new space station farther out than anyone had ever traveled before.

The trip would take eight years, but that was in Earth time. As Helen’s father had explained, most of this time would be spent in stasis, so Helen would age only a few weeks before she arrived.

“It will be just like going to sleep for a few nights,” her father had told her brightly when first describing the trip.

No fool, Helen had set her jaw at this simplistic explanation. “Sure," she had said. "And when I wake up, I’ll still be a kid, but all my friends will have grown up. When we reach the station, they’ll all be in college.”

Her father had taken in his daughter's quick logic with both admiration and sadness. He had no answer. It was the truth.

Or it was the truth as he imagined it, at least.

In reality, as Helen set her foot on the gangplank of the ship, she took her first steps on a journey quite different than any her parents could ever have imagined. She *was* going somewhere—somewhere very, very far away—but it wasn't the Illumina Station. Her father—her poor, sweet father whose journey was destined to be so short and sad—he would never have the chance to think of his daughter by any name other than the one he had given her. To him, she would always be just Helen.

But Helen Corsair would be known by many nam­­­es in her life. Some would call her Beacon. Some would call her Desert Star. They would call her names in many old languages, names meant “devil” and “bell ringer,” names that meant “dog chaser” and “ghost bringer.”

But as a gangly, dark-haired girl of twelve turning to take in one last view of the home she was leaving behind, Helen was no more aware of these things than a seed resting in a dusty field is aware of an approaching storm.

ONE

By the time Helen woke on the deck of the Martian medical station, her friends had already aged seven months. Most her schoolmates were 13 by now, while she was not even a single day older.

It was this daunting thought that occupied Helen's mind as she sat in a bland room eating a bland sandwich handed to her by a bland medical technician. While Helen’s mind reeled, the technician did his job, mechanically examining her for signs of any of the various ailments that could overtake passengers in stasis.

"Any soreness in your joints?" he asked tonelessly. "Any changes in vision?"

Sitting at one of several dozen compact silver medical stations in the warehouse-like hold, Helen yet again took on the impossible task of mulling over her future life, and found she could think of nothing but her family's small wooden house in Jordan Falls, nestled between the woods and the sea, the house that was now seven whole months in her past. Loyal to her stormy mood, her family's five-year-old border collie Blink lay quietly at her feet looking appropriately desolate.

Touching Blink with one toe, Helen gestured to the medical technician. "What about him?" she asked. "Are you going to check out Blink too?"

This question seemed to fluster the already distracted technician. "I'm not sure," he said. "I'll have to ask my supervisor. We usually only do the passengers here."

"Blink *is* a passenger," said Helen crossing her arms firmly across her chest in a gesture she had inherited directly from her formidable mother.

The technician began to stammer a disconcerted reply.

Across the hold, Helen saw her parents appear through a small doorway, first her father, smiling as usual with some corny joke on the edge of his lips and then, trailing after, Helen's predictably stern and wry-looking mother. They glanced briefly around the room before spotting Helen and crossing to the bench where she sat.

Her father squeezed his daughter's shoulders, saying, "Hey kiddo," before turning to the technician. "Everything okay here?" he asked. "She hasn't been giving you any trouble has she?"

Her father winked and Helen felt her scowl lessen in spite of herself. "Aren't they going to make sure Blink is okay?" asked Helen. "He's been in stasis too, you know."

Helen's mother sighed at this. "I don't know why you insisted that Blink stay in your pod, Helen. He would have done just fine with the livestock, and the vets would probably have had him checked him over by now. Honestly Helen, you're always so stubborn."

"I don't know whereshe could have gotten *that* trait," said Helen's father with a grin.

Helen's mother crossed her arms, becoming a mirror image of her daughter.

Helen put her hand protectively on Blink's collar. "He would've missed me."

"He would have been *asleep*," said her mother firmly.

Her father chuckled and took his wife's hand. "Surely it doesn't hurt anything if she wants her dog with her?"

Her mother gave a sigh and a grim smile, relenting. "Okay. But Blink isn't *her* dog, Bill. Remember that. Not to be the bad guy, but Blink's on this trip to be a working dog. We both know he's going to be occupied most of the time after we arrive, and Helen might as well get used to that idea now."

Helen's frown deepened, and her hand tightened on Blink's collar. "*Helen* can hear you, you know. You don't have to talk like I'm not here. And anyway, Blink's always been a working dog. He'll still get to sleep with me."

Helen knew her mother's words were true, however—at the station, Blink's job would be to help her father work with livestock most of the time. Her mother, on the other hand, would be leading the terraforming team, the group of scientists who would have the daunting task of coaxing green growing things out of the barren metal of the Illumina station.

Her mother sighed and turned to Helen with an infuriating all-knowing look. "Alright, well we don't need to talk about this anymore right now. We'll talk more when we get there."

"In seven years," grumbled Helen.

Helen's mother ignored this comment and gave her daughter a perfunctory and unreturned hug. "It won't be so bad," she said. "You'll see. You'll have loads of friends soon enough. You'll be running the station before you know it." This empty reassurance out of the way, Marion turned to her husband. "The Eden's reboarding before the Fortitude, so I'd better get going." She scratched the top of Blink's head. "Be a good dog," she said. "And try to take care of my stubborn daughter."

Helen's parents exchanged a quick kiss. "See you in a few minutes," said her father. Her mother gave a rare laugh at this, then turned and walked away, her long dark braid swinging across her back as she disappeared through the door on the far side of the hold.

William looked down at his brooding daughter with sympathy. "She means well, you know."

"How can you tell?" asked Helen folding her arms mutinously across her chest. Her father laughed and tousled her hair.

Over the past year or so, Helen's relationship with her mother had become increasingly prickly, ever since her parents' decision to leave Jordan Falls for the Illumina. Even though Helen knew it was a joint decision—"a *family* decision," as her mother called it—Helen couldn't help but blame her mother, whose successful career made their family a perfect fit for the fledgling space station.

As Helen finished her sandwich, a vet finally arrived to examine Blink. Watching the vet's meticulous process with some interest, Helen absentmindedly reached into her jacket pocket, and discovered a few small green branches tucked inside.

"Look," she said to her father. "It's the blueberry clippings we got from the garden. Why aren’t they all dried up? It's been months, hasn't it?" For a moment she hoped there had been some sort of mix-up, that they were really still on Earth and that no time had passed at all.

Her father chuckled. "They were in stasis too," he said. "Nothing ages in those pods." Helen pondered this idea, realizing that, of course, that must be how they transported her mother's plants to the station. The vet gave a quick thumbs up to Helen's father before rushing off to other tasks.

"Alright kiddo," said her dad. "That's our cue. Time to get back on the Fortitude before they leave without us."

Helen followed her father back to the deck of the ship and traveled down the short maze of passageways to one of the many small rooms full of stacked rows of transparent stasis pods. Helen could see that many of the pods in her room were occupied by passengers either already asleep again or quickly heading in that direction. Her father helped her climb into her berth, and then hoisted Blink up after her. Blink circled twice before obediently settling into a compact ball at her feet. Her father climbed up the short ladder to kiss his daughter goodbye. "See you in a flash, kiddo," he said.

On impulse, Helen reached up and tucked a small sprig of the blueberry plant into her father's front pocket. He smiled, tousling his daughter's hair before pushing the button that brought the curved window of the berth down between them.

Helen heard the soft hiss of machinery, smelled the tang of something almost lemony, and immediately began to feel sleepy. Her father stayed by the pod as she struggled against slumber, and the last thing she saw before her eyes fell closed was her father smiling down at her as he ran one hand through his red hair.

Just as her father had said, her time asleep passed in a dreamless flash. And eventually she began to wake up, her eyelids impossibly heavy. But, as on the Martian way station, she waited patiently for them to open of their own accord. She knew this would happen in good time and that her father would be waiting nearby to take her to the next medical checkpoint.

From a million miles away, she could hear the echo of voices, which slowly resolved into words.

"…a ship…those papers…You don't really believe any of that rubbish, do you?"

"About…she came from…he's my brother. Should I call him a liar?"

To Helen's half asleep brain the words were familiar but the accent thick and strange. And a bubble of anxiety began to form in her drowsy mind as more and more words became clear.

"I don't know, but we have to do something with her, don't we."

"And what do you propose we do? Throw her back like a fish?"

Helen heard a sharp bark, a sound she knew well, a bark that told her Blink was awake and ready for play. And then Blink's happy bark of recognition transformed into a low growl that was countered by a deeper menacing animal snarl.

Helen's heart raced with adrenaline and her eyes flew open. In foggy confusion, she took in her surroundings.

She was not in the berth, not the one she had started in, in any case, and her father was nowhere to be seen. She was in a small dark room, lying on a low bed covered by a scratchy black blanket. Wool? But that couldn’t be right…

In the shadows she could see the forms of strange men, some smoking pipes, some looking concerned, others scowling gravely, but all—to the last one—staring straight at Helen with unwavering attention. The pipe smoke curled around her in spicy-smelling tendrils, adding to her lethargic confusion. She tried to command her brain to attention without success.

At the foot of her cot, Blink had no such problems. He stood at full alert—teeth bared, feet splayed, hackles raised in defense, his entire posture communicating readiness and hostility. And as Helen turned her head to see what Blink was trying so desperately to protect her from, she found herself inches from a huge set of snarling jaws. The jaws seemed to quiver with menace and were set in an enormous black ruffed head, a head attached to a creature far too large for such a small room.

Her mind quickly shuffled through possibilities—*lion, bear, panther..*. These were quickly cast away when her mind settled on a final undeniable conclusion—*dog.*

It was gargantuan, to be sure, but still recognizable even in her sleepy haze. This monstrous animal that Blink was about to fight—this creature, larger even than the bears Helen had occasionally spied in the far back woods on walks with her father—was a huge black dog.

