

MATTHEW MAGRO

THE TIE

Anywhere you want to go baby, name it, we'll go there,
Keiko Yasana, to her daughter.

“WELCOME TO HELL” proclaimed the blood red block lettering. Tourists giggled as they had their snapshot, stepping aside to reveal the entire message painted on the walls of the spaceport, “Welcome to Hellas”.

It was the oldest tourist trick in the book, even the first explorers to visit the Hellas Impact Basin on Mars had gone so far as to crack that joke. Keiko Yasana sighed wistfully as she remembered doing pretty much the same thing the first time she'd arrived with her father years ago when he'd finally earned enough money.

Her mind snapped back to the present and cast a wary eye on her daughter, Rihoko Yasana, who played in a small pit of imported sand in the children's playpen of Hellas spaceport. The girl was intelligent, sometimes too much so, not at all like her parents.

Parent, she reminded herself bitterly. She snapped her attention away from her daughter briefly, though always keeping a wary eye out, to go over things for the umpteenth time, to reassure herself that she was doing the right thing.

She activated her Visual Sono-Optic Interface, almost universally called a VISO, pulled up an email dated three months ago and skimmed it.

We regret to inform . . .

. . . an industrial accident involving your de facto . . .

. . . our sincerest condolences.

She sighed. Rihoko was used to her father not being around. Mining was not necessarily one of the professions that allowed him to stay at home but it had put food on the table. Now Richard Anselm would never see his daughter grow up.

She looked at the email once more, recalling the abject grief she had experienced then, the worry that had flooded her, which now gave way to ashen resignation . . . and deleted it without a further thought.

Keiko cast a look at Rihoko. She was building a castle out of the yellow sand that had been imported at great expense from Earth. Mars didn't have much in the way of amenities, the sandpit in the Hellas spaceport was the crown jewel of children's entertainment in Hellas Colony.

She glanced back to her VISO and pulled up another email dated two months ago.

Notice of Eviction . . .

. . . no longer currently in our employ . . .

. . . sincerely, the Jupiter Mining Corporation.

Anger flashed through her. Still in the midst of grieving for Richard they were already trying—scratch that, they already *had* evicted her from the home the company had paid for. At the end of the day it was the way of Mars—brutal, unforgiving and efficient. She'd appealed the eviction of course. Fortunately someone at the corporation seemed to have maintained a shred of human decency and had extended her tenancy temporarily.

She deleted that letter too. She no longer needed it, and where she was going, she'd rather not be reminded of losing her home after losing her husband.

Then the third letter had come a month ago.

Child Welfare Services . . .

. . . due to a lack of permanent address . . .

. . . will result in removal of the minor.

That had been the last straw. Her husband was gone; her home was gone and soon, if she didn't play her cards right, her daughter too. She deleted that email as well, as much to be rid of it as to gain some small measure of catharsis.

Not her daughter. Not Rihoko, not on her watch. She was all Keiko had left, the only thing she had to be proud of, the only thing that kept her together through the worst months of her life.

Wearing a brave face and keeping her baby happy was the definition of her life now . . . it had forced her to keep Richard's death quiet. As far as Rihoko was concerned her father was alive and well, working on one of his longer stints in the mines.

Keiko had made her decision. There was no future for her in the Solar System. Martian law would remove her child, Earth had strict immigration laws coupled with a crushing gravity that would nearly cripple Rihoko without months of acclimatisation, and most other places in the system didn't accept children.

The only option she had left was to run. Run with her daughter as far as she could afford to go. She'd already managed to secure passage on the starship *Mariner* heading out to a planet within the Alpha Centauri star system. She'd seen pictures of its primordial seas and hazy green skies. What future did her daughter have under that alien sky?

Keiko blinked back tears. No. She wouldn't cry. She couldn't. She couldn't let Rihoko know just how afraid she was or how much she missed Richard. She still couldn't think of what to tell her on that front. The last thing she wanted was to see the crestfallen face of her daughter before the tears started to flow. She wanted her to be happy. She wanted her to smile.

Keiko would tell her. One day, but not now, not today. The pain was still too much. She would need to be strong for her baby and right now strong she was anything but.

'Why are you crying, Mummy?' asked Rihoko.

'Oh! Um . . . just some dust baby,' lied Keiko. Her daughter had snuck up on her—she was getting exceptionally good at that.

'Oh, okay!' said Rihoko with a madcap grin before leaping upon her mother with a fierce hug.

'Whoah! Hey! What brought this on?' asked Keiko.

'For letting me play in the sand!' she said matter-of-factly before diving into another crushing hug.

Keiko returned the hug and smiled while trying to suppress her tears. In so many ways she felt that Rihoko deserved a better mother . . . but she would try her best to keep her happy. At the forefront of every thought, in the darkest recesses of her mind and accompanying every last beat of her heart lay the single thought that drove Keiko Yasana—do it for her.

