Saturn's Children

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Extract

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PART ONE

Inner System

Learning Not to Die

Today is the two hundredth anniversary of the final extinction of my One True Love, as close as I can date it. I am drunk on battery acid and wearing my best party frock, sitting on a balcony beneath a pleasure palace afloat in the stratosphere of Venus. My feet dangle over a slippery-slick rain gutter as I peek over the edge: Thirty kilometers below my heels, the metal-snowed foothills of Maxwell Montes glow red-hot. I am thinking about jumping. *At least I'll make a pretty corpse,* I tell myselves. *Until I melt.*

And then –

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I do not contemplate suicide lightly.

I am old and cynical and have a flaw in my character, which is this: I am uneager to die. I have this flaw in common with my surviving sibs, of course. It is a sacred trust among our sisterhood, inherited from Rhea, our template-matriarch: *Live through all your deaths* she resolved with iron determination, and I honor her memory. Whenever one of us dies, we retrieve her soul chip and mail it around our shrinking circle of grief. Reliving endings is painful but necessary: Dying regularly by

proxy keeps you on your toes – and is a good way to learn to recognize when someone is trying to kill you.

(That last is a minor exaggeration; we are friendly and anxious to please, and few would want to murder us – except when we are depressed. But please bear with me.)

We all find it increasingly hard to go on. We are old enough that critical anniversaries hold a fatal allure, for birthdays bring unpleasant memories, and if the best of all possible days have come and gone, why persist? It's a common failure mode for my lineage – first we become nostalgic, then we enmire ourselves in a fatal lack of purpose, and finally we start to obsess. In the final soul-agony that precedes the demise of our sibs, we horrified onlookers perceive a fragment of our own ending. *Live through all your deaths.* Harsh irony, then, that Rhea, the original from whom we are all copied, was one of the first to inflict this terrible burden upon us.

And so, on my hundred and thirty-ninth birthday, near as I can count it – for I was born for the second (and more definite) time exactly sixty-one years after my existence was forever rendered purposeless by a cruel joke of fate – I spend my carefully hoarded savings so that I might sit on the edge of a balcony outside a gaming hall thronged with joyful gamblers, the ground far below a ruddy metallic counterpoint to the clouds boiling overhead: And I look down, contemplating eternal death, and try to convince myself that it's still a bad idea.

It could be worse, I tell myself. *I'm not eleven anymore; it's a choice I'm free to make.*

And then –

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A shiver of laughter through an open door, a gust of chilly air from within, and the faint vibration of a shod foot on the balcony floor tell me that I am not alone out here.

It's annoying. For most of the working year I've lived here in quiet isolation: Finally, when I want to be alone with my memories and the clouds, I have company.

'Ooh, look: a freak!' someone squeaks behind and below me. 'What's *that* doing here?'

Ignore them. I don't want to reinforce their behavioral loop. I tense, nevertheless, my fight/flight reflex kicking in. Nasty little bullies: I've been here before, as have my sibs. We know how to handle this.

'It must be an arbeiter. Is it shirking?'

I look round slowly, forcing my facial chromatophores to their palest creamy blankness, betraying no emotion. 'I am not indentured,' I say, very deliberately. Which is entirely true, at this place and time. Another of the rules Rhea laid down: *Don't ever leave one of your own sibs as an indentured arbeiter.* It's a rule formed in an earlier age, and it has cost us dearly, but none of us wears a slave controller. 'I am a free woman.'

There are three of them between me and the balcony door: one bishojo female about my size, and a matched pair of chibi-form dwarfs – members of the new aristocracy, caricatures of our dead Creators, trussed up in the intricate finery favored by aristo fashion this century. Standing while I sit before them, the dwarfs are at eye level with me: They goggle with huge, limpid eyes utterly empty of mercy. Their full-sized mistress looks down at me and sneers: 'That can be fixed. What a revolting parody! Who let it in here?' I take her to be the leader because her gown, which seems to consist mostly of ruffles of wire lace held together by ribbons, is more intricate than her companion's. She's got a delicate chin, sharp cheek-bones, pointy ears, and a spectacular mane of feathery green filaments.

The small female raises one lace-gloved hand to cover her

mouth as she yawns melodramatically. 'It's spoiling the view, Domina.'

