

EXCERPT FROM 'AMIDST ALIEN STARS'

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Dawn found Laura studying the growth tanks again. It seemed like she came here every morning, watching the children grow to maturity, one tank for each woman spirited away by the Gliezans. And the DNA of her son, Jason, imprinted in each and every one of them!

Despite being just forty-two years old, she was grandmother to each, and the beholden guardian of them all. She was also their mentor, albeit via the alien technology that currently grew their bodies at almost forty times the normal rate. They looked human enough if you could ignore the alabaster skin with a tinge of green around the cheeks and the clusters of red hair floating above the small, flat ears, contrasting with what she thought of as their *normal* brown hair. And, of course, their bright, steely eyes!

Small noses, of course, but at least the lips were human. Laura thought that was important. She didn't know why; it just was.

And already so tall! Perhaps half a head taller than Jason.

They looked about sixteen years old now and, like she and Jason and the other abducted humans, had been circling around Glieze for just under five Earth-months. Simon Cordell, had mentioned in one of his more lucid moments that the alien chemistry was silicon-based, not carbon-based like that of humans. How could she believe that, for Jason's DNA to combine with such creatures?

Yet here was the evidence! She looked at the nearest child, floating in its tank, arms out wide as if it were flying. The body was as near perfect as it could be. The face possessed an aura of peace and confidence. The genitalia appeared normal. There were no tubes or other connections to flesh. The chest did not rise and fall. But it was alive, as surely as she was. And she could see the aura, flickering gently with muted colors inside the transparent tank.

Her powers induced at Milijun had not diminished. Indeed, they seemed to have grown. She had the beginnings of a telepathic connection with her son, and she could swear she even saw faint auras around Gliezan bodies.

Such a responsibility she had: to help decide when the hybrids would be released, when they would accompany her and Jason back home, when they would begin the task of *communing* the alien intent to the people of Earth. And how, she wondered, could that be in Australia, where the initial attempt at cooperation had ended in violence born of ignorance and fear?

In this room, there were six hybrid children. In other rooms, the rest grew at a similar pace. Their release must come soon, probably within months, yet she feared it, as if it were some dreaded disease to be visited upon Earth. How could she, Laura Sinclair, architect, single mother—if *I wasn't before, I certainly am now*—influence world statesmen, and do so in a world still recovering from the effects of terrible wars? *But isn't that the point of it all? Isn't that what the Gliezans preach?* Join us, reach out, and know your universe.

As if by magic, Rjebnigerrsel was beside her, ankle-length Gliezan robe shimmering in the half-light. As always the words came to her on wings, as if entering her mind without the need for her ears or their connection to her brain.

"You are here again, Lady Laura. They grow well, do they not?"

Laura turned and studied her Gliezan counsellor as she always did. Taller than her by a head, Rjebni possessed stern ebony features, thin lips, high cheekbones, fiery emerald eyes, and swept-back red hair. Yet, despite clearly not being part of it, he bore a remarkable affinity for the human species. *How is that so?* she pondered, and not for the first time. They were, after all, born of a place well beyond the reach of humankind. But, of course, they had reached out to Earth, not the other way round.

She offered the alien a watery smile, amused at the Gliezan habit of addressing her as *Lady Laura*. "Yes. They grow well." She had been informed that the children were learning the languages and cultures of Earth, even as they grew. Whether that meant a child would speak all major languages, or they would know all tongues as a collective

group, she had not been told. Maybe it wasn't important.

"You have seen your son recently?"

Laura's face lost its smile as she shook her head. "Not today. It is early. He seems to be growing beyond me in many ways."

"Yet in others he is closer," Rjebni said shrewdly, reading her mind. "Enjoy your day," he whispered as he left the chamber, departing as swiftly as he had arrived.

Laura followed him and walked down the corridor. She wondered about Rjebni. If he had been human, he would have borne her a severe grudge. After all, she had been with Nomi when the Milijun mole had slain the Gliezan's brother, Rkaphgerrsel. On the other hand, the Gliezans had such a burning confidence in life after death, loss of being did not seem of much consequence to them. And it had been a risk that Rkaph had been prepared to take. She knew their knowledge of the universal dimensions was well above anything Earth had discovered or surmised, but she understood little of it. For that matter, she did not want to know. *Four dimensions are enough for me!*

She turned and entered the viewing chamber. The planet Glieze drifted majestically below, enveloped in a purple mist, ice caps glowing, and not at all like Earth. To the side, she could see one of the tubular arms running out some distance to where another sphere was located, reflecting sunlight, harboring its secrets.