**REVISIONS NEXT DRAFT**

* Clarify beginning events. Start with Helen walking in the street.
* Clarify that Helen’s trip is not unusual or an emergency. Have a scene of her remembering other friends who have gone into space.
* Have a scene of her saying good bye to a friend (Sally).

TWO

The snarling dogs began to circle, but Helen remained frozen beneath the heavy fog of long sleep. *Something is wrong.* She knew how this part was supposed to go—deep space travelers were often confused when they woke, so they were treated with extra care. They were brought out of stasis in warm recovery rooms filled with soft music and long rows of clean white beds. They might be given juice and food to recover their strength in increments, and to make the transition easier, children were often greeted by the faces of parents, who had been roused earlier. Helen felt she was far too old for such coddling and had insisted that she be brought out of stasis along with the first group of adults instead of the other kids.

Now, staring down the slavering muzzle of the monster dog, Helen wished she hadn’t made that request. She didn't feel like an adult at the moment, and all she wanted right now was to see her father—or even her mother—emerging from some secret recess in the gloomy room to take her in their arms. *This is wrong,* thought Helen. *All of this is wrong. I'm imagining it. I'm still asleep.*

But even trembling in confusion, the gears Helen's mind continued turning, and she knew she wasn't dreaming. *No dreams in stasis*, her mother had told her. *Just one minute asleep and the next awake.*

In front of her, the two enraged dogs squared off, hackles raised and teeth bared in menace. There was no doubt at all, however, about which way the fight would go. The standoff was almost comical. On one side stood the behemoth dog, a great churning mountain of fur and fangs, and on the other stood Blink—wiry and courageous—but also so small in comparison that he appeared almost as a puppy play fighting some backyard skirmish he couldn't hope to win.

But this was no game, and the outcome of a real battle would be deadly for Blink. Helen felt her heart lurch with a jolt of fear, and new streams of adrenaline coursed through her veins. It was enough to start her legs moving forward but only ever so slowly, as if they were made of half-dried clay.

She wasn't going to make it. Her loyal Blink was in terrible danger, and she was failing him when he needed her most. Helen clenched her fists in frustration, and with all the impossible effort she could muster, she threw herself towards her dear friend. She fell to her knees, helpless and still more than a meter away from the clash about to happen. In fact, her tumble seemed to plunge Blink even more into protective mode, and both dogs crouched back on their hind legs ready to spring.

And then just as quickly as the whole thing began, it was over. A towering shadow moved in the crowd, and a tall weather-beaten man in a black wool overcoat and a worn grey hat emerged into the light with a leathery scowl. "Anchor!" he said sternly. "Get over here you mangy cur!"

The words were not particularly piercing, but the man that had spoken them had a certain undeniable authority that easily crossed the barrier between species. The monster dog's reaction was immediate. At the sound of the command, the horrendous creature was transformed from hellish fiend into scolded pet. Head and tail low in submission, Anchor padded over to the man in the tattered black coat and lay down quietly with a furtive sideways look at his master.

The dog looked embarrassed, Helen realized with a shock. In fact, laying quietly at his master's side, the giant dog now looked not so much different than Blink did after he had been caught committing some illicit act—digging in the trash or trying to herd the neighbor’s chickens. In fact, the huge dog's awkward gait and lanky proportions suggested that Anchor might be even younger than Blink, a half-grown mutt barely out of puppyhood. The thought was staggering to Helen who had never seen such a huge animal in close quarters.

With Helen now seemingly safe from immediate harm, Blink reverted to his normal cowardly ways and slunk under the bed. Attempting to clear her sleep-addled mind, Helen looked around the room for any sign of her father. The dim smoke-filled space held men of seemingly every shape, size, and age. With the exception of the man in the coat and hat, most of the men wore heavy boots and grey or black wool sweaters (many of which had seen better days). There were men smoking long curved pipes that appeared to be carved from greenish bone, men who wore old-fashioned glasses, men with stern expressions or kindly ones, men who looked bemused or concerned or even slightly awed—every type of man, it seemed, except the one Helen sought. Nowhere to be found in the smoky room was the gangly red-headed form of Helen's father.

Something about the scent in the air reminded her of home, however, of the ocean, or—more precisely—of the docks in Jordan Falls where the fishermen tied up their Cape Islander boats and stacked their lobster pots in the off season.

But then Helen knew there were no oceans on her voyage—she could almost hear her mother’s chiding voice somewhere off in the distance, *no oceans in space silly girl, hardly any water at all—*so Helen quickly chased the thought away.

Gathering up her tattered courage, Helen made herself stand unsteadily from the floor. She put on her sternest face and glared back at the men who were still rudely gawking in her direction.

"Where am I?" she demanded. Although she tried to sound strong and serious, Helen could hear the waver in her voice as she spoke the words, and she mentally scolded herself for the show of weakness. Through tendrils of pipe smoke, she could see that the walls and floor of the small room were dark worn wood, and all was decorated like a cozy if slightly shabby guest room in someone's home—scattered about the low-ceilinged room was a motley collection of wooden chairs, threadbare embroidered cushions, wall hangings depicting a variety of odd-looking sea creatures, and small sturdy hand-woven rugs. "Is this Green's station?" Helen asked uncertainly. "Or did something happen? Are we back on Earth?"

At this final word, the men in the room responded with a collection of surprised gasps, and a few expressions changed from stern to incredulous.

"Are we supposed to listen to this rot, Bumboo?" said a voice from the back of the room, and other voices began to rumble in assent. Helen felt her spirit rise in anger as it always did when her words were questioned (even when she was lying). Helen couldn't stand for anyone not to believe her, and anyway, she *almost* always told the truth. And at the moment, Helen couldn’t even imagine what there was to doubt in her words.

The man with the grey hat and black coat, now identified as Bumboo, held up his hand, and the murmuring stopped. "Just let the girl speak, Oscar." He peered at Helen just as sternly as some of the others but not without some kindness too. Even when he had scolded his dog, Helen has sensed the sparkle of a smile hiding somewhere just beneath his expression. "Now, why would you think this is Earth?" he asked.

"Well…I just thought if something went wrong…you know on the trip," said Helen, uncertain now, "That we'd head back there."

This elicited another round of exclamations from the men.

"Sciist plant if ever I saw one."

"What rubbish."

Bumboo stood and faced the men. "Some of us," said Bumboo glaring at the men who had spoken up, "Should remember that the Sciists aren’t our enemies. Many here in this very room have Sciist roots—parents or wives or children, not to mention friends. The Corsair way isn't the only way."

"But who's to say she isn't an enemy?" asked another voice. "She could come from the Shallow, for all we know."

Another gasp went through the crowd followed by cold silence, as though this final thought were too horrible to even contemplate.

This was the last straw for Helen. Still groggy and confused and never patient at the best of times, Helen balled up her fists and took a solid step toward the men, now ready to stand her ground. "What's going on?" she demanded, her voice rising. "Where's my father? He said he'd be here when I woke up. Where is he?"

Sensing Helen's change in tone as a call to action, Blink again threw his cowardly nature aside once again and lunged from under the bed toward Bumboo who stood directly in Helen's path.

Just as quickly and with equal loyalty, Anchor launched across the room and grabbed Blink across the back with a set of jaws as large and dangerous as a bear trap. Helen watched in mute horror as Anchor shook Blink like a rag. Although Blink was not a small dog—as a border collie mix, he was 50 pounds or more—in the mouth of Anchor, he looked barely bigger than a rat held captive in the maw of a cat.

Helen threw herself into the fray, without an inkling of what she might actually do to save Blink from his plight.

Seeing the lack of wisdom in this action, Bumboo placed a firm hand on Helen’s shoulder and prevented her from plunging into the dog fight.

At that moment, the door burst open, and Helen became vaguely aware of the form of a towering dark-haired woman whose presence seemed to hold in the electricity of a gathering storm.

"What," said the woman with a fiery glare around the room, "In all the four storming oceans is going on in here?" If Bumboo's voice had the power to command respect from men and dogs, Helen felt sure this woman's voice had dominion over the force of nature itself, calling up tornadoes and hurricanes at her whim. At her entrance, Anchor had dropped a now limp and panting Blink to the ground and slunk off, cowering into a dark corner, tail between his legs. The woman held a sturdy looking black pot in one hand, and while she seemed no older than Helen’s mother and her face was quite attractive and surrounded by a tangled mass of dark reddish brown curls, her posture and fierce expression suggested that she wouldn’t hesitate to use any number of dangerous kitchen implements on any man or beast unwise enough to cross her.

Helen flew to Blink, who was whimpering and lying on one side. His eyes were open, but Helen could see several lines of blood trickling down his ribs. She knelt by his side and buried her hands in the fur by his head, feeling helpless to save him.

The pot-wielding woman surveyed the scene before her with a grim look before moving to action. "Arden!" she yelled through the doorway. "Arden Dickens! I know you’re out there in the hall. Come in here now, boy."

A tall black-haired boy entered the room and glanced at the black pot in the woman's hand with understandable trepidation.

"This pup's been hurt," said the woman. "Get him over to Doctor Simon, quick as you can now."

The boy paused uncertainly, glancing at Helen until the woman raised her pot once more. “Now!” she said. “Don’t make me ask you again.”

The boy obediently reached for the dog, but Helen dug her hands deeper into his fur, not willing to release her last connection to something familiar. "No!" she said. "You can't take him! He's my dog. He's mine!"

The men in the room looked around at one another, their looks of curiosity and disdain replaced by obvious discomfort at Helen’s dismay.

The woman set her pot down, and reached out to Helen's hands. "It's okay," the woman said, her fierce expression softening. "Let go now. Old Simon will have your dog fixed up right as salt in no time. He's the best Animist on the South Water."

Defeated in this final small battle, Helen released Blink's fur, and the boy carefully lifted her dog's limp body and carried Blink from the room.

Helen felt tears sliding wetly down her cheeks and wondered vaguely how long they'd been there. She angrily brushed them away.