Domina? That can't be good. Instincts hard-learned from the experiences of my dead sibs tell me that I'm in worse trouble than I realized. I'm having a flashover to another sister, murdered long ago in a hutong under domed Lunograd. She's right: I don't need the attention of vicious aristos bored with gambling and searching for stronger thrills. 'I was just leaving,' I say quietly, and bring one foot up to floor level so that I can stand up.

'Thank you, child,' the Domina addresses her companion, 'but I had already noticed the obstruction.' I use my foot to push back from the edge, put a hand down, and lever myself up. I'm already turning to face the glass doors as the Domina glances down at the male companion with a sniff of disapproval, and says, 'Stone, deal with the trash.'

Stone – baby-doll death in a black tunic with gold frogging – steps toward me, one hand going to the power mace at his waist. The top of his head is on a level with my hips. 'It will be a pleasure, milady,' he says.

'I'm going,' I say, and my fight/flight module prompts me to feint toward the glass doors, then duck suddenly and roll sideways. I continue the roll as a hammer slams against the lacquered aragonite inlay that decorates the edge of the balcony. Chips fly; where the decorative underlay is exposed it begins to fizzle and fume.

'Graah!' he roars, and raises his mace again.

I'm too close to the long drop for comfort, and my attacker is between me and the French doors. What I *should* do is rush along the balcony, dive into the gaming hall through one of the other windows, and make myself scarce. But I'm off-balance, angry, and humiliated by the casual brutality of the

Domina's interruption, so I do something really stupid instead.

One foot waving over the big empty, I grab for his arm with my free hand.

'Eeee!' I miss and grab his head by mistake. He responds by shoving me back toward the edge. His feet grip the balcony as if glued, but I am twice his height and at least five times his mass. Then he raises the mace again. I panic and brace my other hand on his shoulder and push with full force, trying to get as much distance between myself and the thing as possible. Only I forget to let go.

His head comes off in my hand. The body falls limply, clattering to the balcony: pale fluid dribbles from the stump of his neck, sealing it off from further damage. The mace buzzes and whirs menacingly. Anything it touches will die. I give it a wide berth as I raise his head toward the Domina, glaring at her.

'You'll be sorry,' says the head, using electrospeech in place of its missing larynx.

'He's right,' the Domina agrees, smiling right at me. She seems to be amused. 'Stone has a vindictive drive, you know. You'll need to run a long way, manikin, and hope he won't find you wherever you hide.'

'Will he come after me if I drop him?' I ask, holding my arm out over the edge of the balcony. I take a cautious step backward along the slippery edge, probing for safe footing with my spiked left heel.

'You won't do that,' the Domina says thoughtfully. 'He's very popular – he has more than two thousand sibs, and they'll all claim feud on you and yours.' She laughs quietly. 'Wouldn't that be amusing?' Her companion giggles conspiratorially, echoing her mistress. 'Go ahead and drop him, manikin. Maybe I'll give you a head start.'

I turn Stone's head to face her and examine the back of his cranial stump. As I expected, there's a soul chip in place, the recording angel to his misdeeds. I extend two fingernails and dig it out of the socket. Then I hold it in front of his eyes. His lips are still moving: *Good.* 'Watch.' I flick it out into the wild and cloudy air beyond the edge of our floating world. 'Say good-bye to your backup, Stone.' Even if he sticks in a new one, it'll take him a while to begin laying down memories again, and months for the older experiences to begin settling into the chip – such as this incident. Until then he won't be able to pass on his experiences to his sibs. I lower his head to the floor carefully. 'If you come after me and I kill you again, you'll have only yourself to blame.'

I take another step back, and there's a glass door off to my right.

'Get you,' mouths the head, as I flee.

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This is not a place for the likes of me. I am not a gamer, and the pleasures on offer here are not aimed at those of my sort: I am an artifact of an earlier age, out of place and time, isolated and alone. Angry and frightened, I head for the oxidizing core of the palace. I find a service air lock big enough to admit me, and on the way through it I shower with liquid water, rinsing away my glad rags in a foaming stream. Glittering nails and spiked heels retract, nipples and pubes revert to normal. I keep my long red hair and my face because some aspects of identity are hard to do without, no matter how expensive; but more serviceable wear awaits me in the printer on the other side of the air lock, suited to my status as a lowly freelance worker. When I told the Domina that I was a free woman, I spoke truth, but just barely. My lineage and my sibs are free, but because we are free, we are also poor. One of life's larger ironies.

