

# The New World

## Chaos Walking, #0

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'THERE IT IS,' my mother says, and what she means is that the dot we've been nearing for weeks, the one that's been growing into a larger dot with two smaller dots circling it, has now become even larger than that, growing from a dot to a disc, shining back the light from its sun, until you can see the blue of its oceans, the green of its forests, the white of its polar caps, a circle of colour against the black beyond.

Our new home, the one we've been travelling towards since way before I was even born.

We're the first ones to see it for real, not through telescopes, not through computer mapping, not even in my own drawings in the art classes I take on the Beta with Bradley Tench, but through just the couple centimetres of glass in the cockpit viewscreen.

We're the first ones to see it with our own eyes.

'The New World,' my father says, putting a hand on my shoulder. 'What do you think we'll find there?'

I cross my arms and pull away from him.

'Viola?' he asks.

'I've seen it already,' I say, walking out of the cockpit. 'It's wonderful. Hooray. Can't wait to get there.'

'Viola,' my mother says sharply, as I shut the cockpit door behind me. It's a slotted door, so I can't even slam it. I keep going to my small bedroom and barely shut my own door before there's a knock on it. 'Viola?' my father says from the other side.

'I'm tired,' I say. 'I want to sleep.'

'It's one o'clock in the afternoon.'

I don't say anything.

'We'll be entering orbit in four hours,' he says, his voice calm, not rising to my attitude at all. 'There'll be work for you to do starting in two.'

'I know my duties,' I say, still not opening the door.

There's a pause. 'It's going to be all right, Viola,' he says, his voice even kinder. 'You'll see.'

'How do you know?' I say back. 'You've never lived on a planet either.'

'Well,' he says, brightening up, 'I've got lots of hope.'

And there it is. That word I'm so completely sick of.

\* \* \* \* \*

'It's us,' my father said on the day they told me the news, and though he was trying to look serious, I could tell he was hiding a smile. We were having dinner, and under the table, his leg was bouncing up and down.

'It's us what?' I said, though I could easily guess.

'We've been selected,' my mother said. 'We're the landing party.'

'We leave in 91 days,' my father said.

I looked down at my plate, which suddenly held a bunch of food I didn't want to eat. 'I thought it was going to be Steff Taylor's parents.'

My father stifled a laugh. Steff Taylor's father was such a bad pilot he could barely fly from ship to ship in the convoy without wrecking a shuttle.

'It's us, sweetheart,' my mother said, my mother the pilot, my mother who was so much better at it than Steff Taylor's father that she was almost certainly the reason we'd been chosen. 'Remember we talked about this. You were excited.'

And that's true. I was excited when they'd first told me they were going to put themselves forward. I was even *more* excited when Steff Taylor started bragging that her father was *obviously* going to be chosen.

The job was vital. We'd leave the sleeping settlers and the other caretaker families behind, speeding into the empty black beyond in a small scout ship. The convoy was still twelve months from the planet. We'd make the journey in five and spend seven months there—not just my parents, I'd have work to do, too—finding the best landing site for the five big settler ships and starting to prepare the ground for the first landings.

But it was more exciting when it *could* have been us. It was surprisingly less so when it was *actually* us.

'You'll get more training,' my mother said. 'You'll learn a *lot* more, just like you wanted.'

'It's an honour, Viola,' my father said. 'We'll be the first ones to see our new home.'

'Unless the original settlers are still there,' I said.

They exchanged a glance.

'Are you unhappy with this, Viola?' my mother asked, her face serious.

'Would you not go if I was?' I asked.

And they exchanged another glance.

And I knew what that meant.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Thirty minutes to orbital,' my mother is saying as I step back into the cockpit, only a little bit late. She's the only one there. My father must have gone down to the engine room already, prepping them for orbital entry. My mother glances up at my reflection in her screens. 'And she rejoins us.'

'It's my job,' I say, sitting down at a terminal ninety degrees from her. And it is my job, one I trained for on the convoy and in the five months I've been here. My mother will pilot us into orbit, my father will ready the thrusters that will carry us down into the planet's atmosphere, and I'll be monitoring for possible landing sites.

'There's been something new while you pouted,' my mother says.

'I wasn't pouting—'

'Look,' she says, bringing up a box on the viewscreen showing the larger of the two northern continents.