Stale air assaulted her like a wave of nausea. Rihoko Yasana hadn't been aboard the abandoned ship for some time. Evidently the waterproofing conducted before they crash-landed into the shallow seas of Alpha had been, at the very least, moderately effective.

She took another breath, followed by another, and another. The air was still breathable. After three years laying on the shallow sea floor she wasn't sure that she would ever have the opportunity to see the decks and hallways where she had grown up.

The salvage teams moved in behind her, eager to get to work. They'd need to cut through a further six decks before they could get to the fusion core. For Rihoko, though, this visit to the rusting derelict was far more personal.

She wandered away from the salvage teams with no concern for being lost. She knew these decks. She had spent years playing, hiding, and growing up in the depths of the ship that had brought her to Alpha.

Ostensibly she was here to guide them to the fusion core and assist with its extraction, though the salvage teams had already made it clear that Rihoko wasn't welcome as anything more than eye candy.

That suited her just fine; she could manage well enough on her own. She trailed her hands over railings given over to rust. Plastic warning signs scored by time and abuse and fingered large dents that she recalled being made long ago when the ship had once bridged the unfathomable distances between the stars.

'Nara,' she whispered, 'Nara, are you there?'

A nearby speaker patch chirped in response, then came more fully to a semblance of life.

*'Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do /
I'm half crazy all for the love of you /
it won't be a stylish marriage /
I can't afford a carriage /
but you'd look sweet upon the seat /
of a bicycle built for two,'* sung Nara, the ship's Artificial Intelligence.

'You poor girl,' said Rihoko sadly, sympathetically stroking a twisted bulkhead, 'you've been alone for so long.'

Nara had been designed to sustain the ship through the gulfs of time and space that necessitated cryo-sleep for its mortal crew. Under normal conditions it could last centuries without losing programming focus.

Unfortunately conditions had been abnormal for quite some time. On their approach to the Alpha Centauri star system so many years ago, an accident had destroyed much of the AI's primary data loop, to say nothing of certain vital systems as well. The computer had held together by the barest threads, its once hyper-intelligent mind reduced to the normal to sub-normal range of its mortal occupants.

After three years of solitary confinement at the bottom of the ocean, the AI that Rihoko had grown up with was now a mere shadow of its former self. It

was like watching a loving parent slip away in a losing battle to Alzheimer's—back before a cure was found.

Rihoko continued to navigate the bowels of the vessel. So much was still intact it surprised her. Perhaps . . . she didn't dare hope it, but perhaps *she* had survived as well. Rihoko had to find out.

Down three decks, over seven sections. A scored panel identified an otherwise non-descript blast door: 'Crew Habitation'.

She stepped through the door after forcing it open with the manual release. Nara must've been developing an analogue of arthritis in her systems, unable to unclench the metaphorical fists that had kept crew habitation sealed even more tightly than the rest of the ship.

Here the decks still gleamed brightly. Not a drop of seawater had invaded this section; a section designed and built to withstand the fury of nuclear fire and the quiet, pernicious patience of the universes deepest cold. Before her stretched just one of many banks of pods where the crew had slept the decades away as the ship coasted between the stars themselves.

Many of the pods were inactive, the crew having been awakened some time ago to deal with the crisis that had forced them to ditch their vessel in Alpha's shallow seas and toxic almost pure nitrogen air.

She passed Captain Mike Osmund in her inspection. The readouts stated his condition simply, coldly and succinctly: DNR, Do Not Revive. He would never survive the reanimation process due to some unseen damage to his pod. Several others shared his fate but a few . . . a select few had NOM, for Nominal. Those that could be revived and would be expected to live long, full, healthy lives.

She trailed a hand over each occupied pod. She had come here so often as a little girl growing up on a spaceship that had met with disaster and survived. As she passed each pod the faces became more and more familiar until finally . . . finally she came upon the sole pod that mattered most to her.

The woman inside was barely in her mid twenties, shoulder length black hair that curled slightly towards the ends, average height and build. She held something in her right hand, hidden from view by her clenched, frozen fist. If it weren't for the cryo-stasis fluid, the layer of rime and the saddened look that had been permanently etched on her face the moment she had been flash-frozen, she would have been considered attractive and beautiful.

Rihoko had come to this pod every day to tell her what had happened. She'd sent emails through the ship's intranet to her; she'd sat and stared wistfully at

the woman that was her mother as year after year she grew older while her mother remained preserved and pristine in her chrysalis of ice.

She'd done that for sixteen long years through their abortive voyage through space, stopping only when circumstances had forced the wakened survivors of the disaster to abandon ship and ditch their vessel in the sea.

Through it all the thought that had haunted Rihoko Yasana for all these years, through all the times of tribulation and famine, of recovery and of separation . . .

'It was my fault, Mum,' she said, barely able to contain her tears, 'it was all my fault.'