

STARLIGHT
SEIZED

BY CHINA DENNINGTON

Prologue

I'm scared of forgetting how it feels to stand in the middle of a field and let the rain wash over me. So I spin in the downpour, my arms outstretched in elation. The world is glistening and full of life. I breathe deeply, knowing this may well be the last time I smell the tangy scent of wet earth and trees.

On Erimost there are no forests or secret streams weaving through the greenery. In fact, there isn't much greenery there at all. But I am trading these things I love for something else: the precious experience of setting foot on another planet. It's something that no one else here has done. Ever. I hold my hand close to my face and examine the iridescent droplets coating my rosy beige skin. I'm afraid I've taken them for granted.

I'm ready to break free of the confines of my life and explore. I want to stretch out my hand and brush the starlight with my fingertips. For now, though, I'll stand here in the downpour, enjoying this storm as I'll never see one like it again.

Tessa
14th of Destya, 1121

“But why have their pictures been erased?” I pressure, racing after my mother as she walks into the next room, her footsteps crisp and quick on the tiles.

“I was looking through photographs of the Landing in the library and their faces are blurred out. When I saw that, I did some digging. Every mention of their names is redacted, every image covered. I couldn’t find a single picture.”

“It’s because of the Damnation of their Memories. You know this already, Tessa,” she replies angrily.

“But why? Doesn’t it seem extreme to you?”

She whirls on me, her thick black hair popping against her pale white complexion. “My parents killed people, Tessa. Is that what you want to hear? They set off an explosion and purposefully killed innocent people. So yes, their memories are as damned to hell as I’m sure they are.”

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Her voice is tight and controlled, as always. I place my sepia brown hand on her arm, causing her to pause.

“Don’t you find it strange that we lost contact with Dentroa the same year they died?” I continue. I withdraw my hand and with a huff she slams around the kitchen, pulling vegetables from the icebox and slicing them with unnecessary vigor on the sleek metal countertop.

“Why are you so obsessed with this?”

“Maybe because I’m stranded on this godforsaken desert planet and I’d like to know why?” I shout. “We are the city historians, aren’t we?”

“You’re only sixteen. You’re not the historian yet, but I am. This conversation’s over,” she snaps as she turns on a lamp to combat the fading light.

I storm away, burning with frustration, pushing the tight coils of my black hair away from my face. Stifled. Trapped. Nowhere to go. I sigh, shutting myself in my room and sinking onto my bed. I’ll survive. Well, for a while anyway. One day at a time, I remind myself.

I comfort myself with daydreams of rain showers and the sight of green forests brimming with life on Dentroa. But dreams they are and dreams they will remain. Will I never leave this place?

Maris
Public
9th of Estane, 1067

The smell of rain permeates the air. Grey clouds hide the sun from us as a quiet wind brushes our faces. I pray that the sun will come out before we leave so I can see its rays just once more on my home planet. All the settlers stand facing the stark white hull of the large-bellied ship that will carry us away from Dentroa to red Erimost.

The Chiasmus Alliance evaluated families as a whole. Every couple has expertise in a specialized area such as agriculture or quantum engineering. If that couple has children, they have been evaluated as well on their skillset, grades, and character. The assumption is that they'll take over their parents' roles eventually and, until then, will serve as apprentices.

The outstanding, the strong, and the brave stand before me. All across the world people are clustered

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around their viewscreens, waiting for the Erimostian mission to leave.

Me? I'm waiting for the world to start.

The announcer begins speaking as the thunderous roar of applause prompted by the president's speech dies down.

"The colonists will now board," he shouts into the heavy silence of ten thousand people waiting breathlessly. This will be the first settlement ever established on another planet. The quiet is eerie as the crowd tries to see us. Those in front of me slowly file toward the ship and I follow. Deafening applause breaks the silence as the first colonist—Pilot Edward Lang—enters the belly of the beast. We all know this is a historic walk, so we take our time. I try to even out my breathing.

I desperately search the sky for the sun. Not finding it, I take a deep breath and close my eyes. My last breath of fresh air. I open them and check one last time. And I see it—golden rays breaking through the gloom and chasing broken shadows through the sky. This is my last glimpse of Dentre. My last breath of its fresh, spicy air. I take it in, wishing I could have more, but knowing that, if fear had its way, I would never leave. I refuse to bow to fear.

The striking reality of our decision is becoming clearer the closer we get to boarding the ship. Many of us wave to the rustling crowd. I join them when my father elbows me in reminder. We've been trained for this part of it too. We've been trained for anything that might possibly happen.