'What is that?'

There's a stretch of river that heads east towards the ocean on the night side of the planet. It's impossible to tell from this distance, even with the ship's scanners, but there's an emptier space up the river a ways, possibly a valley, where the forest breaks open a bit and what looks like might even be lights.

'The other settlers?' I ask.

The other settlers are almost a ghost story to us. We've had no communications from them either in my lifetime or my parents', so we always figured they didn't make it. It's a long, long trip from Old World to New, decades and decades, and so they were still on their way when our convoy left. But we heard nothing from them. Even our deepest space probes only caught distant glimpses of them as they travelled. Then after the time came when they would have landed, still years before I was born, it was hoped that we could communicate with them on the planet as we got closer, let them know we were coming, asking what it was like, what we should prepare ourselves for.

But either no one was listening, or no one was there anymore. And it was the second possibility that got everyone worried.

If they didn't make it, what would become of us?

My father says they were idealistic settlers, leaving Old World to start a simpler, low-technology, farming kind of life with religion and all that. Which seems both stupid to me and also seems to have failed completely. But we were already so far out by the time whatever happened to them happened, there was no turning back, just the same course to the same place where we'll find our own doom, no doubt.

'How didn't we see it before?' I say, leaning closer to the screen.

'No real energy signatures,' my mum says. 'If they're powering themselves, it's not through a big reactor like we'd expect.'

'There's a river,' I say. 'Maybe it's hydro-electric.'

'Or maybe it's empty.' My mum's voice is quiet as we watch the screen. 'It's hard to tell if those are even actual lights or just blips in the readings.'

The little patch by the river starts getting farther away. We're entering orbit the other direction, heading west, circling the planet once as we enter the atmosphere, and coming back round the other side to land.

'Is that where we're going?' I say.

'It's as good a place to start as any,' my mother says. 'If they didn't last, then the first thing we need to do is learn from their mistakes.'

'Or get killed the same way.'

'We've got better technology,' my mother says. 'And from what we know, they shunned what they had anyway, which could very easily have been why they failed.' She looks at me. 'That's not going to happen to us.'

You *hope*, I think to myself.

We both watch as the continent rolls away from under us.

'Ready,' my father calls over the comm system.

'Then let's call that ten minutes mark,' my mother says, pressing a countdown button.

'Everyone up there excited?' my father's voice says.

'Some of us are,' my mother says, frowning at me.

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'I'm so glad we're not going,' Steff Taylor said the first time I saw her in class after it was announced it was my parents who were the landing party and not hers. It was actually my favourite class, arts with Bradley on the *Beta*. Bradley also taught us maths and agriculture, and was pretty much my favourite person on the whole convoy, even though he made me sit next to Steff Taylor since we were the only girls our age in all of the caretaker families.

Lucky us.

'It'll be so boring,' Steff said, twisting her hair in her fingers. 'Five *months* on that *little* ship with just your mum and dad for company.'

'I can vid back to friends and classes,' I said. 'And I like my mum and dad.'

She sneered at me. 'Not after five months you won't.'

'Steff, you used to brag about how your father—'

'And then when you *land*, you've got to live there with who knows what kinds of scary animals and hoping your food rations last and there's going to be *weather* there, Viola. Actual *weather*.'

'We'll be the first people to see it.'

'Oh, whoopee,' she said. 'First people to see a deserted mudhole.' She twisted her hair a little harder. 'First people to die there more like.'

'Steff Taylor!' Bradley said from the front of the class. All the other kids huddled over their interactive art vids were suddenly looking up.

'I'm working,' Steff said, running her hands over her artpad.

'Is that so?' Bradley said. 'Then perhaps you can come up here and show the rest of us what you're working on.'

Steff frowned, hard, a frown I knew covered the latest grudge she was adding to her long, long list. As slowly as she could get away with, she got to her feet.

'Thirteenth birthday,' she whispered to me. 'All alone.'

And I could tell by the satisfied look on her face that I reacted just exactly how she wanted.

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'120 seconds to orbital,' my mother says.

'Ready here,' my father says over the comm, and I hear the engines change their pitch as we prepare to stop falling out of the black beyond and power our way through the atmosphere of the planet.

