



OTHER SYSTEMS

A NOVEL BY ELIZABETH GUIZZETTI



48 FOURTEEN
PO Box 17132
Sugar Land, TX 77496

<http://www.48fourteen.com>

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For information, address:
48 FOURTEEN,
PO Box 17132,
Sugar Land, TX 77496.

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E X C E R P T

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PEOPLE FILLED THE STREETS, not rioting in anger, but wanting to be the first to see the visitors. The hospital was full of people too, complaining of a sweet smell that would not disappear. The air was sweet with jasmine, honeysuckle, and other flowers of summer. Entrepreneurial spirits sold seasonal fruit, popcorn, and cotton candy. Others held handmade signs. Most said: "Welcome Friends from the Stars!" However, there were a few that said, "God made us this paradise. Go home!" Or worse: "God made humans in His image, what do you look like?"

Abby saw Rory in the throng and waved. Her heart started beating faster as he called out and pushed his way towards them. He inclined his head towards Da, Abby, and Orchid before he playfully slugged Jin and Ray's shoulders in turn. Tara growled under her breath and whined. Abby clutched her dog tighter. They walked beyond the horde enjoying the carnival-like atmosphere over to a nearly empty field where plain-clothed police had set up metal fencing and a plastic barricade with signs that read: "Don't crush the lettuce."

On the far side there were several men, including Mayor Xiao.

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The translucent blue metal ship hummed above them. Even from the ground, Abby could see it wasn't a large ship, probably not more than sixteen meters in length and six meters wide. The roar of its engines brought the rest of the crowd, gawking toward the landing sight.

Orchid pulled on Abby's sleeve. "This is not the ship that Mr. Johnson showed us."

Abby said, "Might be a short range ship. The larger ship is probably still above."

As soon as she said it, Abby knew it was true.

It hovered over the large green field of lettuce before it began to lower and fold its wings inward. Three lads jumped the barricade. Da and a few other clear-headed adults shouted at them. They did not back away and the crowd heard the screams of agony and terror before the great blue flames disintegrated them. Da checked Jin. Tara pulled backward on her leash, pawed on the ground and gently nipped at Abby's skirt. Orchid hid her face in Ray's shoulder. A few other boys tried to touch the ship, the heat radiated towards them and they screamed in pain. Half of the human throng still pressed forward, the other stepped back.

The hatch opened and six people exited: tall with dark hair, smooth tan skin that was unmarred by blemish, and wearing gray coveralls. They were ageless, with a strange sameness about them. They might have been twenty or forty years of age; there was no way to tell.

Abby asked, "Da, do you think it could be a family?"

"Perhaps. On such a long trip, families would want to stay together," he said as he raised his hand to tell her not to speak. He was trying to listen.

Mayor Xiao stepped forward. "Welcome home?" He pressed his palms together and inclined his head as did the City Secretary and Police Officers.

No expression came to the newcomer's faces, but they put their hands out. Abby remembered that long ago, when there were less people, shaking hands and embracing was customary. The mayor put his hand out the same way. The man clasped it. Abby guessed that was a good sign.

With a strange lilting accent, the newcomer said, "I'm Captain Saunders of the Vos. We tried to contact you, but it seems you no longer have over-air communications."

"My understanding is that we sent out messages." Mayor Xiao was a politician, not a scientist; he really did not know what the man was talking about. He wound up falling into the habit of nodding in order not to seem too stupid.

Captain Saunders began making an obviously pre-written speech, yet he told the crowd nothing. The other newcomers scanned the multitude, looking for something. Abby thought one looked directly at her, but she knew that was probably just foolishness. Remembering that there was more than one ship, she realized that an armada had encircled the planet. It seemed likely that they would be in orbit over the largest cities. The shuttles would spread out from there.

"What do you think they want?" Abby whispered.

"Obviously, they have come home," Rory said with authority. "The entire world is changing. Old rules will no longer apply."

He put his hand on her shoulder. An unwanted shiver

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of excitement ran down her back, but was dulled by her father's presence and her resolve not to be Rory's next conquest. She tugged on Jin's sleeve and changed places with him, using Orchid's fear as her excuse. Da raised an eyebrow at the younger man; his beliefs on the importance of virtue were well known.

Rory eventually moved away. Abby told herself that she didn't care, but she watched him go out of the corner of her eye. When she glanced back, she saw her father's green eyes studying her. She kissed the top of Orchid's head in order not to have to answer him. He said nothing, but put an arm around her. Da was always good at letting his children know his feelings without words. At that moment, Abby knew he was proud that he did not have to worry that his eldest would do something dumb, no matter how much she liked a certain young man.

