

Letters From The Light

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For Heidi, the light of my life.

The Blazing Aurora VI

3307AD

ON THE OUTSKIRTS of an increasingly quiet Sol system, a lone vessel streaked through the starry skies.

It was a small ship. Nothing like the great migration arks which had set out from Earth generations earlier to seed the stars with ambitious, cocky humans. Not as bulky as the Drexus Corp supply vessels which had once flown a continuous loop between deep space mining colonies. And certainly not as streamlined as the pleasure cruisers that lay dormant in the ports of the once-thriving resort planets.

Perhaps tiny was a better description. Yet had anyone been tracking it from UNP command, they would likely have marked its movements as significant.

The tiny ship headed in from the Kuiper Belt on a trajectory to Earth, rapidly shedding velocity until it came to a full stop at a large Hicks classed asteroid. For ninety-two minutes it circled. It launched a satellite that bounced sixty-two forms of radiation at the rock, both standard and exotic. It released trace amounts of Polonium-210. Then it retrieved its satellite and took off in the direction of Neptune.

Definitely worth a threat evaluation. UNP reports should have been escalated up the line to central command. But no one was watching the stars anymore.

CHAPTER 1

Lower Broome

Australis 3308AD

AGGY WILCOCKS SURFACED, gasping and coughing. The surging flood had taken her by surprise, separating her from her family, pushing her right through town and slamming her against the tin veranda of the transit station.

Winded, she sucked desperately for air before diving down into the murky water in a frantic search for Uncle or the children. She came back up, still breathless and alone. Aggy dove again, pushing at the shifting debris. Lots of branches, a tractor battery, two dolls and some hydroponic drip-feeding tubes. Nothing important or useful.

Bobbing atop the water-line and blinking back tears, she squinted towards the horizon. The familiar landmarks were missing. No more grain silo or McWilliam's two-storey Pub. Even the town hall, where she had hoped to attend her first harvest dance with Stevie Bennet, had gone. Swirling, turgid water had swallowed everything and everyone; so quickly.

Aggy grabbed a wooden table that floated within reach and clung to it as she looked west for the source of the flood. It was impossible to see anything clearly in the white-topped turmoil.

Then, looking up she noticed the cavern's rocky roof approaching as she rose higher in the water. Unless she could find a way out soon, the vast underground cavern that had been her home would fill to become her watery tomb.

Behind her, the roof arched down into the water and merged into the back wall of the drowned transit station. All her life it had been there. A distant, largely ignored wall that defined the edge of their territory and kept them safe. Now it was a dam that was drowning them all.

She forced down a sob and reached out to touch it. The wall was slippery, cold to the touch and impossibly smooth. She clawed at it with her hands but couldn't get any purchase. Feeling above her head, she found a conduit that ascended from the recently submerged building beneath her feet, and clung to it.

Steady at last, she made herself recall Uncle's last instructions, hoping it would calm her down and help her find a way out.

What had he said? Think, Aggy, think! The stories of the world above us are true. Just need to survive this. Find ... something? Find what? It had happened so rapidly she couldn't remember. JayMoe would know.

Aggy was about to dive down to search for him when she heard a low growl. She looked into the distance. Her heart screamed. Another wave loomed. There was only enough time to strengthen her grip and take two deep breaths.

The green wall of frothy water hit and, once again, she was submerged.

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Earlier that evening, as he did every night, Uncle Larry gathered the children in front of the fireplace.

‘Who will receive the first song tonight? Maybe the one about the evil Master who lives below us just waiting for the chance to creep up and steal the supper of lazy children. Hey?’

A squeal from the youngest child caused giggles in the others. Aggy gave Uncle an exaggerated eye roll.

‘Oh right, too scary for this time of night,’ said Uncle.

‘How about you, Johanna? Maybe you’d like to hear about your ancestors who dove into the oceans off Broome searching for pearls for their girlfriends. You know they held their knives clenched in their teeth. Hey?’

‘No, on second thought, we’d better not do that one. I’ll have to explain the whole “ocean” concept to Macallum again. I haven’t got it in me tonight.’

Aggy looked around the room at the five little faces, scary stories forgotten, each one beamed at Uncle hoping they would be the star of his latest epic ballad.