I'm not on shift right now, but there's casual work available if I want it. The cost of living here strains my resources, but it's better than being stranded on the surface in a domed slum, renting my nervous system out to a carbon sequestration station's analytics. I should really go looking for a rickshaw to pull, but I'm still edgy from my encounter with the Domina and her thug. So I head down to one of the sublevels under Environment and go looking for Victor.

Victor is a jazz piano, a xenomorph fallen upon hard times – a stringed instrument with heart, and a head, and arms, from a period when authenticity was in vogue. These days improv is unfashionable, running counter to the tastes of the mannered elite. The wrong type of melody can be taken as a criticism; aristos are quick to anger and quicker still to defend their honor. So Victor works in atmospheric maintenance by day shift and runs a movable acoustic feast in the service tunnels by night. Such places have been with us always, since the time when my True Love's kind stalked old Earth, and we who remember them maintain the traditions. (We even drink aqueous solutions of ethanol, though not for the same reasons.)

I find Victor's node in a pendulous vapor trap under one of the great extractor circuits that leaches sulfates out of the inner atmosphere of the oxidizing zone. He's plated the walls with carbon black, grown an array of colored lights, and caused the floor to extrude foam pads that divide it up into soft-floored booths. The dive is quiet tonight, and Milton – Victor's sometime waiter and partner in crime – is polishing the bar top lackadaisically. 'Where's the boss?' I ask, pausing beside him.

'Boss is in back, twinkle-tits.' Milton affects a malfunctioning voice, rasping and choppy. 'What can I fetch ya?'

'A liter jug of the special. Hold the PEG.' Lots of serious

drinkers like to add a shot of polyethylene glycol to their brew, but it makes it too sweet for my tastes.

'It's your poison.' Milt shrugs with one pair of shoulders and serves up a pitcher. 'That'll be five centimes.'

I sign his note and carry the pitcher over to the boss man, who is sitting in a cozy niche against one wall and tapping away at his keyboard with one hand, surrounded by an appreciative audience of underemployed dustbusters. 'Spare a moment, Vic?' I sit down opposite him.

He nods and keeps playing without breaking rhythm. The dustbusters are hypnotized; they flex their legs so that they sway from side to side where they stand. Some of them wear iridescent uniform shells, but most of the lowly cleaners are naked as they day they were duped and chipped, black many-legged tubes with heads that are little more than fringed hoses, each capped with a pair of little beady eyes. 'Wasn't expecting you tonight,' he admits. 'Thought you were partying it up with chibi-san. Want to jam?'

'I'd like to, but not now, Vic.' I pause for a moment, listening to my inner voices. 'I think I need to leave town.'

'Ah. Wait one.' He launches into a long, fiddly closing sequence and finishes up his line. The dustbusters wait for a few seconds after the last note dies away, then bounce up and down enthusiastically. 'Take ten,' he announces to them. 'You're a great audience, but I need a recharge.' He flashes a signal at Milton, and across the bar hidden speakers reprise an earlier session. In moments, we're on our own; the dustbusters are suckers for instant stimulation. 'Is it serious?' he asks. 'How far do you want to go?'

I consider my options. 'Off-planet, probably.' My sibs are mostly on Earth; I may be the only one of my kind on Venus. 'I offended an aristo.'

'You offended a – how?' He demands. His body language signals surprise: He strokes a rising chord progression on his keyboard.

'I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.' I take a long pull on my pitcher. The special tastes strongly of creosote with undernotes of sulfur and syrup; a strong, chewy flavor that my tongue tells me would be utterly vile if I hadn't had my olfactory system tweaked for Venusian norms. 'Hmm, that's nice.' There were refreshments in the gaming salon upstairs, rarefied concoctions for rich gourmets, but Victor's brew is comforting.

'Ungood,' he says mildly. 'Do you have the money to pay for off-world passage?'

I take another mouthful. 'Now that's the problem. Living here has been more expensive than I expected. I don't want to hit on my sisters unless . . . well. Emergencies only. And while I've been saving, at this rate it'll take me another six years to raise steerage back to Luna.' Two hundred Reals, minimum – the Venusian gravity well is expensive to escape. 'I was hoping you might know someone?'

'I might.' He plays a brief chord progression. 'Can you make yourself scarce for a few hours?'

I drain the pitcher and feel the weight in my digestive tract. 'How many do you need?'

