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The Control Room

Grace Cox

“We have to go back tonight,” whispers Rex. His apple red hair sticks to his forehead with sweat as we wait to go into the auditorium for the annual assembly meeting. I smooth my own hair down, hoping I don’t look as disheveled as him. He had convinced me to sneak into the Control Room with him this morning, but we had to leave before we could break in.

“Are you kidding?” I raise my eyebrow at him. “We were *this close* to being seen by the patrol! Do you know how much trouble we could be in right now?” I look around to make sure no one in front of us overheard. “You have to forget about this, Rex.”

He rolls his eyes at me.

“Julian . . . are you telling me you are not the least bit curious to see what is in there?” The intense shine in his eyes scares me. He puts his arm around my shoulder in his usual way of begging, but I shrug it off.

“Why should I be curious? It’s just the dumb Control Room. There’s probably nothing in there but a bunch of electrical stuff.”

“Yeah, well, I want to see for myself,” he says resolutely. Next year Rex and I will be 15, and we will be graduating into Job Training for Habitat 1. I know Rex wants to become a Pilot, but as for me, I prefer something with a little less adventure.

Finally the doors to the auditorium slide open, and the line starts to move. As we file into the room, each person bows respectfully to two GIF portraits glowing next to the doors. The first GIF shows the great Xavier Bloom in his presidential red and gold scrubs. He was the first Martian, born on one of the first human voyages from Earth. His mother was a Russian Cosmonaut, and his father, a Chinese one. After he was born, everyone wanted to have their child on Mars. There was a huge baby boom and a rush to create the Habitats.

I remember when Xavier Bloom died. I was only four years old in Earth years (we still count in Earth years on Mars), but I remember the nannies bringing all of us children into the Playcare room to view the announcements. The man on the screen was the same one we bowed to once a year at the assembly. I had never seen him in person. Nanny Mario was cried hysterically in the corner of the room while the other nannies patted his back and wiped away tears of their own. Xavier Bloom

had been the President of Habitat 1 for 128 years. They were scared of a future without him.

The next day we were driven into the room for another announcement. The other four-year-olds and I watched as a new face came onto the screen: Viji Moreno. She introduced herself as our new president, but no one had ever heard of her before.

Rex and I bow to the second portrait where President Moreno smiles back at us. Rex sticks his tongue out toward the hologram, but I push him toward the doors. He keeps getting more and more reckless. Sometimes I am afraid of what he might do next. He is my best friend, but sometimes even I don't know what he is thinking.

The assembly is boring. The only good thing about it is that we get to skip classes for a day. I notice a pretty girl named Aimée whispering with her friends a few rows in front of me. Her smooth dark hair shines in the fluorescent lights like the tail of a black stallion. She is a natural beauty, with sharp black eyes and full pink lips. My hands start to sweat, and I wipe them on my scrubs, trying to turn my attention back to the fiery blue hologram.

The hologram has no hair or defining features. Rex has gotten into many long arguments with some of the other guys about whether the hologram is male or female, but I don't bother to argue with them about it. It's obvious that the creator made it neither. It is to neither give nor take away power from any one group of people. There must be complete equality on Mars or we will end up just like the people on earth: dead.

During each assembly the Hologram reminds us about how the people of Earth bombed one another for reasons of greed and hatred. How they were so consumed with discrimination that they killed without reason. And how large groups of people were repressed, eventually retaliating in a force that destroyed all human life on earth. Had there not already been humans living on Mars when that happened the human race would be extinct right now.

“ . . . and, eventually, they used these atomic bombs to eradicate the entire human race on earth . . . ,” the Hologram drones on.

I yawn. I have heard this speech so many times I could recite it in my sleep. I look at Rex, and I am shocked to see him paying rapt attention. I sit up a little straighter and nudge him.

“What are you looking at?” I ask.

He glances at me.

“Huh?” He turns his gaze back to the hologram, clearly interested in what it is saying. I look at the hologram, too. Maybe I missed something. Was this not the same speech I had heard time and time again?

Rex turns to me and says incredulously, “Are you hearing this?”

“What? No. I mean not really . . . Isn’t it the same thing it always says?” I look at him questioningly.

“I never understood before . . .,” he says.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “It’s not a mystery . . . it’s just history.”

Rex looks back up at the hologram thoughtfully.