'Ready here, too,' I say, opening up screens that I won't really use until we're closer to the ground, looking for a clearing big enough to put down. A clearing, if I'm good enough at my job, where we might actually grow our first town.

'90 seconds,' my mother says.

'Engines opening,' my father says, and there's another change in pitch. 'Oxygenating the fuel.'

'Buckle up,' my mother says.

'I *am* buckled,' I say, then turn my chair so I can buckle into it without her seeing.

'60 seconds,' my mum says.

'One more minute and we're the first ones there!' my dad shouts over the comm.

My mother laughs. I don't.

'Oh, come on, Viola,' she says. 'It really is exciting.' She checks one of her screens, dials on it with her fingertips, then says, '30 seconds.'

'I was happy on the ship,' I say, quietly but so seriously my mother turns to look. 'I don't want to live down there.'

My mother frowns. '15 seconds.'

'Fuel ready!' my father says. 'Let's go atmo-surfing!'

'Ten,' my mother says, still looking at me. 'Nine.'

And that's when things go really, really wrong.

\* \* \* \* \*

'But it's a whole *year*,' I said to Bradley in one of my training tutorials less than a month before we left. 'A year away from my friends, a year away from schoolwork—'

'And if you stayed,' he said. 'It would be a year away from your parents.'

I looked back into the empty classroom. It was usually filled with the other caretaker families' children, learning our lessons, talking to our friends. But today it was just me and Bradley, going over some of the science tech for the trip. Tomorrow, Simone from the *Gamma*—who I think Bradley secretly fancies—would be teaching me emergency survival skills, just in case the worst happened. But it would still just be me and her in this room, separated out from everybody else.

'Why does it have to be us, though?' I said.

'Because you're the best ones for the job,' Bradley said. 'Your mother is probably our best pilot, your father is a highly skilled engineer—'

'And what about me? Why do I have to pay for what they're good at?'

He smiled. 'You're hardly just some girl. You're tops in maths. You're the younger ones' favourite tutor in music—'

'And for that, I should be punished by being dragged away from everyone I know for a year?'

He gave me a look, then he dialled so quickly on the training pads in front of us that I could barely see what he was doing. 'Name this,' he said, in a teacherly tone that made me answer immediately.

'Hardpan,' I said, looking at the simulated landscape he'd chosen. 'Good drainage, but dry. Irrigation for at least five to eight years before suitable for crops.'

'And this?' he said, dialling again.

'Temperate forest. Limited clearing needed, potentially good for cattle, but strong environmental concerns.'

'This one?'

'Near desert. Subsistence farming only. Bradley—'

'You've got skills, Viola. You're bright and resourceful and even at your age, you'll be a vital part of the mission.'

I didn't answer because for some stupid reason, I could feel my eyes getting wetter.

'What are you really frightened of?' Bradley asked, so gently I looked up into his brown eyes, into the kindness of the smile across his brown skin, the small grey curls just starting to show in the hair at his temples. I saw nothing but warmth.

'Everyone keeps talking about *hope*,' I said, swallowing.

Bradley's voice was too tender to bear. 'Viola—'

'I'm not afraid,' I lied, swallowing again. 'It's just I'm going to miss my thirteenth birthday party, and the graduation ceremony to the upper fifth—'

'But you'll be seeing things no one else will. Heck, you'll be an expert by the time everyone else gets there, the one everyone turns to for an opinion.'

I pulled my arms to myself. 'They'll just think I'm a show-off.'

'They think that now,' he said, but he was smiling.

And I didn't want to smile back.

But I did. A little.

\* \* \* \* \*

There's a small banging sound from the bottom of the ship as we hit the first turbulence of the atmosphere.

But my mother and I both look up immediately. It's the wrong kind of bang.

'What was that?' my mother says.

'I think—' my father's voice says—

And there's a sudden *ROARING* sound over the comm and a yelp of alarm from my father—

'Thomas!' my mum yells.

'Look!' I shout, pointing at the display pads, which are lighting up, one after the other.

The engine room is filling with fire and the exits are sealing shut to contain it.

And they're doing it with my father inside.

'Dad!' I scream—

And that fast, everything changes.

My mother frantically presses her displays, trying to open the engine vents to blow the fire out of the ship—

'They're not responding!' she yells. 'Thomas, can you hear me?!'