It was a nightly ritual they all loved, aside from teenaged Aggy, who thought it was ridiculous to fill the little kids’ heads with false stories about the past and predictions of ‘special futures.’

Uncle had sung her special future-song once. It was full of heroic battles in exotic lands and yet she was stuck farming dawn to dusk, every day. Surviving with her adopted uncle and five other orphaned children – trying hard to create a home but mostly just existing in a forgotten underground settlement.

With a nod to Uncle, Aggy left to do the evening livestock check.

Outside the cabin, she stopped to gaze up at the high brown ceiling. That was her nightly ritual. She was obsessed by the mystery of how the ancient engineers had discovered their cavern and transformed it into a bright, liveable colony. Aggy had always thought that it was like living inside a giant walnut shell.

They had fresh water for their hydroponics fields bubbling in at Gibson Falls in the west end. Wastes exited via the automated transit station to the east. In between, trillions of nanobots shared

their world, unseen, scrubbing the atmosphere, maintaining the overhead lights and balancing the soil nutrients.

It was marvellous, aside from the fact that you could never leave. Unless you were water coming in, or refuse going out, you were destined to stay in the closed community.

Aggy broke her gaze and bent to tie her bootlaces. Something was wrong. Water was trickling everywhere, forming small rivulets in the dirt around her boots, and puddles in her footprints. She smelled something strange too. The air smelt metallic, tinny even, with a bit of a static feel causing a shiver to run across her back.

Then the sound hit – a deep roar came in from the west. When she stood, a powerful gust of wind hit the side of the little house, shaking the shingled roof.

Aggy assumed that the pellet condenser, which she and JayMoe had been working on earlier that day, must have malfunctioned. She turned to run around the corner of her house towards the noise only to collide with JayMoe, who came screeching on one wheel. The small droid grabbed her hand, pulling at her. He was jabbering so fast he made no sense.

‘JayMoe! JayMoe, slow down. What’s going on?’

Their front door had flung open. In two leaps, Uncle Larry crossed the old wooden porch and lifted up JayMoe. He too was talking fast, senseless gibberish.

She shook her head, thinking she must have injured herself smashing into JayMoe. She started back to the house when Uncle dropped the droid and leapt over to grasp her head in his hands – his eyes full of desperation.

‘I’m sorry it has to be like this,’ he said hurriedly. ‘I thought we had more time but the Master found us again. We should have been safe here! How did he find us?’

Aggy opened her mouth to respond.

‘Don’t try to speak. There’s no time and you can’t communicate in this mode anyway. I’m in hyperspeak – a condensed way of

talking which slows down our experience of normal time. Our whole conversation will happen in just a second or two of real time.

‘You see, when you were small, I arranged a little ... well, implant for just this sort of emergency, but yours is for receiving only. You weren’t old enough for a full implant.’

Uncle’s tone told her more than his words. He was usually so annoyingly cheerful. Aggy felt her face blanching and her hands trembling.

‘Oh honey, don’t cry. You must be strong. I’ve got but an instant and then the link will be over. I need you to understand that my stories of the world above us are true. All of them! We’re not alone. There is a great big world waiting for you on the surface above us. Aggy, you need to survive this and find it.’

He looked over her shoulder, his eyes growing larger as the rumbling intensified. It was almost impossible to hear what he said. Slow, distorted screams echoed from the direction of McGinty’s homestead. Slimy wetness pushed hard at her ankles. She felt herself slipping but dared not look away from the certainty of Uncle’s face.

‘Go with JayMoe. Trust him. He’s more capable than you know. Remember, look for the thin places. That’s where you’ll find the Light. It’s the only way you’ll find the truth about our world. Find the Light—’

Before he could finish his sentence, time abruptly sped back up to normal and an enormous wall of water smashed through the house, tearing her from Uncle and turning her world upside down.

Somehow, JayMoe had managed to latch onto her wrist. Together they were picked up by the wave and dragged away from the farm in a heartbeat.