“I don’t know,” he says seriously. “It just seems strange to me . . . how could they all be dead? Don’t you ever wonder if some of them survived?” He looks at me and then lowers his eyes to his hands, and for the first time I notice the dark circles under my friend’s eyes. I don’t know what to think about his new attitude, but I hope he gets over it soon.

At midday we get a break for lunch. Rex and I troop off to the mess hall with the other students.

“Yes! Tofu burgers!” says Beni, one of the youngest boys in our class. I hear a few more cheers as the news of today’s lunch item echoes through the line behind me. Tofu burgers are one of the tastiest things on the menu in Habitat 1. Rex told me once that earthlings ate burgers made out of animal flesh, but I didn’t believe him. He likes to say shocking things like that, but none of it is true. I close my eyes and let the juices from my burger seep into the crevices of my mouth. It is so good!

I look at Rex to see if he is enjoying the burger as much as I am. I expect to see him stuffing his face, but he has barely touched his food. It’s so unlike him. Rex is usually the first person to finish his food, but today he is nibbling slowly with a faraway look on his face. I wonder if it has something to do with the way he was looking at the Hologram earlier, but I don’t want to think about it.

“Dude, what’s wrong with Rex? Is he sick or something?” Beni asks, looking concerned.

“Um . . . he was up late finishing that paper for Smith,” I lie. I shift in my seat and try to change the subject.

“So are you ready to hear about why you should recycle?” I ask. For the second half of the day, the Hologram talks about the principles that Habitat 1 was founded on: sustainability, recycling, and resourcefulness.

“Do I have a choice?” laughs Beni. He turns to talk to someone else, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

When the bell rings signaling the end of our lunch period, Rex grabs my arm.

“Julian, we have to go now,” he whispers.

“Where?” I ask, but in my head I think, *Oh, no! Not this again.*

“Back to the Control Room. We have to go while everyone else is in the assembly.” His clear blue eyes stare into my black ones, begging me to come with him. He is scared to go alone.

“Okay, I’ll go with you, but this is the last time, Rex!”

“Okay!” he puts his hands up defensively, but I can see he is relieved.

I follow Rex as we place our trays in the wash bin. We try to blend in with the crowd as we make our way into the main corridor, a hard task for Rex. His hair makes him stand out like the cherry on the top of a chocolate sundae. We dawdle until we are the last people who haven’t entered the auditorium again, and then he pushes me into a sprint down the hallway. Thanks to our vegetarian diet and physical endurance classes, neither of us is very much out of breath by the time we reach the Control Room.

If Rex hadn’t shown it to me this morning, I would have walked straight past the room without ever noticing. There are no doors or signs, only a small glowing rectangle on the floor. Rex taps the rectangle lightly with his foot, and a large glowing panel with a keyboard appears on the wall in front of us. In an instant Rex is quick at work, furiously typing codes and passwords to hack into the room.

I look around us. I think it’s strange that there are no cameras in this part of the corridor, but I suppose people don’t usually come down this far.

“Rex . . . How did you know the Control Room was down here?” I ask. He shoots a glance over his shoulder, obviously not wanting to be distracted.

“Someone told me it would be here,” he says. Well, that piques my interest.

“Who?”

“Don’t worry about it, Julian,” he says. “Will you just make sure no one is coming? I’m almost done here.”

“Well, excuse me for asking,” I mutter. I roll my eyes, and look down the hallway again. There is a small shadow flickering around the corner of the hallway, and I squint at it. *Maybe it is just my imagination*, I think. Nevertheless, my heartbeat quickens, and I start to hear a sound like *swish, swish, swish*.

Then I panic. I grab Rex’s arm and shake him, whispering urgently, “Rex! Hurry up, man. It’s the patrol! We’re going to get caught!” I don’t know what our punishment will be, but I really don’t want to find out.

“Hold on! I’ve almost got it,” says Rex through gritted teeth. An instant later I am being shoved through the wall, and the corridor vanishes from my sight.

I find myself in a room filled with hundreds of whirring machines with little blinking dots of red and green sparkling across them. I reach out to find Rex, but he is not next to me. There is nothing but a smooth metallic wall behind me.

What if Rex was caught by the patrol? I think. No one I know of has ever done anything this risky before. I bang my fists against the wall, and it echoes throughout the room.

“Rex!” I call.