'What's happening?' I shout, because the roar of the atmosphere is getting so much louder than in our simulations.

‘It shouldn’t be this *thick*,’ my mother shouts back, meaning the atmosphere, and I have a sinking feeling in my stomach as I wonder if this is what happened to the original settlers. Maybe they never even made it to the surface.

‘I’m going down to find dad,’ I say, unbuckling from my chair and standing—

But there’s another *bang* and the ship lists badly to one side. I fall, hanging on to the chair by my fingers. My mother grabs the manual controls with both hands and wrestles us back in position. ‘Viola, I need you to find us a landing spot! Now!’

‘But dad—’

‘I can’t get us back up, so we’re going to have to go down! Now, Viola!’

I sit down and buckle back in, my hands shaking.

‘Find that stretch of ground by the river!’ she says.

‘It’s on the other side of the planet,’ I say, but I know from the shuddering of the ship that we’re tearing through the atmosphere *way* faster than we should.

‘Just find it!’ my mother shouts. ‘If there are people there—’

And I can see from her face how worried she is about my father, and I know that if she’s battling with the ship instead of going down to find him, then we’re in even worse trouble than I thought—

\* \* \* \* \*

‘I’ll *miss* you,’ Steff Taylor said at our going away party, her voice twisting up high, making it sound even more insincere than it is.

All the caretaker families had gathered in the conference room of the *Delta* for the party, happy for any excuse to get drunk and say goodbye. Steff swept me into her arms in a hug angled so that everyone around us would see her face, how sad she was that I was going away for a year. Then she let me go and collapsed into her mother’s arms with a wailing that was louder than anything else in the room.

Bradley came over with an amused look. ‘I’m sure Steff will cope with her grief better than I will,’ he said, handing me a wrapped gift. ‘Don’t open it until you’ve landed.’

‘Til we’ve *landed*?’ I said. ‘That’s five months from now.’

He smiled and lowered his voice. ‘Do you know what separates us from the beasts, Viola?’

I frowned, sensing a lesson. ‘The ability to wait to open a present?’

He laughed. ‘Fire,’ he said. ‘The ability to make fire at will. It allowed us light to see in the darkness, warmth against the cold, a tool to cook our food.’ He gestured vaguely in the direction of the *Delta*’s engines. ‘Fire is what eventually led to travel across the black beyond, the ability to start a new life on a New World.’

I looked down at the present.

‘You’re frightened,’ he said. This time, it wasn’t an asking.

I shrugged. ‘A little.’

He leaned down to whisper to me. ‘I’m frightened, too.’

‘You are?’

He nodded. ‘My grandfather was the last of the original caretakers on the convoy to die, the last one of us who’d actually breathed the air of a planet and not of a ship.’

I waited for him to go on. ‘And?’

‘He didn’t have anything good to say about it,’ he said. ‘Old World was polluted and crowded and dying from its own poisons. That’s why we left, to find a better place, one we could do our very best not to wreck like we had Old World.’

‘I know all this—’

‘But the rest of us are just like you, Viola. We’ve never seen any space bigger than the cargo bay on the *Gamma*. I don’t know what fresh air smells like either except what they’ve got on the immersive vids, and that’s not the real thing. I mean, can you imagine what a real *ocean* is like, Viola? How big it must seem? How small we are compared to it?’

‘Is this supposed to make me feel better?’

‘Actually, yes.’ He smiled and tapped the present I was holding. ‘Because you’ll have something to help you against the darkness.’

The present was small in my hand, but heavy, substantial. ‘But I can’t open it ‘til I get there.’

‘How would I know?’ he asked. ‘I’ll just have to trust you.’

I looked back up. ‘I’ll wait,’ I said. ‘I promise.’

‘And I’m going to miss her *birthday!*’ Steff Taylor wailed loudly, shooting me a look, and I could see that her eyes, at least, weren’t wailing.

‘I’ll see you in twelve months, Viola,’ Bradley said. ‘And when I get there, make sure I’m the first one you tell what the night looks like by firelight.’

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The scout ship feels like it’s going to fly apart at any second. The atmosphere is bashing us around and it’s all my mother can do to keep us upright.

She calls occasionally for my dad, but there’s still no answer.

‘Viola, where are we?!’ she shouts, wrestling with the controls.