With an air of practiced efficiency, the woman in the apron now turned her formidable attention to the men, who were still standing around the room, now looking awkwardly and pointedly away from Helen.

"And you fools!" said the woman. "Badgering a poor child to tears. What were you thinking?"

A short bald man in the back tentatively raised a finger in his own defense but was summarily shut down by one electric glare.

"I won't hear it, Oscar Miller!" said the woman. "Not a single word. Out! Every one of you!" she said, picking up her pot again and brandishing it toward the door. "Any business you have with my husband can wait until tomorrow. Out of my inn! Now!"

A few of the men grumbled in complaint, but all filed out until only Bumboo was left, leaning in one corner and chewing contemplatively on a sliver of wood. The woman cast him a wicked glare. He returned her sour look with a weather-worn grin and held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. She allowed him to stay with a final fierce look.

Softening her expression back into one of concern, the woman knelt by Helen where she sat still crumpled by the spot where Blink had been only moments before.

"Now then," said the woman. "It's not as bad as all that." She wiped Helen's face with one work-roughened hand. "What's your name, then?"

Helen tried to force the tears to stop but found it harder than she thought it would be. "Helen," she said miserably.

"Well, Helen," said the woman firmly, "I'm Emma, and you've met my husband, Bumboo. He normally has better manners," she said, punctuating her words with another hard glare at her husband.

Taking Helen's hand, Emma coaxed her up where they could both sit more comfortably on a pile of shabby quilts folded neatly at the foot of the bed.

"And that sorry creature in the corner there," Emma continued, gesturing to the huge dog, still cowering in a large ball in the shadows, "Is Anchor. Evidence aside, you don't need to be afraid of him. He's good with people, especially children. I think he was just a bit startled by your dog."

As if to illustrate the point, Anchor thumped his tail looking recalcitrant.

"Where's my dad?" asked Helen miserably. "Are we on a ship?"

"Well, yes, actually," said Emma. "Aren't you a bright girl. This is the Grey Goat. She's the best inn you'll find on floating on the south waterfront."

Bumboo cleared his throat and leaned forward on his elbows, his expression carefully blank. "I think she means a spaceship, Emma."

Emma looked minutely startled and then embarrassed. She looked down, brushing invisible specks from her apron. "Well of course that’s what she would mean," she said, turning to her husband in annoyance. "And that's just the problem, now isn't it? It's time to give to poor girl some answers, Bumboo. She's still scared half to death, and what have you and the idiot men in this town done about it?"

Bumboo sighed and crossed the room to the small bed. "We do owe you answers, Helen," he said taking his hat off briefly to scratch the back of his head. "But the truth is, I may not be able to tell you what you want to know. I can tell you that this isn't your home, though. And I’m sorry to say it isn't your ship either."

"Then where *is* the ship?" asked Helen.

"Still up there," said Bumboo, pointing vaguely toward the ceiling. "My brother's orbiter found you. That's how you ended up here. They salvaged your ship after you came through the Eye.”

“Salvaged?” said Helen, panic rising in her chest again. “What do you mean by salvaged? And where are the other people then? Where’s my dad? And the other ship? My *mom* was on that ship.”

Bumboo shook his head slowly. “They only found just the one ship, and that by itself was mighty peculiar. Even stranger, my brother says you and your dog were the only living things in that place. Like a ghost ship, it was.”

“But my dad—”

“Not there,” said Bumboo. “No one else was there.”

Helen shook her head slowly trying to let this sink in. Her father. Gone. Her mother. Gone. Blink was all that was left to her now—and *he* might be dead or dying. Dying in the hands of stranger…she shook this thought away before the tears could start again.

Helen swallowed hard before resuming her interrogation. “Then where am I?” she asked. “And what’s the Eye? This doesn’t seem like Mars or Earth.”

“Earth?” said Emma, startled out of her silence. She laughed and smiled taking one of Helen’s hands. “You mean like in the children’s stories?

Helen snatched her hand away as if burned by a hot coal. “It’s *not* a story,” she said. “It’s my home. What’s going on here? Tell me what’s happening!”

Bumboo sighed, taking off his hat again and scratching his head. “I know this is hard for you, Helen. And if what you say is true, you won’t even understand much of this, but you’re not on Earth. You’re at a place called Lokabrenna, a *planet* called Lokabrenna.

“The reason Emma laughed is that some people say we came from a place called Earth, that we came through a great hole in the sky—*that’s* what we call the Eye. But all that happened almost eight hundred years ago, if it happened at all. You see a lot of people here don’t believe that story anymore. They think we started here, that we’ve always been here, and they argue with the people who still believe in Earth. Why should we believe we came from the sky? After all, we’ve never actually *seen* anything come through the Eye.” At this he gave a great sigh. “Until now, that is.”

“So,” said Bumboo holding his hands out in front of him, “You can see why your arrival has caused a bit of a stir.”

“And has caused *some* people to forget their manners,” added Emma.

“That too,” said Bumboo. “And I’m sorry for that.”

Helen took this all in, feeling slightly numb. She thought about it, and then shook her head slowly. “It’s impossible,” she said. “We haven’t even traveled out of our own solar system yet. We’ve only had space travel for two hundred years—”

Helen froze mid-sentence, as a thought sent a sudden wave of cold over her entire body. Who really knew how long you could stay in stasis? The technology was fairly new. Her father had told her that animals had been kept safely under for more than a decade, but that was as far as the tests had gotten so far. They never kept people under for longer than two years at a stretch. But how long was *possible* really? Twenty years? A hundred? *Eight* hundred?

Seeing the color drain from Helen’s face, Emma stood, smoothing her skirts as she did so. “That’s enough for now,” said Emma with an air of practicality. “All that matters for the moment is that you’re on *my* boat, and I’m not going to let you starve. It’s time for a bit of food and something warm to drink before bed.”

Helen started to protest—*what about Blink, what about the ships, what about—*but seeing Emma pause to scoop up her iron pot, Helen felt a crushing exhaustion shudder through her frame. She let all thoughts dissipate and followed quietly after. As she left, Anchor gave her a furtive glance from the corner without raising his head. Even with everything that had happened, the look was poignant and sad and more familiar to Helen than anything else around her. The dog’s mournful expression reflected the marrow-deep sorrow Helen herself felt. *I made a mistake*, the look seemed to say. *I am alone. I am ashamed.*

As Helen left the room, she reluctantly gave Anchor a small scratch on the top of his head. *I forgive you,* she thought. Anchor’s great tail thumped softly once, and he let out a deep and thoughtful sigh.

Emma led Helen brusquely down a long low hallway, and as Helen tried to keep up, she began to realize that some of her unsteadiness was not only in her head, and the smell of saltwater on the air, clearer now in the hall, reminded Helen again of the docks in Jordan Falls.

“We’re on the water.” said Helen, swallowing a deep pang of homesickness. “Why’s your inn on a boat?”

“Why not?” said Emma. “I’d bet her against any of the inns in town, that’s for sure. Not all Corsairs are water people, but most are.”

“Corsair?” said Helen, remembering now that Bumboo had said it before. “But that’s my last name.”

Emma laughed. “You and half the folks around here. And a good strong name it is too,” said Emma, hoisting her skirts to climb a set of stairs so steep it resembled a ladder.

Helen started to ask more, but forgot her questions as she emerged after Emma into a kitchen full of soft light and the smells of cooking. A harried looking woman slightly younger than Emma juggled various plates and silverware and stirred a collection of bubbling pots on an enormous stove.

“How’s the weather, Millie?” asked Emma, grabbing a spoon to sample the contents in the closest pot.

“Half fair, half storm,” said Millie without looking up from her work. “Lots of business but mostly drinkers. Franklin Dewar’s already passed out under the table in the corner.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Well, money’s money, I guess. At least the chowder’s good tonight.”

Millie glanced at Helen as though seeing her for the first time. “This the lass then? The one from the Sciists?”

“Yes,” said Emma. “And she’s a bit out of sorts at the moment. But nothing a bowl something warm and a cup of tea won’t fix.”

Emma prepared a bowl and mug for Helen, throwing in a large hunk of dark brown bread for good measure. Then taking Helen by the shoulders, Emma led her through a swinging door into a dimly lit room full of people talking and laughing at small tables over food and drink. Emma drew her along one wall, avoiding the attention of the majority of the customers, much to Helen’s relief. Among the faces of the patrons, Helen saw men and women both and a few faces she recognized from the room below. These ducked low when they saw Emma enter or turned away to avoid notice.

If Emma saw this, she said nothing, leading Helen along an inconspicuous path to another set of stairs, this one a spiral, leading up to the deck of the ship.

“Thought you might like some fresh air,” said Emma. “Better than this smelly lot, anyway,” she said nodding in the direction of the dining room.

As Helen emerged on deck, it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark, but as soon as they did, she became aware of small yellow and blue lights twinkling in every direction. Emma led Helen to the ship’s rail, and Helen soon realized that the source of the lights was other boats—boats and ships of every shape and size as far as her eyes could see. Some were lit with few lights and some with many, some seemed abandoned in the starry dark and others, like Emma’s, were bustling with life.

“Are these all…inns?” asked Helen uncertainly.

Emma laughed, setting Helen’s food down on a low ledge next to the ship’s railing. “Hardly,” she said. “A few other inns but mostly fishers or algae skimmers or just folks’ homes.

“Now drink up,” she said, pushing the rough clay mug into Helen’s hands. “It’ll give you strength.”

Helen brought the bumpy reddish mug to her mouth completely expecting the taste of tea. She almost spit out her first mouthful when she was greeted instead by something salty and flowery with an aftertaste that reminded Helen of cherries. The flavor wasn’t bad, exactly…but certainly strange.

“What is this?” asked Helen.

“I told you,” said Emma. “It’s tea.”