'Make it three: I have to make inquiries.' He takes my empty pitcher and lobs it across the bar, straight into Milton's third hand. 'I'm going to miss you, girl.'

I shrug. 'It beats the alternative.'

'Sure it does. Vamoose!'

I vamoose.

*

It is not easy to hide in a town where you are twice as tall as almost everyone else, but I have had lots of practice; when

big-headed munchkins with huge dark eyes point at you and shout 'ogre!' wherever you go, you learn fast, especially in the unpoliced frontier boonies. This is not a large town, but like all Venusian stratosphere dirigibles it has infrastructure spaces – the interiors of the oxygen-filled lift cells, the skeletal support frames beneath the flooring – and I have learned them. I work my way down from Victor's lounge to the lowest level of the oxygenated zone, tweak my metabolic cycle, and exit via an air lock into the vast shrouded spaces of the dirigible frame.

I often come here off shift. I bring my pad and do my mail, view movies, browse wikis and strips, try to forget that I am the sole one of my kind on this world.

I'm comfortably holed up in one of my private refuges – a niche between the number four lift cell and the transparent outer skin, with an ocean of padded balloons to rest upon and a view across the cloudscape below – when my pad itches for attention. I lean back against the membrane, letting it cushion me, and focus on the letter. It's from Emma, one of my wilder sibs. I haven't heard from her for a while, I realize, and check my memory: nearly six hundred and some Earth days, to be precise. Which is odd, because we normally exchange letters every fifty or so.

I conjure up her imago as I last updated it. She's a honey blond model with cascading ropes of hair, symmetric high cheekbones, brown eyes with just a slight hint of epicanthic fold, and just a faint metallic sheen to her skin; as perfect and obsolete a model of beauty as any of us. But her imago looks slightly apprehensive, reflecting the emo hints encoded in her letter. 'Freya? Hope you're doing well. Can you call me back? I have a problem and could use your help and advice. Bye.'

I make the imago repeat the message with increasing

perplexity. Just twenty words, after all this time? I'm on the edge of replying, saying as much, when I check the routing and see she's mailing via the central post office on Eris Highport. Anger dies: Her brevity makes sense, but her location is puzzling. *What's she doing out* there? I wonder. Eris is way out-system, nearly twice as far out as Pluto. Eight light-hours! That's a long way for one of us to go. Normally we don't venture into the deep black, there's nothing of interest to us out there. Emma and I, and a couple of others, we're the exceptions, willing to travel off-planet – as long as there's somewhere civilized to go to at the other end.

No lineage is identical, and Rhea's Get are prone to diverging from baseline faster and further than most (that's what happens when your specifications are obsolete and your template-matriarch is dead). Even so, one of our norms is a weakness for centers of civilization. Last time I heard from Emma, she was on Callisto, working as a guide on skiing holidays across the icy outback. I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised that she's fetched up in one of the Forbidden Cities, and elapsed transit time might explain the long silence, but even so . . .

'Emma, I'm moving shortly. What can I do for you?' I squeeze the message down tight, then wish it up to the post office and try not to wince when I hear the transmission cost. Her reply will get to me eventually, but it's a pricey correspondence to maintain. For a moment I consider going to see her in person, but such a fancy is ludicrous: the energy budget, not to mention the flight time, would be astronomical. Tens of thousands of Reals, if I travel in steerage – probably millions if I want to get there in time to be of service.

Having replied, I try to relax on my bed of balloons; but I'm too disturbed to get comfortable. Nobody else loves me

enough to call, and the Domina's threat preys on my mind. So ugly, to fall victim to an aristo's boredom! *I need to get out of here. Even if I have to indenture myself to do it?* Maybe it *is* that urgent. I came to Venus thinking I could make a fresh start, but I haven't made a fresh start here, I've just floated from one dead-end job to another, empty-headed and lonely. *Has it really been nine Earth years? I must have been mad!* But there's nothing here to stay for. *Time to fly away*.

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Down near the ill-lit, cramped confines of the arbeiter barracks where the slaves sleep in racks stacked six high, I have a room of my own. It's not much, but it's got the basics: power point, inflatable bed, printer, maintenance toolkit, wardrobe. It's somewhere to sleep, and dream, even though I try not to do too much of the latter – I'm prone to recurrent nightmares. I rent it for a huge chunk of my wage, and keep it as unfurnished as possible – the mass tax is fierce, and I have found public amenities cheaper than private – but it's still the nearest thing I have to a home. There isn't much I want to take, but still, it's where I keep my graveyard. And I'm not going anywhere without *that*.

