



PROLOGUE

Earth year 3886

There were two babies lying side by side in the crib. One of the twins was fast asleep. Blaze with his bright red hair was stocky and had his arms flung out so they took up the whole space. The other baby, half his size with fine auburn hair – and as yet unnamed, because nothing her parents tried seemed to fit – was scrunched in a ball at the end of the mattress, all wide eyes and gasping fish mouth. Little silent tears rolled down her face.

She was definitely awake.

Fluro looked around for help, but their parents were out for the night and he was on duty. He had a list, which he took out of his waistcoat pocket, but big eyes and silent tears were not on it.

‘Well then, wide-awake little one, we need to go off-plan here. Any thoughts?’ Fluro folded the list

carefully back into his pocket and bent his head over the crib. ‘Hey there, stop pulling my moustache! It is a fine specimen, but it’s not to be mauled.’

The tiny baby giggled as Blaze grunted in his sleep. His leg kicked out at his twin sister.

‘This space is unfairly distributed,’ Fluro stated. ‘Shall we take action and go for a little wander? I can’t miss it, and you may as well join me.’



Fluro let out a gigantic *oof* as he settled his bulky frame into one of the uncomfortable angular chairs on the balcony of the Nova family’s apartment.

‘Now there, if you face in that direction – stop kicking me! – you shall enjoy the fun too.’

He smoothed his handlebar moustache and adjusted his monocle. His eyes moved up the neon skyscrapers that dominated the streets, squashed together to make the most of every centimetre of space. Luminous traveller walkways hundreds of floors up linked the buildings. Cars beeped and crawled slowly across the skyways in the gridlocked city, and hologram billboards blared out adverts for the latest dronebots and new Sky Malls. The buildings and the sky above bathed them both in a fluorescent glow.

The one thing they couldn't see were the stars.

'Everyone has forgotten what we once had,' said Fluro with a sigh. 'I wish we could witness them. Against a real night sky, not this artificial glow. Even if it wasn't for the shell, all this befuddling light pollution would make those wondrous gaseous giants nigh on impossible to see, as they pursue their stately paths light years above us.'

The baby on his knees jerked and she let out a little yelp like a puppy.

'Too bright, little one? Or are you reacting to the secret I have gifted you?' Fluro dropped his booming voice to a whisper. 'I know the truth of what is beyond our false sky, and the lies that keep it secret, the hate that it masks and the desperate people it keeps outside. This secret is far too dangerous to share, so I'm only telling you because I know you won't remember, and sometimes I just need to say it out loud. Thank you for listening.'

She yawned in response, and he pulled out his pocket watch to count down the seconds. 'Centuries ago, people would *choose* to come on holiday to places like this, with its glittering neon and flashing lights. But cities like ours were few back then – in most of the world there were quiet fields and trees

and deserts and everywhere a night sky . . .’ Out of habit, Fluro glanced over his shoulder. ‘Who would have guessed then that today most of us don’t give any thought to the fact that we are a planet, and have no idea that it means we are part of something bigger, an entire galaxy! And the unspeakable horrors we have committed to be *safe* in that secret.’

He readjusted his arms awkwardly and placed the baby so that her head was nestled in the crook of his elbow, her face gazing upwards, towards the artificial shield above that encircled the entire planet like an eggshell made of blinding, fluorescent light, keeping the galaxy beyond firmly hidden away.

‘Two thousand, two hundred and four years ago, an astronomer called Edward Halley recorded seeing a burning object as it shot through the night sky. And every seventy-five or seventy-six years, we get to celebrate that moment when Halley’s Comet is visible for several weeks after its long journey around the sun.’

Fluro snorted. ‘Well, it *would* be visible, if it wasn’t for that blasted shell.’ He looked down at the baby. ‘This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and though you are exceedingly wriggly I’m very glad I get to spend it with you. According to my calculations,

this is the very moment that Halley's Comet will be closest to our planet.'

She burped and giggled, then grabbed his chunky index finger.

'Right, here goes. Look up and imagine.' Fluro closed his eyes and pictured himself sitting on a hill in the middle of fields, his back against an old oak tree. No illumination. No city blaring. The sky above was completely velvet-black, apart from the awe-inspiring display of hundreds of thousands of twinkling stars, and there, traversing the sky, the comet burned, leaving the light of its tail in its wake.

He opened his eyes and blinked rapidly. Could he really see it? He gasped as tiny shimmering lights – almost like spores in earthy tones – poured down from the sky and gathered together in the shape of an arrow, zipping and darting as if they were looking for something. Fluro held his breath as he saw the spores hesitate, pause as though they were listening, and then change their course towards him.

Not him. *Her!* They were coming for the baby!

She let out a cry of delight. Fluro looked on in awe as the spores danced around her head, and she laughed out loud and tried to grab at them.

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He knew he should protect her, flee, cover her face, do something! Instead, frozen with wonder, he watched as the glittering spores faded away to dust, leaving behind a constellation of freckles upon her little face. He saw one tiny spore that remained by her right ear, its glisten fading, and he reached out and touched it just before it disappeared. A burst of electricity shot through him, making him feel as though his teeth were going to shatter. And when he looked at his index finger, he saw there was now a trio of stars upon its tip.

Stars? Why did he think that?

Freckles, *freckles* on his fingertip, silly old man.

Fluro studied the baby's face as his brain frantically whirled and he attempted to close his open mouth and make sense of what he'd witnessed. His brain jolted back into gear as he realized he needed to protect this child in his arms.

'That's going to take a bit of explaining when I hand you back to your parents, and a lot of omission. Do you know how rare freckles are these days? I'll simply pretend I didn't notice anything when they ask me, bumbling old fool that I am. I'm sure we can convince them that freckles sometimes manifest in the first few weeks of life, right?'

She swiped her hand over her face, as if her brand-new freckles were making her itch.

‘I suppose they are something for you to get used to, little one. Let’s get you back to bed. Everyone with their boring, plain faces is going to be jealous – and you are going to be so proud of your freckles!’