Helen was more careful tasting the chowder, and was somewhat relieved to find it tasted more or less like the seafood chowder with which she was familiar. Some of the textures were strange—softer than one might expect—but the overall flavor was right. She ate quickly, realizing she was more than a little hungry. In the end, she found herself sopping up the last of her soup with the sweet brown bread, a habit Helen’s mother had discouraged with disapproving looks but one which Emma didn’t seem to mind.

As Helen slowly sipped the last of the strange tea from her mug, she noticed that she and Emma were not alone on the deck of the Grey Goat. A few other customers stood scattered along the rails drinking from mugs or talking quietly in pairs. Somewhere not far off Helen heard a cheerful female laugh, and the sound made her feel suddenly very sad and alone. Feeling the abrupt chill of the night, Helen clutched her thin shirt around her shoulders.

Far on the other end of the ship, Helen spotted a series of long low shadowy shapes laid out along the deck—if they hadn't been on the deck of a boat, Helen might have almost thought they were haystacks.

“What’s that?” asked Helen pointing. “Down there.”

“Just the men’s dogs.” said Emma. “They take up too much room down below. Nothing to worry about though. Unless you're a bilge rat, that is.” she said, giving Helen quick wink. “But truly, they're better behaved than Anchor. He’s still young yet.”

And sure enough, one of the low shapes suddenly moved, lifting a shaggy canine nose to sniff the salty night air.

"They’re *all* so big?” asked Helen.

Emma laughed. “Well to my eyes it’s your dog that’s a bit on the small side.”

Suddenly there was a loud crash from below deck, followed by a chorus of raucous laughter. Emma's face turned stormy, and even in the dark, Helen could see the fire lighting in her hazel eyes.

"Holy sheep guts, what now?" said Emma, and without another word she disappeared down the staircase in a whirl of skirts.

Helen noticed that the laughter stopped abruptly shortly after Emma's disappearance. *No coincidence there*, thought Helen. She doubted Emma stood for much foolishness on her boat.

As Helen looked out across the water, she was surprised when the silhouette of a man standing some distance away suddenly disappeared over the rail. Afraid for his safety, Helen immediately stretched over the banister and peered down towards the water to see where the man had landed. What she saw instead was a series of long knotted ropes hanging down to a dozen or so rowboats tied in the water around the edge of the ship. The man who had vaulted over the rail was deftly scurrying down one of the ropes. When he reached the bottom, he dropped unsteadily into one of the row boats and immediately began to row with little effect. The man looked around, seemingly confused as to why he wasn't moving.

"Still tied in!" yelled a voice from behind Helen.

Helen turned to see Bumboo standing behind her holding a sweater in his hands.

"Aye! Thanks then!" yelled the man from below, untying the boat before rowing away.

Bumboo shook his head smiling. "Too drunk to realize he's in Franklin Dewar’s dory. I suppose they'll sort it out in the morning."

Bumboo held the black sweater out to Helen. "Emma thought you might be cold out here in the wind." Helen took the sweater gratefully and pulled it over her head. It was a little large but the wool was soft and warm.

"So where's he going?" asked Helen, nodding toward the man who was still paddling in a wobbly line away from the boat.

"Back to town," said Bumboo. "Scupperton. We're not far from shore." Bumboo pointed, and Helen could see now that not all the lights came from boats. In the distance she could also see the silhouettes of a clump of low buildings, some with flickering yellow windows and some dark.

As she peered at the town, she was surprised when a bright sliver of silver light suddenly appeared above the low roofs.

"What is that?" asked Helen. "There, that light?" Even as she watched, the sliver grew bigger, emerging in the night sky like white fire.

"That," said Bumboo with a chuckle, "Is the Eye. It rises and sets like the sun, but you can see it at night as well as day. The old timers call it the Dog Star."

"Why?" asked Helen, unable to take her eyes from the swirling mass of light emerging in the sky.

Bumboo laughed, "Well, I suspect you'll find out soon enough." He shook his head slowly and gave Helen a quizzical look. “I suppose that seals it for me. Even without our odd clothes, if you don’t know the Eye, I doubt you’re from anywhere around here.”

"So…it's a star then?" asked Helen.

Bumboo frowned thoughtfully. "No, it's not a star, not really. My Grandpa always told me it was 'a great bloody hole in the sky.' That seems about as true as anything. I don’t know what it is, and I doubt anyone else really does either, no matter what the Sciists say."

Bumboo took a curved white pipe out of the pocket of his coat and lit it, giving Helen a sidelong glance. "Emma lets the customers smoke inside, but I have to come out on deck. How's that for love?"

The Eye was half risen now, and Helen could clearly see that the center was a circle of black, surrounded by a mass of slowly moving tendrils that seemed half cloud, half light.

"And my ship…it came through that thing?" asked Helen.

Bumboo sighed and blew out several contemplative puffs of smoke. After a moment, one coalesced into a ring and floated off into the dark. "That's what my brother Rufus told me. He's an odd one, Station Sciist and all, but I doubt he’d lie outright."

The Dog Star was almost fully visible now, and Helen could see why people compared it to an eye—the swirls of light seemed to pulse and spin as if alive, slowly circling a dark pupil that expanded and contracted as though focusing on the tiny world below.

"Now I have a question for you, Helen, the last one for now. But I can wait until tomorrow if you're too tired."

Helen thought about this and gave Bumboo a quick nod of consent.

"You said there was a second ship, one your mother was on? Do you remember the name of that ship?" asked Bumboo.

"Of course," said Helen. "It was the Eden."

Bumboo froze for just a fraction of a second and his worry was palpable in the night air. Then he gave another long sigh and knocked his pipe on the side of the ship to empty the remnants into the sea. “Ah Helen,” he said shaking his head slowly. "I know it will bring me a world of trouble in the end, but winds help me, I believe you. And that was exactly what I was afraid you would say.”

"Why?" asked Helen, glad at last to be believed by *someone* but also profoundly confused by Bumboo’s reaction. "What does it matter what the other ship was called?"

"Because," said Bumboo, seeming very tired himself all of a sudden. "In those children's stories Emma talked about, the ones that talk all about Earth and Old Home and the beginning of things, the stories that interest the Sciists and make the Corsairs angry, in *those* stories The Eden was the name of another ship, a very important ship. In the fables and myths we all learn as children, the Eden was the ship that brought us here."

Helen heard these words in a fog. She stared mesmerized at the slowly spiraling Eye, feeling almost pulled into its depth. She knew she should feel a jolt of fear at Bumboo's revelation—a sense of horror at what this might mean—but instead she felt a strange sort of eerie calm, as though Bumboo’s words were something she had always known, like a dream slowly bobbing to the surface after years sunk deep in the murky recesses of her memory. Her mind began to spin slowly with the turning of the Eye.

Behind her, she heard Bumboo laugh and was shaken out of her reverie by his firm hands on her shoulders.

"You're falling off your feet, girl," he said with a chuckle. "Looks like Emma's tea has got you. No one sleeps lightly on this boat. Let's find you a berth or you'll end up sleeping on the deck with Franklin Dewar.”

Helen let herself be led to the stairs by Bumboo, glancing back over her shoulder for one last look at the Eye, now fully visible in the sky. As she did so, one of the huge shaggy dogs on the other end of the ship lifted up its head and let out a mournful howl. A second later, several other dogs added their voices in answer. And soon Helen could hear them calling from all across the water, from boats and from the shore, a somber chorus that would continue until long after she had drifted off to sleep.

**REVISIONS NEXT DRAFT**

* Include more about Helen’s stoic nature to make her failure to react emotionally clearer.
* Arden should now have black hair.
* One dog fight might be enough.
* Divide the chapter between the below deck scene and the above deck scene.
* Include more about what the ship looks like / feels like. Also more about the ship’s technology.

THREE

Helen saw stars—not the twinkling type of star from the night sky, but the lopsided paper sort that a young child might cut out and bring home from art class. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, and realized the paper stars were actually glued to a low ceiling only a few feet above narrow bed in which Helen lay. The stars seemed to be laid out in a sort of pattern, and "The Bellows" was scratched in a childish hand on a slip of paper that was tacked up next to the whole array. *Bellows*—so strange and old-fashioned sounding. A constellation, maybe?

And then it hit her all at once, heavy and full of momentum, like a sandbag landing after a fall from a theater ceiling. The curtain rose on the events of the previous night before she was ready. *An unfamiliar constellation for an unfamiliar planet.*

She was lost, as lost as anyone could be. Her mother and father gone to who knows where. *Use your brain, Helen*, she heard her mother’s annoyed voice say in her head. *We’re dead. What else makes logical sense?*

Helen shook the thought away, unable to even consider it for now. And Blink—her last solid connection to the past, lay gravely injured—possibly dying—in the hands of a stranger. What could she do?

Panic begin to boil up in Helen’s blood and her hands curled into a white-knuckled death grip on the tattered wool blanket under which she lay. *An alien blanket, an alien place*.

But in reality *she* was the only alien here. What would they do to her, Helen wondered, replaying scenes from the various movies she remembered in which aliens had visited earth? It never went well. And Helen had never stopped to think how it must have seemed from the aliens’ perspective, what they must have been feeling. Terror. Hopelessness. Despair.

Then as quickly as the murky, overwhelming feelings hadarisen in Helen’s chest, the sensations receded. Helen felt a familiar resolve wash over her, followed by a sort of calm as her stubbornness to remain in control conquered her fear.

*There is nothing for it*, as her ever practical mother always said, *except to move forward.*

If her parents were missing, Helen would find them. If Blink was wounded, she would see that he was healed. She would fix this by learning everything she could about this place, by exploring until she knew what had happened, by finding a way home.

Finally ready to face whatever lay ahead, Helen tore her gaze from the unnerving alien stars above her bed and sat up carefully, taking a quick inventory of her surroundings. Pulling aside the thin curtain next to her, she realized she was actually in a narrow bunk room. A sturdy looking wooden ladder led down from Helen's sleeping nook to a bare but well-swept floor, and a few feet across the room, Helen could see three more pairs of beds. These were all tidily made up with the mismatched curtains pulled back with bits of ribbon or string. Helen could hear the low rumbles of snoring, however, so she knew she was not entirely alone in the room.