The entrance looms. With one last look back, I step over the threshold. I'm used to the narrow entrance passage, but I'm glad when it opens up into the auditorium. We file through it until we reach a room with

fifteen long rows of chairs. We each stride to our seats, sit, and promptly fasten all the safety straps exactly as we practiced. The announcer's voice filters through the speakers, "Thirty minutes until liftoff."

There is dead silence as people reflect on the solemnity of the event.

This must be the longest half an hour of my life. I start counting my breaths to distract myself from the passage of time. The sound of the rockets firing tears through the air so the announcer's voice can barely be heard.

"5...4...3...2...1...Liftoff." The roar is deafening as a rumble tears through the ship. The pressure becomes greater and greater. I remind myself that it'll be over in a couple of minutes, besides, this is the least of the discomfort I'm submitting to for the sake of this mission. I sing a song in my head. A song about new realms and dreams come true. A song about rebirth.

My name is Maris Hall and I'm seventeen years old. I've been tasked with recording the story of the settlers of Astya, the first settlement on Erimost. In addition, I am keeping a personal journal of a less objective nature, as I guess many others will do as well.

My goal as the city historian is to preserve the stories of our journey and lives for future generations to judge as they see fit. This is where that record begins.

Tessa
2nd of Kystane, 1125

Disconnected. That's the essence of what I am at nineteen years old. For fifty-four years the people of Erimost have been out of contact with Dentroa. We've survived, but without any ties to our own history. Without the ties to our homeworld that were supposed to sustain our stories and our souls.

The stories and poems I write frequently explore the topic and allow me to channel a creativity that's stifled in my role as the historian, despite my opinions otherwise. The historical record I write is dry. So dry in fact that it would crumble at the slightest bit of examination. I'm still only the apprentice though. My mother is the true historian.

She encourages me to keep my writing to the point. Clear. Precise. Numerical. It's little more than a genealogical tree and endless notes about agricultural products, energy output. All of those riveting details.

Mother always reminds me, “A little imagination never hurt anyone, but it does hurt the record. Extraneous information simply fogs up the mirror and gives the future Erimostians a twisted picture of our lives.”

I’m sure she has a reason for this opinion as she seems to hold to it quite strongly. It probably has something to do with her disgraced mother, who was the first historian.

This morning she decided that it’s time to take me into the Archives for the first time. So now here we are, traipsing through the dusty red streets. The library, where the Archives are housed, is within walking distance from our home. This fact allows us to avoid the hassle of preparing our dappled grey mare for a trip.

The library is one of the larger buildings in Astya, rising three stories, purposeful and sleek in a way typical of our architecture. The silver exterior is decorated with flowery flowing designs, which is unusual. The navy-blue walls of the wide room we enter must have been a brilliant hue once, but they’re now faded and starting to peel in some places. There’s a desk off to one side, but Sylvester the librarian doesn’t even look up.

Mother guides me to a locked room off to one side, where she works and lives, and breathes. For a place called “the Archives” it’s rather underwhelming. It’s smaller than I expected also. Three large monitors hang on the wall, all connected to the same computer. A battered desk sits in the corner. It’s neatly organized, not a paper out of place, like the narrow, alphabetized bookshelf beside it that runs from the floor to the ceiling. Organization is one skill I definitely didn’t inherit.

My mother is a tall woman with streaks of silver running through her dark wavy hair and a calm

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countenance. Anywhere she goes, she rules the room. Only those who truly know Mother can catch the fear that drives her. Everything has an order, a pattern, a routine. I think she feels helpless sometimes, so she controls everything she possibly can to ease that discomfort. Always looking over her shoulder. That's my gorgeous mother.

"It's time to start your training in earnest, Tessa," she says seriously as we enter the room.

I just sigh. What has she been doing all these years then? Years of additional writing exercises, mandatory reading about organizing information, and endless conversations about expression.

She's never let me in here before though, always saying that entering the Archives is a sacred experience only to be had when ready. Now I think she just wanted to avoid me running to her office every time I was bored or curious. I run my fingers along the cold metal wall.

I'll spend years holed up here, writing dry histories that no one will bother to read. That thought makes me intensely claustrophobic and I have the sudden urge to flee. I won't though, of course. I'll soldier on like I always do, careful to guard my expression so my mother doesn't see. It would hurt her to know I feel that way.