‘We’re coming back around!’ I shout over the roar of it all. ‘We’re going too fast, though. I think we’re going to overshoot it.’

‘I’ll try to get us down as best I can. Can you see anything on the scanners? Anything beyond that bit of the river where we can land?’

I press through my screens but they’re jumping around as much as everything else on the ship. The engines are still firing us forward and so we’re pretty much *falling* towards the planet, too fast, with no way to slow ourselves down. We’re *zooming* over a *huge* ocean right now and I can tell my mother is worried that we’ll have to put down in the middle of it—

But the continent’s coming up on our screens now, looming dark as night and way too fast and suddenly we’re over it, the ground whipping by down below us.

‘Are we near it?!’ my mum yells.

‘Hold on!’ I check the mapping. ‘We’re south of it! About 15ks!’

She wrestles with the manual controls, trying to turn us a bit more north. ‘Dammit!’ The ship lists and I slam my elbow into the control panel, losing my maps for a second.

‘Mum?’ I say, worry and fright in my voice as I try to bring the maps up again.

‘I know, sweetheart,’ she says, grunting with the controls.

‘What about dad?’

She doesn’t say anything but I can see it all on her face. ‘We’ve got to find a place to put down, Viola! And then we’ll do everything we can to save him!’

I turn back to my maps. ‘Looks like a prairie of some kind first,’ I say, ‘but we’ll probably overshoot that.’ I dial through some more scans. ‘A swamp!’ I say.



My mother's got us heading north again, back towards that river we saw, which seems to peter out into swampland.

'Will we be low enough?' my mother yells.

I dial through a few more screens and projected landing arcs. 'It'll be close.'

The ship gives a huge jolt.

And then there's an eerie quiet.

'We've lost the engines,' my mother says. 'The vents never opened. The fire choked out.' She turns to me. 'We're gliding in. Program me a flightpath and hold on tight.'

I dial quickly through a few more screens, locking in a landing arc into what I'm hoping will be a nice soft swamp.

My mother pulls the manual controls hard with her fists, lining up her screen with the path I've laid out. Out the portholes I can see the ground far too clearly now, treetops getting closer and closer below us.

'Mum?' I say, watching as we get lower in the sky.

'Hang on!' she says.

'MUM!'

And we hit.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Happy birthday!' they shouted on the big day, ambushing me at breakfast with the least surprising surprise party in the history of the universe.

'Thanks,' I mumbled.

We'd left the convoy three months earlier, watching it blink out of sight behind us as we sped away fast, fast, fast. We were still eight weeks away from the new planet, eight long weeks in a ship that was beginning to smell a bit, no matter how much the air got filtered.

'Presents!' my father said, sweeping his hand over the wrapped boxes on the table.

'You could at least *try* to look pleased, Viola,' my mother said.

'Thanks,' I said again, a bit louder. I opened the first present, a new pair of boots, meant for hiking through rough terrain, completely the wrong colour, but I made sort of fake thankful sounds for them anyway.

I opened the second.

'Binos,' my father said as I took them out. 'Your mother had them upgraded by Eddie, the engineer on the *Alpha* before we left. These do things you wouldn't even believe. Night vision, in-screen zoom...'

I looked through them and found a giant version of my father's left eye looking back at me.

'She's smiling,' my father said and his own giant grin filled the binos.

'I am *not*,' I said.

My mother left the room and came back with my favourite breakfast, a stack of pancakes, this time with thirteen motion-activated fibre-optic lights glittering on the top. They sang me the song, and it took four goes moving my hands before I got all the lights to go off.

'What'd you wish for?' my father asked.

'If you tell,' I said. 'It doesn't come true.'

'Well, we're not turning the ship around,' my mother said, 'so I hope it wasn't that.'

'Hope!' my father said, too loud, covering up my mother's words with forced enthusiasm. 'That's what we should all wish for. Hope!'

I frowned because there was that word again.

'We brought this out, too,' my father said, touching Bradley's still-wrapped present. 'Just in case you wanted to open it now.'

I looked at my parents' faces, my father bright and happy, my mother annoyed with all my moaning but trying to make me have a good birthday anyway. And for a brief second, I saw their worry about me, too.

Their worry that I didn't seem to have any hope at all.