Swinging her legs over the edge of the bed, Helen noticed she was now clothed in a warm flannel gown and thick wool felt slippers tied up with green leather laces. She was glad for this, as the morning air held the cool tang of autumn. She climbed carefully down the ladder and discovered that the snoring was coming from the bunk below. A grey haired man with an overnight shadow of beard slept open-mouthed with one arm and one leg sprawled off the bed.

Just as Helen was preparing to set out on her own in search of the kitchen, Emma's face appeared in the doorway.

"Ah, you're up," said Emma, roughly pulling back her unruly curls with one hand and tying them back with a faded blue scarf. "Feeling better, I hope. Nice to see a child that wakes with the sun. Not lazy like some I might mention." Emma scowled in the direction of the lower bunk and then marched across the room and gave the sleeping figure a jab in the side with her booted foot.

"Frank!" she yelled through cupped hands, a bit louder than necessary. "Get up you old dog. Your wife's here with your dory."

Helen’s mind was clearer in the brightness of morning, and it dawned on her how strange it was that so many people here used dories as everyday transportation. Coming from Nova Scotia, she knew about the old-fashioned oar powered boats—she had been to the historic dory museum not far from her town in Shelburne and knew that the little boats had once been widely used by fishermen in Nova Scotia and elsewhere. Helen’s grandfather had even had one that he had restored as a hobby. No one that Helen knew of, though, used them for much in modern times.

Emma jabbed the sleeping man again with her foot, harder this time, and he sat up with a start, bumping his head on the underside of the bunk. He slumped on the floor with a groan. "What time is it then?" he asked groggily, blinking with visible effort and staggering to his feet.

"Daytime," said Emma, "And well past time for your shop to open. And don't worry about Tupper. He swam back to shore last night with the other dogs. Now get going. Ruby's waiting."

The man's bloodshot eyes widened slightly in concern. "Right," he said, tucking in his grimy shirttails and straightening with new steadfastness. "Time to pay the piper. Better be off."

"I'd say so," said Emma with a half smile. "And from the look on Ruby's face, you'd better stay on the mainland for at least week or so."

The man nodded somberly. "So how much do we owe you then?"

Emma put her hands on her hips and looked Franklin up and down as though evaluating the worth of the man himself. "We'll call it four for the drinks, eight for the lodging, and two for making Bumboo lug your sorry carcass to bed."

"More than fair, more than fair…" mumbled Franklin, heading for the door with sober resolve. "Til next time Em."

"If Ruby doesn't skin you and sell you for leather," said Emma without a backwards glance.

Helen heard a grim harrumph from the hallway.

Emma shook her head with a dour smile. "Piece of work, that one. Good thing Ruby's got a head on her shoulders or he'd ruin them both."

"He forgot to pay you," said Helen, slightly concerned at the oversight.

"In money, you mean?" Emma laughed. "I doubt he has two shards on him if Ruby has half a drop of sense. Oh, don't worry now. We'll collect this afternoon. He and Ruby work in the garden—dairy farmers—so they pay me in goat's milk. Honestly, we do most of our business in barter, at least around The Scup—we get a bit of money now and then from the Sciists and out of town folk, but trade's generally the easiest way."

"Alright then," said Emma, clapping her hands. "A bit of breakfast and then into town. Must check up on your dog, after all."

At the mention of Blink, Helen felt a pang of guilt and worry, and a deep pit formed in the hollow of her stomach. Helen swallowed these concerns before the panic could engulf her again. She vowed to be vigilant—for Blink, for her parents—even if they weren’t here to see it.

"Ah now," said Emma. "No frowns. Dr. Simon knows his business. I'm sure your dog's fine."

Helen nodded with the profound seriousness of one poised precariously on the treacherous brink between child and adult.

Emma pulled a large waxed canvas bag from the hall and placed it in Helen's arms. "Sent word last night to Ruby, and she was nice enough to bring some of her daughter's old things. See how they fit—should do you a bit better than the lot you had on at least. Don’t know how you survive the chill with clothes like that. When you're done, stow the rest in the cupboard above your berth then trot down to the galley." Emma turned and left.

Helen dug through the bag, finding an interesting of array items that looked as though they would fit her more or less. She thought of the clothes she had so carefully packed for her new life on the Illumina station—all her favorite things. The olive green overalls she liked to wear with her black and white striped sweater, her orange leggings, her favorite jeans that she had worn in by running them over again and again with her bike, and the “Stings” t-shirt given to her by her slightly older friend Sally (who knew a lot more about bands and music than Helen did).

Who knew where her clothes were now? Still floating around in the ship? Or vanished with all the other unfortunate passengers on the ship?

And how different these new clothes looked! They reminded Helen the scanned pictures of long dead relatives that her parents kept in folders on their computers. She could hear her father’s voice even now—“This was your great great great Uncle Tim, who died in World War Two over a hundred years ago.” And Helen would roll her eyes, bored to death with the discussion of ancestry and genealogy. Now she wished she could hear her father say anything, no matter how boring.

These clothes did look a lot like the ones in those photos, handmade and clearly worn, faded, patched and repatched. Looking at the bag with trepidation, Helen imagined the jeers she would have received wearing these things to school back home, and she desperately hoped that all the other kids in the area wore similar garments.

Helen settled on a pair of loose green canvas pants that buttoned tight at the knee, a simple long-sleeved pullover shirt that seemed to be made of soft off-white muslin, and a faded blue wool cardigan with intricately tied knots for buttons. In the bottom of the bag she found a collection of off-white cable knit knee socks and a sturdy-looking pair of grey fleece-lined boots. These last were about a size too big, but Helen was used to this in any case, having grown up with a practical mother who was always more willing to endure her daughter's complaints about baggy clothes than she was to buy something new every time Helen went through a growth spurt. Helen completed the outfit with a plain black wool scarf and pocketed a pair of mittens and a soft grey hat for later use.

Exiting the room, Helen realized she was on the same narrow hallway from the night before, and, having a good memory for directions,she quickly made her way to the end and up the steep stairs to the kitchen. She stepped in to see Millie leaning against the stove and speaking seriously with a lanky, long-haired boy who appeared about a year older than Helen. He wore a grim expression matched by the serious shadows under his eyes, and Helen was relieved to see he wore the same style of clothes as she did(with a seemingly equal share of rips and patches).

"Now check the shells before you buy," Millie was saying. "Some of that last bunch were empty. Most of the fishmongers in Bluenose are honest, but there're more than a few rotten eggs."

The boy gave a curt nod as Millie dropped what looked like smoky glass dominos into his palm.

"Twelve shards should be enough to cover all. Ah!" said Millie distractedly. "Here's the lass now. Helen Corsair, this here's AlexTan. Alex can certainly show you the ropes around here, Helen. He’s practically an old hand."

Alex turned toward Helen, and his scowl deepened. "Maybe," he said sullenly. "Not that I have much time to spare for newcomers."

Helen felt a small knot of pride and dislike form in her chest and matched Alex's unfriendly stare with one of her own.

Emma had come into the kitchen for the tail end of this prickly introduction, and she gave Alex a soft cuff on the back of the head, disrupting his sandy hair and displacing his unfriendly look with a startled one.

"Ow!" he said, whirling towards her. "What was that for?"

"For being a black cloud on such a pretty day," said Emma, handing him a small black key tied to a length of twine. "Take the skiff. There's enough oil for the trip. Be back in two days, no more. And don't get into mischief."

"When do I ever get into mischief?" grumbledAlex sullenly, rubbing the back of his head. He was still frowning in Helen's direction but with a slightly chastised look.

Emma scoffed. "You're in your fourteenth year," she said, giving him a push toward the door and following after. "It's a miracle you've kept the straight path as long as you have, but I'd be a fool if I thought my good luck would last forever."

Helen watched Alex's unkempt hair disappear through the dining room hatch with thoughtful uneasiness. She was finely attuned to the subtleties of social interactions in the way that only someone just learning them can be. Back on Earth, Helen could have interpreted the complex meanings of the merest eyetwitch of any friend or enemy in the vicinity (and she had had a few of both)—but the hierarchy of children in this strange place was an absolute mystery.

She couldn’t imagine, for instance, her own mother casually sending her off to the next town by herself on an overnight errand (Helen had sometimes followed the old rail trail that far without her parents’ knowledge but never for more than a few hours). What would be the repercussions of this initial scuffle with Alex? For all Helen knew, she might have turned entire unknown factions of children against her through this one small hostile interaction. She knew well thata person's fate could turn on less.

*I need to make friends*, she reminded herself. *If I’m going to find out what happened, if I’m going to make it back home, I’ll need help.*

With a grim,regretful expression, Helen turned back to Millie. "Is that Emma and Bumboo's son?" Helen asked.

"Alex?" asked Millie, handing Helen a black bladed knife and handful of purple bulbs that looked like garlic but smelled like onion and…something else…not quite so familiar. Helen sat on a stool next to a well-worn wooden counter and began to chop, her eyes starting to water almost immediately.

"No," said Millie, deftly sorting through several baskets of vegetables at once and tossing the rejects out a nearby portal with a splash. "Alex lost his parents in a shipwreck two years back. Emma and Bumboo just took him on as an apprentice. He’d more or less settled as a Corsair even back then.”

Helen chewed her lip thoughtfully. *Tan*, he had said. That was Helen’s mother’s last name before she’d married Helen’s father with his French Canadian roots. But Alex certainly didn’t look like any of the Tans in Helen’s family, not with his light freckles and reddish brown curls. So many familiar names in such an unfamiliar place...

Helen wiped the fumes from her eyes with one hand and continued to chop diligently. “What do you mean he’d settled as a Corsair?” asked Helen. “I thought his last name was Tan?”