See, being the historian, working for years in this cold room, doing the same thing every day, that works for her and I respect her for it. She's, well, I can't exactly say content, but...functioning? Violet Hall is a strong woman who I love. I possess her strength of character, but I'm afraid I don't aspire to be like her in any other way. Maybe that's because I'm already destined to be like her. To fill her job, to write histories, and to spend most of my life in *her* office. I've learned from experience an infallible law of the universe: when told to do something

or be a certain way, we inevitably push back against that idea. We fight against it until we either conform or we fall from the exhaustion of the effort.

I wouldn't mind being the historian so much if I was able to write in my own way about the events that piqued my interest. Instead, the Senate sends event log requests whenever they want something entered in the record. The writing itself is highly formulaic and factual. Factual is fine, but it doesn't have to be boring. This is an argument I've had with my mother a thousand times. She's given up debating with me about it and now just raises her eyebrows and gives me a look whenever I bring up the topic.

I value honesty and try to say what I really think. To the people I know that is. I've been told before that I can seem aloof when in public, but I don't mind that reputation so much. With a few exceptions, I keep to myself and like it that way. Some people mistake that tendency for shyness. I assure you it's not.

"Take a seat," she says, motioning to a mismatched, cushioned chair beside her own. I do.

"I want to start you off by reading Mar...the first public entry in the record."

This catches my interest and I find myself leaning forward as she pulls it up one of her screens. She's only allowed me to read some of her own entries before, but never those of her mother. I spot a brief flash of longing or pain, something sad, in her eyes when she starts to say her mother's name, but then stops herself.

As we read the first entry silently together, I can immediately tell this will be different from my mother's entries. Just how different shocks me though. I find tears coming to my eyes by the time I finish. I quickly hide them.

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This writing is raw, real, and vivid, yet it's still factual and acknowledges its own bias. The very first records entry. It holds a kind of magic, like an origin story, that seizes me, pulling me into it. I don't have to be there. The simple act of reading makes me feel the wonder my grandmother felt, makes me feel like I'm standing there as the transport ship is about to take off from Dentroa. What caused such a drastic change in style since then? Why has the Senate restricted and regulated my mother's entries so heavily? I've always assumed that these regulations have been in place since the founding of Astya.

My mother's fingers tap on the desk impatiently. Now that's one trait I did inherit from her without any doubt.

"Are you done, Tessa?"

I nod and hold my tongue. I could ask my questions, but she would only bristle and proceed to tell me what she'd already planned to say anyway. I approached the topic of my grandparents with her a number of times when I was younger.

Her response was always the same until the last argument: "There are things better left unremembered, Tessa."

When I was sixteen, she exploded because I pressed too hard and I finally realized that my questioning would always be in vain. I didn't ask her anymore after that.

I'm surprised when she asks, "Thoughts?"

"It's unorthodox, but it's lovely," I reply honestly.

She nods quietly and, based on the slight glimmer in her eyes, I don't think she trusts herself to speak.

After several breaths between us, she finally says, "And why don't we write like that as the historians?"

Disappointment courses through me. For a moment I foolishly thought we were going to have a real conversation about our family history.

I give her the answer she's looking for, knowing I can't win this fight. At least not with her, not right now. The woman is at least as stubborn as I am.

"Because it lends itself to confusion. Historical records are meant to be strictly factual so that future generations can easily sort out fact from fiction and have confidence in the validity of their sources."

A dry argument for a foolish position. Fact and emotion are always intertwined, seemingly stretching away from each other, but only with both can you see the entire picture. Emotion without fact is difficult to temper. Fact without emotion is the food of a society that desperately wants to avoid its own humanity. Neither extreme is good and both have the potential to lead to violence.

I have difficulty listening to the rest of Mother's lecture as she goes over regulations and systems organization. The image of a frightened, yet entranced girl staring up into the universe, stretching out her hand, saying, "I want to see your wonder" has captured my imagination.

As much as I want to be anywhere but this planet, reading that account helps me understand why people wanted to come here in the first place. A few enterprising souls, hoping to further human technological advancement. Living on another planet was the equivalent of claiming the universe as our own. We weren't just explorers, out on the occasional excursion into the great unknown. Not anymore. Now we were inhabitants of the universe itself. A race spread across the stars. Why did we do it? So we could say we did.

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Mother continues talking about procedure and style, using one of her own entries as an example. She then moves on to organizational systems and the like. I try to listen, but my mind is elsewhere.

Her voice cuts through my thoughts. “I suppose that’s all we’ll go over today, especially since I can see how tired you are.” Her tone holds a note of reproach.

As she rises, I consider asking her if I can read more of Maris’s entries or perhaps for the key to the office. I’ll be able to read them when I’m the official historian, but I don’t want to wait that long. Curiosity thrums through me at the chance to learn more about my grandmother from her own mouth.