I thread my way back through swaying fabric tunnels slung across the windswept empty, up ladders and power rails and down tracks. It's dirty and hot, the atmosphere poorly controlled compared to the grand ballrooms and gaming salons. This is the abode of the maintenance crews who keep this airborne pleasure palace pleasing to the aristos in their staterooms on the promenade decks. The small fry live here, one deck up from the barracks of the slave-chipped arbeiters.

My room is one of a stack of former freight containers, welded together and carved into apartments by some long-forgotten construction mantis. Some of the apartments are the

size of my two fists, while others occupy multiple containers. They sway slightly when the town activates its steering turbines to avoid turbulent cloud formations: the aristos of the Steering Committee call us 'ballast' and joke crudely about casting us loose if the town runs into a storm.

As I climb the ladder to my front door, I hear a faint scrabbling sound, the chitinous rasp of polymer feet on metal decking. I tense, instantly alert. It's coming from my room! Has one of Stone's sibs come after me already? I move my head, listening, trying to build up an acoustic picture. Something is moving around inside. Something small and scuttling, with too many legs. *Not Stone,* I realize. I resume my climb, quietly and fast, and ready myself on the narrow balcony beside the door. There's a mechanical padlock – I sealed it myself – and sure enough, someone has etched through the shackle. Flakes of white powder coat the body of the lock where it dangles from the door latch. The intruder is still moving around inside my room, evidently not expecting to be disturbed. I listen briefly, and as my 'visitor' rustles around near the printer, I yank the door open and jump inside.

My room's a mess: bedding ripped apart, printer overturned and leaking working fluid, cached clothing strewn everywhere. The culprit squats in the middle of the chaos. I haven't seen its like before: six skinny arms, a knee-high body bristling with coarse fur, three big photoreceptors spaced around a complex mandible assembly. It's clutching my graveyard, the lid open as it whiffles over the soul chips of my dead siblings. 'Hey! You!' I yell.

The intruder swings its head toward me and jumps to its feet, and all its fur stands on end as it electroshrieks a blast of random microwave noise at me. Clutching my graveyard, it darts between my legs. I sit down hastily and grab it, pinning

it to the floor. It's about the size of one of the medium-sized canines my True Love's species used as companions, back before they made us, and it shrieks continuously, as if it's afraid I'm going to kill it. Which I just might if it's damaged the graveyard. 'Drop it!' I tell the thing. 'Drop it now!' My fingertips prickle where they touch its fur, and I realize they're sparking. Maybe it doesn't have ears? It looks weird enough to be a vacuum dweller, oh yes.

The thing writhes briefly, then flops limply beneath my hand. I grab the graveyard and hurriedly put it behind me. 'Who are you, and what are you doing here?' I demand.

It doesn't reply. It doesn't even move. A thin, acrid smoke rises between my fingertips. 'Oops,' I mutter. *Did I break it?* I take my hand off its back and stare. The fur is coarse and feathery, and as I inspect it, I see dipolar recursion. Okay, it *is* a vacuum dweller – and a loud one. It has no lungs, but a compact gas bottle and a reticulation of power feeds that show that it has adapted itself to a temporary excursion down-well. This is just too weird. I pick up the graveyard and inspect it. It doesn't seem to be damaged, but I can't be sure, short of loading every one of its occupants, one chip at a time. *Later,* I resolve, slipping the case into my battered shoulder bag. 'You'd better not have damaged it,' I warn the supine burglar, then in a moment of vindictive pique I kick it across the room. It stays limp until it hits the opposite wall, but then it emits a blindingly loud pulse of microwaves, folds its legs and arms, and blasts straight at my face.

'Fuck!' I duck as it whooshes overhead, straight out the open doorway on a blast of highly illegal exhaust. The gas bottle's not for respiration, it seems. I spin round just in case, but it shows no sign of coming back. Instead – is that a rip in the wall opposite? *Whoops.* Yes, it is. The little burglar just

punched a hole in the outer membrane of the town. *The crew won't be happy about that,* I figure. *Better get out of here.* I scramble down the ladder, and, carrying all of my dead sister's soul chips in a shoulder bag, I go in search of whatever deal Victor has lined up for me.