Millie rolled her eyes. “Not his name, you goose. His job. His guild.” At this Millie paused in her sorting and gave Helen a thoughtful look. “But then I guess you wouldn’t know nothing about that, would you? Not if you’re really from where they say you’re from,” she said dropping her voice to a whisper and pointing one finger conspiratorially toward the ceiling.

Helen felt herself about to say something snippy in reply to this but, remembering the regrettable stare down with Alex, she wisely held her tongue. A moment later she yanked a nicked finger away from the chopping block in surprise. The black knife in her hands was wickedly sharp. What was it made of? Not metal...something foreign. Glass? But not quite that either.

“Well I suppose I should tell you. You’ll be needing to know these things,” said Millie tucking one errant tendril of wispy blond hair back into her head scarf as she continued to work. “But how to explain it? You grow up here, you just *know* these things.

"There’s three guilds, see, and they’re sort of like your family except you *choose* them, right? When you come of age. That’s generally fifteen but some do a bit later and some a bit earlier. I was sixteen. Late bloomer, my mum said.”

“You choose your job at *fifteen?*” asked Helen, somewhat aghast.

“Or sixteen,” Millie emphasized, her feathers a bit ruffled.

“But what about school?” asked Helen.“And college?”

“School?” asked Millie confused. “You mean writing and numbers and all that. Like what little kids learn?”

“I mean high school,” Helen insisted. “You know, history and calculus and physics and all that.”

“Calcu-what?” asked Millie, looking at Helen like she was some sort of halfwit who had just wandered in barefoot from a snow storm.

Helen’s mother and father had always made it clear that Helen would go to college. “And you’ll do science or engineering,” her mother wouldalways add. “Something useful.” “Art is useful,” her father would pipe up. And then would follow the hours of discussion and debate, at which point Helen would sneak off outside or over to a friend’s house.

Millie shook her head continuing. "You learn all the things you really need on from apprenticing. Corsairs are water people, of course, but they got all kinds of jobs just like the other two guilds. A fisherman’s a Corsair and the algae skimmers too—they harvest that slimy gunk out on the algae tubes to make oil, and that’s what makes just about everything run around here, the lights and engines and everything.”

Despite Emma’s mention of a skiff, Helen had yet to see a boat with an actual engine, but she held her tongue. She had noticed that the lights strung up on deck seemed to be electric, and she had smelled the faint fumes of diesel exhaust in the air the night before. So there had to be a generator somewhere.

"And a fish merchant's a Corsair, though he might never go farther out to sea than this here tavern. Just like a butcher's a Gardener, even though he might not be able to tell the difference between a beet and a shallot. The Gardeners deal with beasts and growing things. And the Sciists—well, they do everything from minting money to making the clocks run. They tinker, I guess. That’s pretty much what ties their jobs together. Not much sense to the Sciists, you ask me, but I guess we need them.”

Millie gave a moment’s serious contemplation to a fist-sized black vegetable that looked like a weird cross between a radish and a stalk of celery. She shook her head before throwing it in the big cast iron pot on the stove. “Isn’t really ripe but it’ll add a bit of flavor. Anyway, what was I on about?

"Oh, right—like I was saying, Alex’s a Corsair through and through. Always has been. It’s in his blood. A mongrel would lose its stench before that boy would leave the sea for some other occupation.”

“But Bumboo was saying something last night,” Helen persisted, “About the Sciists and Corsairs fighting. What did he mean by that?”

Millie shook her head. “It’s not like that, see.” She looked puzzled as she considered how to explain it. “It’s all politics, right? All the guilds got needs from the others. The Sciists need oil from the Corsairs to keep their machines running and the Corsairs need the Sciists to build engines for their boats. And we *all* need the Gardeners for food,” said Millie holding up a wilted celery radish in illustration. “But sometimes the guilds don’t agree. The Corsairs don’t want to give the Sciists all the oil they want for some of their experiments and for getting to and from their fool space station. Can’t argue with them there—why spend so much studying the Eye and Old Earth when we got bucketsful of problems right here on Lokabrenna? That’s what I say. No offence,” Millie added with a wary look in Helen’s direction.

Helen held off commenting so Millie would continue.*No information from enemies,* she reminded herself.

“Anyway,” said Millie, “The Corsairs and Sciists and Gardeners all need each other, even if we don’t always agree. It works that way. I even got a Gardener beau on shore.” She gave Helen a sideways glance. “But don’t tell Emma. She wouldn’t like the idea of me leaving the Grey Goat for the Garden. But I’ll tell you about him sometime, if you like,” she added with a conspiratorial wink.

Helen was beginning to feel that Millie was a bit silly and a bit dim.

“But the people that live on The Shore all get along well enough--Gardeners, Scists, and Corsairs alike. Haven't got any enemies," Millie said brightly, before pausing as though just now remembering a forgotten item at the market. "Unless," said Millie quietly, her rhythmic chopping slowing to a crawl, "You count the people in the Shallow.”

“The Shallow?” asked Helen, fascinated by the sudden change in Millie's light-hearted face, now beleaguered with worry.

"They used to be our brothers and sisters. That's what the stories say. Wouldn't know it to look at them now," said Millie in a low toneless mumble.

Helen felt almost mesmerized by Millie's voice. "And then what happened?" asked Helen in a near whisper.

Millie shook her head suddenly as though shrugging off the remnants of a bad dream, her chopping accelerating again. "Nothing," said Mille, not looking at Helen. "Nothing happened. Hush now. Breakfast isn't going to make itself."

"But--" Helen protested.

Helen was drowned out by a loud scraping as Millie took that opportunity to drag the humongous cooking pot into a better position over the stove.

*Clay*, Helen noted with curiosity. The pot was clay. *Why not iron or steel?* She wondered, suddenly. Come to think of it, Helen thought, looking back down at the glassy, black knife, not much seemed to be made of metal around here.

Finished sorting and chopping the great mounds of produce, Millie swept Helen’s cutting board full of vegetables into the pot with the rest, and then deftly cut a large slice of bread and slathered it with a sticky clear liquid that looked like honey before shoving it into Helen’s hands.

Remembering the strange tasting tea from the night before, Helen tentatively touched her tongue to the sticky bread and was comforted by the familiar taste of honey. She devoured the rest before Millie could even hand her a cup of water to wash it down with.

Just as Helen drained the last drops from the cup, Emma appeared in the doorway wrapping a scarf around her head. She clapped her hands together with a satisfied look around the organized kitchen. “Well things seem to be in good hands here. We’re off to town then. Hat on, lass. It’s nippy out.”

**REVISIONS NEXT DRAFT**

* Include more about what the ship looks like / feels like. Also more about the technology.
* Have a scene where Helen sees the washroom, that it is fairly modern with a pump system and storage tank and running water.
* Increase the conflict between Helen and Alex. Have her snap back at him.
* Increase the tension between Helen and Millie. Make it clear that Millie is not impressed with Helen’s kitchen skills and have Millie try to humiliate Helen about this.
* Humanize Emma and Bumboo a bit.

THIS CHAPTER ASSUMES THAT THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER WILL IN REVISION:

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FOUR

Following Emma up the narrow wooden stairs to the ship’s deck, Helen felt a moment of pride at her ability to keep her feet as a set of waves came in and the boat gave a sickening heave. Her family had always had boats, albeit nothing as large and elaborate as the Grey Goat, and her mother’s scientific research had often involved the ocean—saltwater algae, in fact. Helen bit her lip, mulling this over and feeling uneasy as she remembered Millie’s comment about algae-skimmers and Bumboo’s mention of “The Eden” as the name of the ship that had brought the founders to Lokabrenna. These thoughts were still too looming and complicated for Helen to sift through. Not yet. One small step at a time.

As Helen emerged on deck close at Emma’s heels, she was greeted by a string of curses—some familiar, others more exotic—from Bumboo who was struggling with a huge tangled knot of rope at the base of an immense lowered sail while Anchor looked on curiously looking like a great furry black hill at Bumboo’s side.

At their arrival, Anchor gave a happy bounce in Helen and Emma’s direction before lying back down and thumping his tail expectantly. Emma raised an eyebrow and gave Anchor a skeptical look before scratching the top of the great dog’s head.

“Don’t think you can charm me, you mangy troublemaker,” said Emma with just the hint of a smile. “It will be a good long time before you’re allowed below decks again.” Anchor lowered his head back to the deck with a sigh and peered up at Helen and Emma with profound doggy sadness.

“Still here?” asked Emma turning to Bumboo. “I thought you’d be long gone by now.”

Bumboo threw the wet knot of rope down in disgust. “I should be,” he said. “Don’t want to deal with the blasted town council.” Helen detected the minutest glance in her direction as he said this and felt the now all too familiar pit form in her stomach.

“Because of me,” said Helen bluntly, never one to dance around the truth.

Bumboo straightened his wool cap on his head and gave Helen a wry sideways look. “Too smart for her own good, this one. But I guess that’s a good thing. Best to keep your wits about you.” He gave a deep sigh and suddenly looked a lot older than his fifty or so years.

Emma moved to her husband’s side and gave the back of his neck an affectionate squeeze, a gesture that made Helen feel isolated and oddly guilty for the stresses she had placed on her inadvertent hosts. It wasn’t their fault she had just dropped into their laps out of nowhere, but what could Helen do to help them now?

Sensing her distress, Bumboo quickly added, “But it would be too simple to blame your arrival for our troubles, Helen. That great blasted spaceship popping through The Eye just threw sand in an already open wound. There’s been a fight brewing since long before you got here.”

“You mean between the guilds?” asked Helen, and then seeing Bumboo’s eyebrows raise in sudden surprise, she quickly added, “I talked to Millie.”

Emma gave a short, derisive laugh, “I wouldn’t count on that girl for much in the way of information. She’s got about as much sense as a ball of mud.”