I looked at Bradley's present. *A light against the darkness*, he'd said.

'He said it was for when we got there,' I said. 'I'll wait until then.'

\* \* \* \* \*

The sound when we crash is so loud it's almost impossible.

The ship smashes through trees, snapping them into bits, and then hits the ground with a jolt so violent I knock my head against the control panel and pain rips through it but I'm still awake, awake enough to hear the ship start to break apart, awake enough to hear every *crash* and *snap* and *grind* as we carve out a long ditch through the swamp, awake as the ship rolls over again and again, which can only mean the wings have broken off, and everything in the cabin falls to the ceiling and back down again and then there's an actual crack in the structure of the cockpit and water rushes in from the swamp but then we're rolling again—

And we're slowing—

The roll is slowing down—

The grinding of metal is deafening and the main lights cut off as we take another roll, replaced immediately by the quivery battery lights—

And the roll keeps slowing—

Slowing until—

It stops.

And I'm still breathing. My head is spinning and aching and I'm hanging almost upside down from my buckle in my seat.

But I'm breathing.

'Mum?' I say, looking down and around. '*Mum?*'

'Viola?' I hear.

'Mum?' I twist round to where her seat should be—

But it's not there—

I twist round some more—

And there she is, resting against the ceiling, her chair ripped from the floor—

And the way she's lying there—

The way she's lying there *broken*—

'Viola?' she says again.

And the way she says it makes my chest grip tight as a fist.

*No*, I think. *No*.

And I start the struggle to get out of my chair to get to her.

\* \* \* \* \*

'Big day tomorrow, Skipper,' my dad said, coming into the engine room, where I was replacing tubes of coolant, one of about a million chores they'd come up with in the past five months to keep me busy. 'We'll finally be entering orbit.'

I clicked in the last coolant tube. 'Terrific.'

He paused. 'I know this hasn't been easy for you, Viola.'

‘Why do you care if it wasn’t?’ I said. ‘I didn’t have any say in the matter.’

He came closer. ‘Okay, what are you *really* frightened of, Viola?’ he said, and it’s so exactly the question Bradley asked me that I look back at him. ‘Is it what we could find there? Or is it just that it’s change?’

I sighed heavily. ‘No one ever seems to wonder what happens if it turns out we *hate* living on a planet? What if the sky’s too big? What if the air stinks? What if we go hungry?’

‘And what if the air tastes of honey? What if there’s so much food we all get too fat? What if the sky is so beautiful we don’t get any work done because we’re all looking at it too much?’

I turned and closed up the coolant tube cases. ‘But what if it isn’t?’

‘But what if it is?’

‘What if it *isn’t*?’

‘What if it *is*?’

‘Yeah, this is getting us somewhere.’

‘Haven’t we raised you to be hopeful?’ he said. ‘Wasn’t that the whole point of your great-grandmother agreeing to be a caretaker on this ship, so that one day *you* could have a better life? *She* was full of hope. Your mum and I are full of hope.’ He was close enough now for a hug, if I wanted it. ‘Why can’t you share some of that?’

And he was looking so caring, so worried, that how could I tell him? How could I tell him how much I hate even the sound of the word?

Hope. That’s all anyone ever talked about on the convoy, especially as we got closer. Hope, hope, hope.

As in, ‘I hope the weather’s good.’ This from people who’d never actually experienced weather except in immersive vids.

Or, ‘I hope there’s interesting wildlife.’ From people who’d only ever met Scampus and Bumpus, the ship’s cats on the Delta. 10,000 frozen sheep and cow embryos didn’t count.

Or, ‘I hope the natives are friendly.’ This always said with a laugh because there aren’t supposed to *be* any natives, at least according to the deep space probes.

Everybody was hoping for something, talking about our new life to come and all that they *hoped* from it. Fresh air, whatever that’s supposed to mean. Real gravity, instead of the fake kind that broke every now and then (even though no one over fifteen would admit that it was actually really fun when it did). All the wide open spaces we’d have, all the new people we’d meet when we woke them up, ignoring completely what happened to the original settlers, super-confident that we were so much better equipped that nothing bad could possibly happen to us.

\* \* \* \* \*

All this hope, and here I was, right at the very edge of it, looking out into the darkness, the first to see it coming, the first to greet it when we found out what it *really* looked like.