Already at the door, Mother studies me with her piercing grey eyes. I stare right back at her, wondering if the subject is better left untouched.

“Tessa, you forget how well I know you sometimes,” she says with a tired sigh.

After a moment, she tosses me the small silver key to the office. “You haven’t been able to stop thinking about that entry of Maris’s our entire lesson. Go ahead. Read them all. You’ll have unrestricted access to them someday anyway, so best to get it all out of your system now.” She starts to leave but then turns back to face me once more.

“And Tessa, I don’t want to hear a single word about them. Keep your thoughts to yourself.”

Her words are sharp and harsh, but I’m too excited to mind.

I nod as she closes the door. A smile spreads over my face as I turn back toward the screen, hungry for the next records entry. Making myself comfortable, I lean back, reading and chuckling at the overdramatic tone until I reach the ending. In a way, I’m disappointed, yearning

for more information on how she felt. Then it registers. Didn't she mention a personal journal in the first entry?

I navigate back to it on the blue screen, my heart picking up as I scan it again. There. She mentions a journal! That begs the question: where is it then? Is it digital or physical? I scan the content blocks on the monitor, searching for anything out-of-the-ordinary in the hopes that her journal will be in the records system. Once I've ruled that out, I rack my brain, trying to think of where else it could be, assuming, of course, that it still exists.

For a split second I consider breaching the subject with Mother, but I dismiss that thought. Even if she does know the journal's whereabouts, she won't tell me. Gram though...she might. If anyone knows the journal's fate, it'll be her. I scramble to lock up, my fingers trembling so much from excitement that I drop the key. Scooping it back up, I hurry out of the library and head home.

Gram has always been one of my favorite people, but that's not surprising. Honestly, it's hard not to like her. She's one of those people who have an ineffable amount of charisma because they seem so...alive. Bright eyes, a genius mind, and a fascination with cosmology are her trademarks. Although she's usually cheerful—if a bit manic at times—she hardly ever laughs. I have yet to figure out if that's part of her personality or prompted by some other event. My guess would be the former, but then again, I don't know. She's one of the few surviving original settlers.

I'm not related to Gram by blood, but Gram raised Mother. She lives with me and my parents in our two-story, mismatched dwelling. The first level is original, with a sleek blue exterior. The second was built much later and, while it's solid, it's clearly made of a different

material that's covered in rough red mud plaster. Make no mistake, Gram's residence with us isn't typical. Extended families often live in one house, but not with someone who isn't related. Nothing about my family is typical though. When the government confiscated her home to build a more tightly packed residential area, she had nowhere else to go. At least they paid her for it.

I go straight to her upstairs room when I get home, hoping she's there alone. I knock softly.

"Come in," she replies, her voice cracking.

I'm not surprised to see her standing before a wall covered in bits of paper tacked here and there, arranged in a haphazard manner that only she understands. Her large, messy handwriting covers every note. It's a wonder there's any space left on the wall. She's going to have to move to another one soon. Pushing her thick glasses further up the bridge of her nose, she stands back to stare at her work, arms crossed and a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Gram, could we talk for a few minutes?" I ask, picking my way through the messy room to her. Her fine salt-and-pepper hair is pulled back in a lopsided bun that flops as she moves about the room.

It's a moment before she responds, but I'm used to that, knowing well that she needs to finish her thought process before I truly interrupt her flow.

Finally, she turns around and warmly embraces me. You'd think I hadn't seen her in ages from her reaction, but that's just how she is: always warm, always comfortable. I can talk to her about thoughts my mother would never entertain. Mother shuts me down swiftly the moment I start in on a subject she would rather not discuss. Gram, on the other hand, listens well and is careful not to make a judgment before I've said my piece.

I work things out by talking. I've always been that way. That being said, Gram sometimes decides to keep things to herself, but at least she's honest about it.

Despite her willingness to listen, I've never pressed Gram on my biological grandmother's story. She'd probably answer me, but still. It's a sensitive topic. From my understanding, Gram knew Maris. In fact, she was her best friend. That's how she ended up raising my mother.

"What's it now, Tessalin?" she asks with good humor.

She keeps moving about the room, picking up a red pen and making some unintelligible marks on a note.

"Gram, do you know anything about Maris Hall's journal?"

Better to be straightforward about why I'm here.

"Her record entries? Of course. You know I was there to read them," she says in a chipper tone that then slips into a tired sigh, revealing her age.

"Her personal journal," I say.

She freezes for a moment, then continues her work.