In spite of herself, Helen felt slightly vindicated by this comment.

Bumboo nodded, in agreement. “You’re right, though, Helen, the Corsairs and Sciists can’t agree on much and the Gardeners don’t help by riding the fence.”

“But who’s in charge? Who’s the leader?” asked Helen. As she said it, she realized she was thinking of something like the Prime Minister they had in Canada, but that probably didn’t make sense here. How would a prime minister deal with the Corsairs and their boats? Helen wondered. She was still more than a little confused by the complex politics of Lokabrenna.

“Well each town on The Shore has a mayor and an elected council made up of Guild Members," said Bumboo. "Emma was on the council for years, but she was smart enough to leave it behind a while back.”

“Good riddance. But then this one was daft enough to get himself elected mayor,” said Emma with a grim smile, giving her husband’s shoulders an emphatic and slightly sardonic shake.

Bumboo gave a bitter laugh. “And it’s been the death of me, as you warned me it would. But not for much longer, thank the sea. Guilds elect their own leaders, and each guild gets to head the council for three turns, then it cycles to the next. The Sciists will have to take over soon, poor bastards. Better luck to them, I say.”

“Well that’s quite enough political talk for me,” said Emma, reaching down and deftly tying up the corners of her skirt. “You may get to drag your feet all morning, but Helen and I have places to be.”

Bumboo picked up the knotted rope again and gave a lazy backwards wave to Helen and his wife. “My time will come soon enough, believe me.”

Emma hoisted herself over the low ship rail and adeptly descended a ladder made of knotted ropes to the water below. Helen followed, yet again grateful for the coordination she had gained from years of climbing trees.

A few minutes later, Helen found herself hunkered down in the bow of a well-used dory as Emma rowed through the fog with practiced strokes. Just like the ones at the dory museum, the boat was painted yellow with green around the edges. “Those colors show best in the fog,” her grandfather had told her when she was five or six and watching him work to restore his boat. “Old-timers knew it. Don’t know how but they did.”

And fog there most certainly was, damp, chilly, the kind of fog that that wove its way through your clothes and got into your bones. It was so very familiar, so much like Nova Scotia fog that Helen felt a cavernous homesickness open deep in her core. How many times had she stayed out in fog just like this, only to return home soggy and shivering to the warmth of her house and the tsks of her mother? Homesickness—certainly Helen had heard the word, but she had never realized just how literal it was, how missing something—a place or a person—could be a physical thing, a deep ache, like an injury the body couldn’t heal.

Through the slowly clearing wisps of morning air, Helen saw the yellow flashes of other dories rowing off to their own destinations, and she could see slow-moving figures on the decks of the many ships moored nearby, some large sailboats, like The Grey Goat, and others more like the fishing boats Helen was familiar with at home—diesel powered Cape Islanders or something like them. She could hear banter called back and forth and the sound of human exertions as ropes and nets were hauled and other small boats were lowered to the water.

Helen found herself drifting off to the slow rhythm of Emma’s rowing, but before she knew it they were pulling ashore and Helen felt her fear surfacing again at the thought of facing even more new and strange things. How much could her brain take in before it just shut down from the weight of too much change? And Blink—what had happened to Blink during the night? Who knew if the doctor had helped him as Emma had said he would?

In her mind Helen could once again hear the echo of her mother's voice chiding her to stop being so dramatic. Helen felt a tight sadness rise in her throat and swallowed it away just as quickly. She wasn’t some shrinking violet that shied away from new things just because they were unfamiliar*. Change is good.* Her parents must have said that sentence a thousand times in the past year—never knowing of course, that that their own loss would be the biggest and most difficult change Helen would have to face. *How could* that *change possibly be good?* Not knowing the answer, Helen set her shoulders and clambered over the bow of the boat to help Emma drag the dory ashore.

Emma handed the ropes over to a hunched old man who was watching over a neat row of similar boats along the shore’s edge. The man looked to be at least five hundred years old and appeared to be constructed of driftwood and twine.

“No napping,” said Emma sternly to the raggedy figure. “I don’t want to have to go chasing my boat all over creation like last time when you let the tide carry it off.”

The man gave an indecipherable grumble and shuffled back to his charges without another word.

And without a pause, Helen was plunged into the town, dragged at breakneck speed down the main thoroughfare by Emma, who clearly knew the value of doing things efficiently. Helen’s mind whirled with the sights and sounds that flashed by. All manner of small tents were lined up along the main pier, and some of the things they contained Helen could have never imagined in her wildest dreams. One stall displayed row after row of eel-like fish, each one bristling with what looked like thousands of glass needles.

In fact, many of the creatures lining the tables in front of the stalls seemed to be more cactus than fish. And some of these spiny creatures had rows of six or eight or even *more* dangling appendages, each one ending in what appeared to be a slimy webbed foot. For Helen these were “fish” in only the very loosest sense of the word, and she suddenly felt slightly ill thinking back on the “seafood” chowder she had consumed the night before. All the same, the market did have a familiar fishy odor that gave Helen some comfort. Perhaps, thought Helen, the smell mattered more than the shape or number of dangly bits when it came to edible creatures…

And there was no doubt that many people in the area thought these creatures very tasty indeed, for from every direction the voices rang out. “Fish! Fresh fish! Clipper! Six pounds a shard! Freshest you’ll find on the middle shore! None better!”

“Mussels! Glumbelly! Eelshrifts! Just off the boat!”

“Salted Grummer! Seasoned from The Green! No better to be found!”

Helen craned her head in the direction of the last voice. “What’s a Grummer?” she asked.

“Pft,” said Emma without looking back. “Not worth the bother.”

As quickly they had entered the fish market, Helen and Emma were through it and into the town proper. The town’s buildings were low, two stories at most and crowded higgledy piggledy around a center square. The constructions reminded Helen of the forts she had sometimes made with friends out of cardboard boxes of variable shapes and sizes. The buildings seemed solid but unplanned and constructed of whatever materials happened to be handy—metal siding, sandy looking bricks, stone—all patchworked together.

The square was large and open and lined with smooth cobblestones, and the center held an old-fashioned looking well, which Helen assumed was meant to serve the general public as a small line had formed by it to pump water into various buckets, pots, and bags.

The town square was alive with morning activities. Vendors rolled out colored awnings at various stalls, and Helen could smell fresh food and bread. It was quieter here than in the fish market, and Helen sensed that things must get started a little later in this part of town. One shopkeeper dragged out barrels containing wooden tools of various sorts and another displayed tables and chairs and other finely crafted furnishings. Yet another was clearly a butcher, although the colors of some of the hanging sausages and cuts of meat were oddly bluish to Helen’s eyes. But many buildings were clearly just places of residence—a groggy-looking woman still in nightclothes shook a rug out a second story window.

Helen increased her pace to keep up with Emma but tried to capture everything she saw in her memory for later review. What *was* that huge creature pulling the cart there? It reminded Helen of a yak, with enormous curled black horns, but rather than fur it was covered in shifting scale-like plates, the lowest of which seemed to cover several too many feet. It made a snuffling noise as it lumbered along, and its plates made a gentle clattering sound.

The town square was not really square at all, as Helen discovered but rather curved around in a long S shape, so when you came in at the end closest to the harbor, the other end was obscured from view. As Emma and Helen rounded the second curve of the S, Helen felt her breath catch in her chest at the image in front of her.

The far end of the town square ended abruptly at an immense patchwork wall glittering with windows and oddly shaped doors and awnings as far as the eye could see—a building, Helen realized—that seemed to stretch forever in either direction as though following the shoreline. The front of the building was covered in a mishmash of signs and tacked on structures that seemed to lead into shops or other establishments somewhere in the interior of the colossal construction, like barnacles encrusting a great silver serpent. The glass rooftop, which was taller by far than any of the buildings in the town had been, was several hundred feets wide and curved like a road as far as Helen could see in two directions. The building was uneven and patched in places, and many of the roof’s glass panels were propped open and Helen could see the branches of trees reaching through them. Others supported various solar panels and spindly windmills of every conceivable shape and size. Through parts of the building, Helen could see the shadowy shapes of people walking behind multiple layers of glass.

Without realizing she had done so, Helen had stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of the improbable structure, and Emma had turned back around to find out what was keeping her.

“What *is* that?” asked Helen.

“What is what?” said Emma, clearly perplexed.

“That,” said Helen pointing emphatically at the enormous ramshackle structure. “That building. It's *huge*.”

Emma turned around as though seeing the thing for the first time. “*That*?” she said. “You mean The Green? That’s where we’re headed. Surely you have a greenhouse where you’re from."

In her mind, Helen pictured the tiny greenhouse behind her grandparents’ cottage, stuffed with wilted saplings and dead tomato plants. It wasn’t even big enough to be a fun place to play.

"No," said Helen shaking her head slowly. "Nothing like this."

Now it was Emma's turn to be stunned. "Then where do you keep your livestock and your farms? Where do your Sciists work? And how do folks get from one town to the next?"

"We have farms, but they aren't indoors," said Helen. "And we just have roads to get from one town to the next. Are you saying there's a road in that building that goes through multiple towns?" asked Helen trying to wrap her mind around this idea.

“It goes through all the towns,” said Emma distractedly. But now Emma was apparently facing her own confusion, and her brow wrinkled in concern. "That can't be right, Helen. If your farms are outside, what do you do during the winter? You'd starve."

"We just wait until spring," said Helen.

"You go 35 turns without farming? That’s impossible." said Emma incredulously.

"We don't have *turns* on Earth," said Helen, becoming increasingly frustrated. "We have *months* and *years*."

And then it was as if a light bulb bloomed into brightness between them like a rising sun, and both Helen and Emma were stunned into silence by their simultaneous realization. Helen's idea of a "year" was determined by how long it took for Earth to circle the sun—but this *wasn't* Earth, and everything was different here. Even time. A month was originally determined by the cycles of the moon. But there was no moon here. *So what controlled the tides then*, Helen wondered suddenly. *The Eye*?