Buffeted by the maelstrom of wreckage that had once been her home, they sped along at a furious pace. A wide-eyed horse floated by, frantically neighing and looking as though it was using its hooves to grasp part of a hen house. She reached across to grab its mane but it slipped backwards into the wash, twirled out of reach and slammed into a low-lying roof.

The neighbour's barn came into sight. She glimpsed Mr McGinty waving his arms out of the loft window. The water spun her away momentarily. When she was able to look back, she saw the crushing waves reduce the barn to rubble.

The town buildings were fast approaching. Aggy started to panic, but by the time they reached them, the depth of the water had increased enough that they glided right over.

With each surge Aggy expected to be crushed or drowned, yet somehow JayMoe managed to keep her afloat. He whirled from side to side, deflecting objects until they collided with the transit station where he finally lost his grip.

Aggy and JayMoe plunged deep below the water.

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On her last dive, out of breath and barely conscious, Aggy felt a mechanical hand latch onto her ankle and push her up to the surface. JayMoe popped up beside her, squeezing her torso to help clear her lungs.

'Thank you!' She could hardly get the words out through the foam she was belching. 'Have you seen anyone else? The kids? Uncle?'

'Don't know. Gone probably.' The droid flailed about, unsuccessfully trying to use his spare hand to get a grip on the slippery wall.

'Gibson Falls. There must have been a malfunction at the waterfall!' Aggy yelled.

'No,' JayMoe said calmly.

'It must be. Where else could this all come from?' She swivelled her head, searching desperately for an answer. None of it made sense.

'No malfunction. Sabotage. The Master's coming for us.'

Aggy was glad JayMoe had slowed his speech down to normal, yet he still wasn't making sense. She suspected he had bumped loose a circuit.

They were still rising rapidly with the water level. Stretching up, Aggy was able to brush her fingertips across the ceiling.

Her surprise turned into a plan. 'JayMoe, it feels smooth, it's not natural rock! If it's manufactured – there might be panels we can pry loose!'

She banged at the surface above her but the ebbing water made it impossible for her to have any impact. She clawed in search of a join until her fingers were a bloody mess. JayMoe grabbed her hands.

'Wait, not yet. Save your strength.' He looked up at the arching roofline while he gently restrained her.

'Save my strength? For what? We're about to be sealed in a cavern of water! I don't know if you've noticed, you stupid farm droid, but there's probably no one alive except us. And given that I'm the only human here, technically there's only me! What should I be waiting for ...?'

Aggy's near hysterical utterings were cut short by an ear-splitting explosion. A pressure wave pushed them both back. Aggy cracked her shoulder against the wall. The cavern lights went out.

'Waiting for that. Now we can go,' he said.

To Aggy's astonishment, the droid produced a small tool which he aimed at the ceiling and, just inches from their faces, cut a circle with a red beam of light. He peeled back a piece of the roof large enough for them to climb through. Then, reaching up, he pulled himself out of the water and dragged Aggy up after him.

She climbed onto the dry surface beyond and collapsed in a quivering heap, panting, as JayMoe used his tool to repair the hole and seal out the rising water.

'Here, take this. Larry said you would need it.' JayMoe passed her the small golden hip flask she'd often seen Uncle Larry carrying.

She took a sip. Aggy couldn't even begin to imagine how he'd had the foresight to grab provisions when this crisis started.

A shiver took hold of her while she tried to process the enormity of what had just happened. She was wet, bruised and alone in a dark tube somewhere inside the roof of their cavern. Lower Broome was gone, along with Uncle Larry, Johanna, Macallum, Billy and Jason.

Everything she knew and everyone she loved was washed away.

JayMoe finished his repair job, changed the setting on his tool to lightkey torch, and used it to illuminate the walls around them as though assessing their surroundings. He stopped to highlight a set of numerical figures stamped into the wall.

'Come on, Aggy. I've got our bearings. We need to move now before we're detected. It's a long trek, although the odds of survival are quite adequate if we get going.' JayMoe held out his little metal hand to her.

Aggy was numb with fatigue and shock. She didn't know what to say or do, and then she remembered Uncle's last words. The little droid *had* already proven to be much more capable than he had any right to be.

She took one last swig out of the flask, passed it back to JayMoe and stood up.

'Lead on,' she said.