But what if?

‘Is it because hope is scary?’ my father asked.

I looked back at him, startled. ‘You think so, too?’

He smiled, full of love. ‘Hope is *terrifying*, Viola,’ he said. ‘No one wants to admit it, but it is.’

I feel my eyes go wet again. 'Then how can you *stand* it? How can you bear even *thinking* it? It feels so dangerous, like you'll be punished for even thinking you deserved it.'

He touched my arm, just lightly. 'Because, Viola, life is so much *more* terrifying without it.'

I swallowed away my tears again. 'So you're telling me the only choice I have is which way I'm going to be terrified for the rest of my life?'

He laughed and opened his arms. 'And at last a smile,' he said.

And he did hug me.

And I let him.

But in my chest, there was still fear, and I didn't know which kind it was. Fear with hope, or fear without it.

\* \* \* \* \*

It takes what seems like forever to unbuckle my belt, hard to do when you're hanging upside down against it. When it finally comes undone, I fall away from the seat, sliding down the wall of the cockpit, which seems to have folded into itself.

'Mum?' I say, scooting over to her.

She's facedown on what used to be the ceiling, her legs twisted in a way I can't really look at—

'Viola?' she says again.

'I'm here, mum.' I push away the things that have fallen on her, all the files and screenpads, everything broken as we tumbled, everything that wasn't fastened down broken to pieces—

I pull up a large metal plate off her back—

And I see it—

The pilot's chair was torn from the floor, tearing away the back panel of it, turning the backrest into a shard of metal—

A shard that's gone right into my mother's spine—

'Mum?' I say, my voice tight, trying to lift it further off her—

But when I move it more, she screams, screams like I'm not even there—

I stop.

'Viola?' she says one more time, gasping. Her voice is high, broken. 'Is that you?'

'I'm here, mum,' I say, lying down next to her so I can get close to her face. I push away a last bit of glass that's covering her cheek and see her eye looking wildly around—

'Sweetheart?' she says.

'Mum?' I say, crying, brushing away more glass. 'Tell me what to do, mum.'

'Sweetheart, are you hurt?' she says, high and fluttery again, like she can't really take a breath.

'I don't know,' I say. 'Mum, can you move?'

I put a hand under her shoulder to lift her, but she screams again, which makes me scream, too, and I let her go back to how she was lying, on her stomach, on the ceiling, the metal shard in her back, blood coming out of it slowly like it was no big deal, and everything around us broken, broken, broken.

'Your father,' she gasps.

'I don't know,' I say. 'The *fire*—'

'Your father loved you,' she says.

I stop and look at her. 'What?'

I see her moving her hand, trying to worm it out from under herself and I take it gently, holding it with my own. 'I love you, too, Viola,' she says.

'Mum? Don't say that—'

'Listen, sweetheart, listen to me.'

'Mum!'

'No, listen—'

And she coughs and the pain of it causes her to scream again and I hold her hand tighter and I barely even notice that I'm screaming along with her.

She stops, gasping again, and her eye looks up at me, more focussed this time, like she's trying really hard, like she's never tried harder to do anything in her entire life. 'They'll come for you, Viola.'

'Mum, stop, please—'

'You've been trained,' she says. 'You stay alive. You stay *alive*, Viola Eade, do you hear me?' Her voice is getting louder, even though I can hear the pain in it.

'Mum, you're not *dying*—'

'Take my hope, Viola,' she says. 'Take your father's, too. I'm giving it to you, okay? I'm giving you my hope.'

'Mum, I don't understand—'

'Say you'll take it, sweetheart. Say it to me.'

My throat is choking and I think I'm crying but nothing feels attached to anything and I'm here holding my mother's hand in a wrecked spaceship on the first planet I've ever been to, in the middle of a night I can see through a crack in the ship's hull and she's dying, she's dying, and I've been so horrible to her for months—

'Say it, Viola,' my mother whispers. 'Please.'

'I'll take it,' I say. 'I'll take your hope. I've got it, okay? *Mum?*'

But I don't know if she hears me—

Because her hand isn't gripping back any more.

\* \* \* \* \*

And that's when something happens, something that makes everything *now*, something that cuts all the past away, the convoy and everyone on it gone and past, and it's just me, here, *now*, so fast, it doesn't seem real.