There was a sun on Lokabrenna—Helen could see it out of the corner of her eye—it was reddish and oddly small. It hung morosely in a pale bluish grey sky speckled with clouds that looked normal enough. But that wasn't *Helen’s* sun. That was Emma's sun, Bumboo's sun, Alex and Millie's sun. Helen’s sun—if you could even see it at all from here—would be indistinguishable from the millions of other stars in the night sky.

*Everything* was different now, and Helen was just starting to realize the full weight of what that actually meant. The wobbly sense that she felt walking here, for instance, the feeling of being slightly lighter than she should be—that wasn't, as she first suspected, the result of being out of sorts from her trip or stepping from the boat onto dry land. Helen actually *was* lighter because even gravity had changed. Of course it had. How could she have even imagined it would be exactly the same?

"A turn," said Helen slowly, looking up at Emma. "That's an Earth year, isn't it." It was a statement, not a question.

Emma nodded slowly, her solemn frown reflecting that she could tell what this information must mean to Helen.

"And your year—"

"Is long," finished Emma abruptly. "For you it must seem really long. Impossibly long. 134 turns. Most people never live to see more than two seasons. We're at the end of autumn now, and I'll be long gone before spring."

Emma looked down at Helen's stricken face and sighed. "We learn these things in school—that the founders saw the seasons again and again back on Old Earth. The idea seemed so peculiar, like a fairy tale or some such. Never stopped to think how strange our own world would have seemed to them, those firstcomers." Emma sighed sadly at Helen’s bleak predicament.

*Firstcomer.*That was what Helen was like. Except not really, because she was alone and an outsider. Everything was strange and new but only to her. Everyone else understood how things worked, while Helen didn’t even know how to chop vegetables correctly. And now Helen knew if she stayed here, if she never got back home, she would be long into adulthood before the weather turned warm again. And how many other such surprises would there be? A lot, most likely.

Helen's face was now almost comically glum, and Emma gave a short laugh in spite of herself, breaking the tension. She grasped Helen's shoulders, pushing her back into motion. "Chin up, girl. You'll survive it. Like my own Grandmum used to say, just focus on the task at hand. Get it done and you’ll feel better."

Helen knew it was good advice. Blink was the task at hand and nothing would make Helen feel better than seeing him safe.

As they walked, Emma began to talk again. “The Green is actually pretty strange, when I think of it as something I’ve never seen before,” said Emma thoughtfully. “Hard to do, having known it all my life. But it’s sort of extraordinary when you think how the founders designed it—a garden, a road, a laboratory, a wall, and a lot of other things all in one. Each town locks down their section at night, so people can only travel town to town during the day. It feeds us and protects us all year round, even in the winter when the hard times come. I guess we’ll get to test that again soon enough.”

“Protects you from what?” asked Helen, her curiosity again overcoming her self-pity. “What’s on the other side?”

Emma frowned as though formulating how best to answer this question. “Animals,” she said. “Dangerous ones. And…other things. Things that were here when the firstcomers came. That’s why the first Sciists used machines to make our own animals so big—the dogs and the cats—though they just seem normal to us now. They needed something to protect them.

“And, well,” Emma paused, giving Helen a sideways glance as though deciding how much she should say at this point. “There are people on the other side of The Green too. Outcasts that were thrown into the wilderness for doing bad things. Some for a little while, some forever. And some people who just live out in the wild desert by choice.”

“The Anubrians?” asked Helen.

Emma gave a terse nod. “We trade with them from time to time—depend on what they have to trade, in fact and need them far more often than they show up. You’ll hear people say a lot of things about them. They’ll have you believing the Anubrians are witches and monsters and every sort of horrible thing, but I’ll tell you now, they’re people and came from the firstcomers just like us.”

“What do you need that they trade?” asked Helen.

“Metal,” said Emma bluntly. “We need metal.”

And suddenly many things—the clay pots, the strange black knife, the limited electricity, the wooden boats, the glass money—all clicked into place all at once.

A moment later, Helen and Emma had arrived at the edge of The Green.

“Here we are,” said Emma. “The Sciists’ Quarter.”

They approached a tattered blue awning that bore the sign, “Simon the Animist.” Under the awning were two dark wooden benches on which a small number of people sat waiting. On the first bench was an old man in a yellow sweater holding an oversized grey rabbit with gigantic front teeth—it reminded Helen of the pictures of Saber-toothed tigers she had seen in her textbooks in science class, except the Rabbit’s teeth were flat.

“Alright,” said Emma. “I have things to do in The Green. You wait for Dr. Simon here, and I’ll be back in just a little while.”

Emma looked at Helen intently as though this was some sort of test, and Helen felt a jolt of fear at the thought of being left alone here…although—looking again at the man with the rabbit who was dozing off now—it really seemed safe enough. Helen thought again of Alex—a boy barely older than herself—going off by himself for two days, and she realized that she wanted very much to be thought of as capable by the people here, not some helpless outsider to be pitied and coddled.

“I’ll be fine,” said Helen firmly.

“Good girl,” said Emma with a smile. “Just sit on the bench and wait for Dr. Simon, and I’ll be back in no time.”

As Emma headed off on her errands, Helen turned to the benches and approached tentatively. Next to the man with the rabbit sat a black-haired boy and girl watching over a restless black sheep with bright green eyes. It was larger than the sheep Helen was familiar with, but not so large as to be terrifying, and although its green eyes set it apart from any sheep Helen had ever seen, it seemed to display the typical dim-witted sheep behaviors Helen was familiar with.

As Helen approached, she suddenly recognized the boy on the bench as the boy from the night before when Emma had called him into the room to take Blink to the vet—Arden Dickens, Emma had called him. Helen was suddenly deeply embarrassed to be around someone who had seen her so upset, and she paused in her approach. The dark-haired boy and the girl next to him were easily a head taller than Helen and so alike in looks that they must have been siblings. The girl was reading a worn-looking book, while the boy managed the fretful sheep.

Helen walked up to Arden, and waited for him to say something first.

After an uncomfortable pause, the girl next to him spoke without looking up from her book. “He can’t see you,” she said. “He’s blind in that eye.”

The boy looked up startled, and indeed did seem to see Helen for the first time. He gave his sister an annoyed glare. “Thank you, Juliet. Very polite.”

Juliet slowly closed her book, and gave her brother a quirked smile that suggested this interaction was nothing unusual before standing and holding out a firm hand to Helen.

Juliet had short unkempt hair and wore an old-fashioned boy’s cap on her head. Everything about her exuded confidence, and Helen liked her immediately.

“Helen,” she said, shaking Juliet’s hand firmly in return.

“I know,” said Juliet, sitting back down on the bench in an unladylike sprawl. “Everyone is talking about you. You don’t look like a spaceman. Where are your antennae?”

Helen laughed in spite of herself.

“Nice,” said Arden. “Always the charmer, my sister.” He stood up and shook Helen’s hand, and as he did so, Helen could see a faded scar crossing the eye that Juliet had said was blind.

A voice from inside the shop called out “Next!” and the man with rabbit went inside.

Arden shook his head and sat back down on the bench. “You can laugh, Jules, but you didn’t see her dog. Just like they described in those Old Earth books,” he said, holding his hands out to illustrate Blink’s diminutive size. “I could carry him without even trying.”

“What are you reading?” asked Helen.

Juliet raised one eyebrow, with a slight smile. “Funny you should ask,” she said, holding up the cover to reveal the title, *Robinson Crusoe.* “No one reads these Old Earth books anymore. They just molder about in the Sciist libraries. My da’s a bit of an historian, though, so our place is covered in them.”

“Yeah,” said Arden cheerfully. “All the Gardeners think we’re heretics because we believe in that Sciist stuff, but it doesn’t faze da one bit.”

“It’s true, though, isn’t it?” said Juliet leaning forward and looking at Helen seriously. “I mean you’re proof, aren’t you?”

Helen shrugged, feeling a surge of relief at having found a seeming ally at last. “I don’t know how I got here,” she said. “But I *am* from Earth.”

“But it can’t have been like this, though,” said Juliet holding up her book in one hand. “I mean, they don’t even have generators or anything. How can they have gone into space? They’re more backwards than us.”

“We aren’t backwards!” said Arden turning an appalled expression towards his sister.

“We are,” said Juliet matter-of-factly. “But the people in this book are way more so.”

Helen found herself laughing again and liking the feel of it. The exchange reminded her of Sally and her friends back in Jordan Falls, and for the first time since arriving, she felt a little at home.

Helen shook her head in answer to Juliet’s question. “That book is really old,” said Helen then corrected, “I mean, it was really old when I was on Earth. There were lots of advancements after that.”

“Good,” said Juliet, looking at the book with mild disgust. “Because this guy is kind of a tosser.”

“Juliet!” said Arden, mildly appalled.

“No,” said Helen quickly, knowing only vaguely what *Robinson Crusoe* was even about but wanting very badly for this girl to be her friend. “She’s right. He is.”

At that moment the man with the toothy rabbit walked back out, and the voice from the shop called out “Next” again.

“You go,” said Arden nodding his head toward Helen. “We can wait, and I know you want to see your dog.”

“Thanks,” said Helen, suddenly yanked back into the moment.

“Does he have antennae?” asked Juliet. Arden punched her in the arm in response.

Helen took a second to send a silent thought to whoever might be listening. *Let him be okay. Let Blink be okay.* And with that, she set her shoulders and walked through the open doorway.

**REVISIONS FOR NEXT DRAFT**

* Make Helen’s first view of the town more of a framing shot. Make it clear this is a town of 500 or so, and that the bustling fish market serves other towns as well.
* Describe the working dogs in the town square.
* Give more of Helen’s internal reaction to what she sees and have her worry more about Blink.
* Have the local populace stare and whisper as she passes.
* More about The Green and less about the difference in year length.