"Well that, my darling, is a heavy subject better left alone."

"Gram." I catch her hand gently, stopping her from writing and forcing her to look at me. "Please tell me."

"What do you hope to gain from it, child? It's just a dusty collection of memories better left buried in the dark."

"Then you do know where it is," I say, excitement creeping into my voice.

"I won't deny it. But that journal contains pain and I don't want your mother to have to go through it again. Answer this question. Why do you want to read it?"

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“She’s read it?” I exclaim, although I shouldn’t be surprised she can keep such a heavy secret from those closest to her.

“Answer,” Gram demands.

I tap my fingers lightly against my leg with a sigh.

“Her writing is beautiful and Gram, I want to see what she saw when she came here. To understand what happened and who she was. Why did she do what she did? I’ve wondered my entire life, Gram, never thinking I’d get an answer...but now here’s this journal...and I can’t stand the thought of not knowing when the answers are at my fingertips.”

Gram fixes her eyes on my face for a tense moment.

“One condition, Tessalin.” Gram rarely uses my real name and only to emphasize that she requires my full attention.

“What would that be?”

“Don’t discuss this with your mother. She shouldn’t be forced to again confront the wound she’s spent her entire life trying to cope with. For you, Maris Hall is simply the mysterious grandmother you never knew. For Violet, she’s the mother who abandoned her baby and left her a job that would every day remind her of what she’d lost. Violet has been put through enough suffering already. Don’t compound it,” she says firmly.

I look down. “You don’t give me enough credit. Don’t you know I wouldn’t do that?”

“Darling, I don’t think you understand. It will be tempting. You’ll be bursting with new knowledge and insights about yourself, about your mother, but they’ll be ones that would simply hurt her. You tend to speak your mind, Tessa, which I can’t fault you for, but this time...it’s better if you don’t.”

“I promise,” I reply solemnly.

She leads me over to her favorite blue chair by the window and gestures for me to sit down, then closes the door with resignation.

“Did my mother ever read it?” I ask again.

“Only the first couple entries when she was around your age. They broke her, Tessa. You wouldn’t understand, because you’ve never seen your mother like that, but I have. She couldn’t get out of bed for a solid two weeks because she was too emotionally exhausted. You see, her mother was lovely. Funny. Endearing. And she could tell all that from those first few entries. I sometimes believe it would have been easier if Maris was a nasty, awful person. But she was anything but that.”

Gram examines the wrinkles on her hands for a moment, as if suddenly recognizing her years, before she looks up and continues.

“Violet never finished the book. One day she finally got out of bed, swept up the journal and thrust it back into my hands, swearing she would never finish it. Pleading with me not to make her. I thought she was ready because she’d been asking me questions about what her parents were like. I underestimated that journal’s power.”

“What do you remember about Maris?” I ask softly.

A small smile lights her face. “Maris and I became friends because we both had an enthusiasm about life that some people didn’t understand. We didn’t really try to contain our energy or be practical. We first met, actually, when we both stepped out onto the surface for the very first time.”

I realize with a shock that I’ve never heard Gram talk about the Landing. She reminisces frequently, but only about life after the Landing. And Maris is always glaringly absent from those accounts.

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“Maris was the kind of girl who could sit quietly in the corner, but you could see a world building itself in her eyes. A bit uncertain at times. Secretive.”

Gram coughs a bit and breathes in, trying to disguise her glistening tears. I’ve never seen her cry.

“I assume you’ve read the journal,” I say.

I’m surprised when she gives a small shake of her head and looks away. “Couldn’t ever bring myself to do it. Too personal.”

She rises and crosses the room to a green wooden cabinet. Papers shuffle and metal clinks as she digs through the mess.

“Ah. Here,” she says, drawing out a sturdily-bound book with a deep green cover decorated with patterns of ivy that twist across the surface like dancers. The pages are yellowing and I smell old ink when Gram nears me with the precious item. My heart picks up its rhythm.

I’m floored that it’s always been this close.

“Keep this to yourself. The Senate wouldn’t be happy if they knew that any of Maris’s other writings survived.”

“Other?”

“Shortly after your mother was born, they conducted a raid on her home to destroy any of her extraneous writings. All they left intact were those official entries.”

I’m horrified at that idea and for once don’t know how to respond. I don’t always agree with the Senate’s decisions. I have my political opinions, after all, but I also think they generally act fairly. Or at least keep to themselves. But a raid to destroy writings?

As I take the leathery old journal into my hands, I wonder what pushed my grandmother to go so far that even her memory has been damned