My father. The crash. My mother. It's not real.

It's like I'm watching it all, including myself, from somewhere else.

I watch myself stand up next to my mother.

I watch myself wait there in the wreckage for a while not knowing what to do.

Until enough time passes that *something* has to be done, so I watch as I climb to where the wall of the cockpit has come apart and look out into the planet for the first time.

Look out into the darkness. Darkness upon further darkness. Darkness that hides things.

Things I can hear.

Animal noises that almost sound like words.

I watch myself step back into the ship, away from the darkness, my heart beating heavy.

And then I seem to blink and the next thing I see is myself pulling back a broken panel to the engine room.

From even farther away, I see myself finding my father, burnt in a nightmarish way from the chest down, a terrible wound on his forehead that would have killed him anyway.

I watch myself as coldness flows through me, watch as I'm so cold I'm unable to even cry at my father's body.

I blink again and then I'm seeing myself back next to my mother in the cockpit, my arms pulled tight around my knees, the battery lights in the panels flickering and slowly getting dimmer.

And then there's a birdcall or something from outside, louder than the rest, a weird one that almost sounds like the word *Prey* or *Pray*.

And I'm back behind my eyes.

Because I've seen something, tumbled there.

Something my mother must have taken from my room and brought into the cockpit, something to give to me as soon as we landed, which hurts me somewhere in a far, far off place.

There, in the wreckage.

Bradley's present.

It's still wrapped, after all these months, after even my birthday. And everything still feels impossible and like a dream, so why shouldn't I open it? If that's what my mother and father wanted, why shouldn't that be the first thing I do on this planet?

I pick it up, sliding off the torn paper and opening it just as the last of the battery power cuts out, leaving me in total darkness.

But it's okay.

It's okay because I've already seen what it is.

\* \* \* \* \*

The darkness is so thick I have to feel my way out of the wreckage, still feeling dazed, still feeling dreamy, the blanket of darkness so complete, it's almost like I'm sleeping. But I'm holding Bradley's gift.

I step out onto the planet and my foot sinks in about ten centimetres of water.

A swamp.

That's right. We were aiming for a swamp.

I keep walking, my feet sticking in the mud sometimes, but I keep walking.

Keep walking until the ground gets more solid, a little ways from the ship.

My eyes are adjusting and I can see a little clearing, surrounded by trees, the sky above us filled with all the stars I was just flying through.

I'm hearing more animals, too, but I swear it sounds like they're actually talking so I figure it must still be the shock.

Mostly there's just darkness.

There's just darkness closing me in.

And that's exactly what Bradley's gift was for.

\* \* \* \* \*

There's a dry enough spot in the middle of the raised clearing, not great, not perfect, but enough. I set down the gift and feel around for some twigs and leaves, getting a few damp handfuls and piling them on top.

I press a button on the gift and step back.

The damp leaves and twigs burst immediately into flame.

And there's light.

Light across the little clearing, light reflecting on the metal of the ship, light that includes me in it, standing here.

Light from a fire.

Bradley gave me a fire box. One that will start a fire nearly anywhere, in nearly any condition, with nearly any fuel.

Start it to give a light against the darkness.

And for a while it's all I can do just to stare at it until I feel myself shivering, and I sit down closer to the fire until I stop.

Which takes a long, long time.

The fire for now is all I can see.

Soon, I'll need to see what supplies I have left to live off of. Soon, I'll need to see if any of the communications equipment survived so I can try and contact the convoy.

Soon, I'll need to take the bodies of my father and my mother and—

But that's soon, that's not now—

Now there's only fire from the fire box.

Now there's only a tiny light against the darkness.

Whatever's going to happen next can wait.

I don't really know what my mother was saying, I don't know that hope is something you can give to someone else, something that you can take.

But I said I would, I said I *did*.

And so I sit in front of Bradley's fire, on the surface of a dark, dark planet, and I have their hope, if not any of mine.

Except the hope that it'll be enough.

And then I see a lightening in the air, in the sky above and behind me. I turn to watch this planet's sun rising, and I realise it's morning, that I've made it to morning.

That I've had enough hope to make it to morning.

*Okay*, I think to myself.

Okay.

And I begin to think of what I need to do next.

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