The orbiting station consisted of two huge geodetic rectangular pyramids, base to base, with six substantial spheres at the corners, twelve ovoid columns forming the connecting arms. That much they had been told.

Those other five spheres, according to the philosophy of Jason, possibly contained replicas of other worlds, which meant they might shelter other species and other Gliezan hybrids. Or perhaps this sphere, the Earth sphere, was the only one operational. Maybe the others were for the future, if the Earth commune proved to be unsuccessful. It was a persistent thought, one that frightened her, one that required her to use all the enhancements Milijun had given her to prevent a catastrophic mental tsunami. Jason helped. He knew more than she did, but even he would not tell all.

Why are the Gliezans so keen to explore the cosmos that they would entertain genetic interaction with humanity in order to do it? Another persistent thought.

Jason had recently said it was possible that some Gliezans were not in favour of the human symbiosis, that some perhaps preferred another race from another world. What that other world was, or what the alien race that populated it looked like, was unknown. All they assumed was that their representatives were probably located in one of the other spheres.

Laura shrugged. *Jesus aid me!* All this was just speculation. There was no proof of any of it. But at least it kept their minds occupied. She permitted herself a brief smile. Maybe that was the whole point. Hypotheses were talking matter, and talking kept them all sane.

She supposed there was the possibility that the Earth hybrids would not be chosen at all, that they would all be discarded as so much unwanted flotsam. That thought sickened her, and she made hasty tracks to the building's exit.

It was snowing outside. Laura drew her dark-green, alien-made cloak around her Earth clothes, the same attire she had been wearing when she was taken from her home planet: white slacks, a blue shirt, cotton socks, and sneakers, all mysteriously replicated when required by her captors. Snow landed on her short blond hair, tickled her nose, drifted among the branches of the nearest spiderlike trees.

The large flakes, larger than on Earth, fell like cascading feathers, touched the green grass, melted to nothing, and were temporarily replaced in a cycle of apparent futility. The station was obviously programmed to represent all of Earth's more moderate climatic conditions; today the sky was grey and heavy, the air was cold, and there was no wind to call a wind. But, of course, it wasn't home.

She pined for the vastness of West Australia, the celebrated beaches, the giant Karri forests, the infinity of the Nullarbor, the pure fresh air. It had withstood the last global war better than most places, but the population had been devastated and with it the comforting infrastructure upon which all people had unthinkingly depended.

A speck appeared in the clouded sky. It grew rapidly and landed beside her. An *RNasia*! Startled, Laura took a step backwards. Visions of encounters on Earth sped through her mind, darkened her mood, and fueled her fear. She too easily recalled the characteristics. Mesmerizing black eyes in a triangular head. Perhaps a metre tall. Two elbows as well as a wrist. Three long fingers, one opposing the other two. Green-grey sparkling skin. Scrawny legs. An apparent knuckle halfway down the instep.

The robotic servants of the aliens were on this station, but she had not been approached by one before, and her first reaction was to turn tail and run. Intuition, however, told her to hold her ground while simultaneously watching its every move. The creature—she still could not think of it as a robot—lifted its arms to display the thin membranous tissues that served as energy receptors. It was, she knew, offering a greeting.

To her surprise, the snow falling around the *RNasia* suddenly started to stick. Its triangular head rolled from side to side, as if trying to hypnotize her with its huge dark eyes. Within a minute, the grass around its feet was covered by a circular white patch of glistening crystals. One of its arms dropped slowly, enabling a three-fingered claw to touch the ground. It seemed to be scratching in the snow. Then, it stepped back, lifted one arm, and mounted the air, vanishing into the swirling snowflakes.

Laura remained still, fearful of its return. Even though her nano-enhanced body could not be invaded by the creature, she could not quell thoughts of what had happened on Earth. The circular snow patch remained. She took three steps forward.

There, scribbled in the snow as if it was a touchscreen, were four words. *Do not trust anyone.*

Her heart skipped a beat. Despite the cold, sweat sprang to her face and hands. *What the hell does that mean?* It was supposed to be all sweetness and light here, with her mission all mapped out. Surely, she deliberated, the message could not apply to Jason.

Do not trust anyone.

As she pondered, the patch of snow shrank and disappeared. The message was gone. The *RNasia* was gone. Her fear, however, remained.

Who sent the *RNasia*? And why? She turned and retraced her steps. She needed to see her son.