I place my ear against the cold metal to see if I can hear him on the other side, but I hear nothing except the sound of my own breath. All I want is to get out of here, find my friend, and go back to my dormitory. There is a door on the other side of the room. I make my way towards it when suddenly one of the machines starts buzzing. I hear a faint computerized voice coming from the machine, saying, “Warning! Warning! Area 5: breached . . . Sending back up . . . Locating satellite images . . . Warning!”

I walk toward the screens where the images are loading. It takes me a few seconds to realize what I am seeing. There are people running all over the place, people being beaten, women crying over dead bodies,

people who look more like skeletons than people. I don't know what to think. These must be images from Earth before the bombs. I frown. They never showed this stuff to us in school. It makes me sick.

The computerized voice starts speaking again. "Warning! Uprising in Area 126 . . . Preparing retaliation forces . . ." New images download onto the screens in front of me. Today's date shines in the corner of each screen with a description underneath.

21. London, England. Breach of nutrition vault, Headquarters building, 58. Captured, five radicals. Escaped, 3 radicals.

22. Beijing, China. Attempted security breach, headquarters building 17. Number of radicals unknown.

23. Los Angeles, United States. Riot, Presidential Residence, 73 radicals killed. 17 captured and held for questioning. Investigation, ongoing.

London? Beijing? *Wait*, I think. *Is this is happening right now?* I hear a low chuckle coming from behind the second door, and without thinking I throw myself behind a large desk.

The door slides open, and I hear a deep voice say, "Lars, check the log, and tell me how many events today . . ." A brief silence, and the same voice exclaims, "Lars! Come look at this! These poor bastards in L.A. are getting exterminated! *Pow! Pow! Pow!*" His laugh booms around the room. "Almost makes you wish you were a part of the action, eh?"

I cover my mouth to muffle the sounds of my own breath. I know that cruel voice will hear it and come find me any second now.

"There have been twenty-three instances today, sir," says Lars.

"Good! That's less than yesterday, isn't it?" booms the first voice. "Maybe these radicals are getting the message . . . maybe we won't have to bomb them again after all, eh, buddy?"

I can't believe what I'm hearing. *Bomb them again?* We bombed them? Rex was right. Everything I had ever known was a lie. The Hologram, the assembly; it was all a big fat lie! There are survivors on Earth. They didn't kill one another. *We bombed them.* The thought sent me reeling, and I grab the side of the desk for support.

How did Rex know this? My best friend . . . who had told him? He said he wanted to see the Control Room for himself. Had someone told him what he would see on the screens? I am snapped back to reality

when the first voice says something else.

“You know they finally caught that red headed kid that’s been snooping around,” the first man starts. “Right outside this room, too. Did he really think he could hide with a head of hair like that? We would have had a hard time explaining that one to Moreno, eh, buddy?” The man chuckles at the thought.

I want to scream.

Finally the voice says, “Well, we better go give Moreno the update before she calls me again. We don’t want to get on her bad side!” I hear the screech of something metal against concrete and the squeak of rubber on the floor as the two men leave the room.

When I am sure they are gone, I emerge from my hiding place. I still can’t believe Rex has been caught. What will they do to him? Where will they take him? Will he simply disappear into the night like a sunset? Surely someone will notice. What excuse will they give as to why he is missing?

I know I can’t stay here any longer, so I go back to the wall where I entered the room. I run my hand over the cold surface, and I look down noticing something I hadn’t before: A small rectangle on the ground in front of the wall. I tap it lightly with my foot, hoping that I won’t need a code, and my wish is granted. I guess whoever built the place was only worried about people getting inside, not about getting out.

Then I am in the hallway again, half expecting to see Rex waiting for me. I shake my head. *That was a stupid thought.* I slowly make my way back to the dormitories, trying to make myself inconspicuous. The rest of my group is washing up for dinner when I enter the room.

“Hey, Julian!” says Beni. He looks at me with big brown eyes and a grin. “What’s wrong?”

I look at him. I want to tell someone what I have just seen, but I can’t bring myself to tell Beni. He wouldn’t understand. Rex was the only one who would have understood, but he is not here. I look around at the other boys. Did one of them send Rex to the Control Room? Or was it someone else? I don’t know . . . I look down at my hands. All I know is that I have to save my best friend, and to do that I will have to find out who sent him to the Control Room in the first place.