Once the newcomers, the mayor, and a few other men that Abby did not recognize went into the ship to discuss communication methods, it was obvious there was little else to see. Though the boys wanted to stay, Orchid wanted to go home.

Da decided, "Let's go home."

WHEN THEY ARRIVED, MA was nearly in tears, wringing her hands and pacing. Grandma admonished the whole family for staying out so long but she kissed both Ray and Jin for being smart enough to not jump the barricade. Da wrapped his arms around Ma who sobbed in thanks that the boys who were burned at the landing

site were not either of her sons. Then she sobbed for feeling such disgraceful emotions.

Abby and Orchid glanced at each other and looked up at the wall screen. It was obvious Ma and Grandma had been watching the news covering the riots. There were unending tides of people throwing bottles and garbage towards the shuttles in Rome and New Delhi. The newcomers simply turned around and flew away. They only landed where they were greeted with respect and friendship. Seattle, London, Johannesburg, and Tokyo were the only first landing sites that didn't riot. Paris and Moscow were second choices, but they greeted the newcomers with open arms. The family watched clip after clip of the shuttles landing until an hour later when the Cloud announced a town meeting at Seattle City Hall. The world rang with the news as the emergency broadcast signal went off upon their handhelds.

EVEN THOUGH THE BOYD Lei family went two hours early, it seemed that nearly all million residents of Seattle swarmed inside or around city hall, watching monitors in the foyer and outside the windows. The family was able to squeeze into the back and stand.

The smell of honeysuckle was overpowering and it became hot with the crush of bodies so Grandma took Orchid home. Two others quickly slipped in the spot they had relinquished.

The same six newcomers with impossibly clear brown skin and one-piece uniforms of pale gray marked

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with his or her insignias sat in plastic chairs facing the crowd.

After the mayor had introduced them, Captain Saunders said, “We have found numerous planets with more or less breathable atmospheres. We have colonized our best hope for the future. We once called this planet c of 75289, but now we refer to it as Kipos—the Greek word for garden. As you may remember from history, Japan, China, India, France, Italy, and Greece supported colonization.

“Kipos orbits the HD 75289 binary star system. We now refer to the A star as Ilios and the B star as Kokadelfi.”

A photo of the solar system was projected upon a large screen. The slides changed a few more times, each photo showing different views and details of the system and planet as the man spoke: “Ilios is located 94.4 light-years from Sol and lies at the northwest edge of Constellation Vela with four other planets, surrounded by an asteroid belt.”

A female science officer began speaking: “Kipos, on average, is a few degrees cooler than Earth and has three large continents, though its total landmass is larger. When we changed the calendar to the Kipos Standard, we kept the same twelve months that you are used to with the Gregorian calendar. However, we have a twenty-seven hour day, three hundred forty-nine days in a year. Our months have twenty-nine days, except for December, which has thirty. December 30th is our New Year...” She went on about holidays for a time and then changed slides.

Another crewmember began: “Now, in order to conserve resources during the journey to Kipos, a person must undergo what we call hypersleep in a gravity/stasis pod...”

Abby noticed, as the science officer spoke, that many of her neighbors drifted off into the glazed look of lazy listening. She wondered if they understood how long it would take to get there. Once a person was in a pod, he or she would not wake up until they arrived on Kipos nearly a century later. Everyone they once knew would be dead. This was a one-way trip.

A tall man stood up. “Since you will be traveling at near the speed of light, how do your vocal or ship to ship communications occur?”

The science officer had a look of contempt. “The short answer is tachyons, which are not bound by space time.”

The audience seemed ready to move on, but Abby did not like the irritated way the science officer answered or their condescending gazes. The tall man asked, “Will you help us learn this technology?”

“Our ship orbiting with the East Coast plans to share technologies.”

Ma whispered to Da, “Why are they so evasive?”

“They’re no longer from Earth, Blossom. They’ve their own way of doing things. Honestly, the more science-speak, the less people listen,” he answered.

The Kiposi moved on smoothly, now noticeably ignoring the man. They wanted people to understand their principle points.

Here it comes, Abby thought.

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“We cannot take your old and frail or very young. Nor do we wish to split up parents from their small children. We can only take healthy young men and women over the age of twelve and under the age of thirty. Still, at the end of this journey, will be paradise.”

A chance to see a new planet! Excitement rushed into her chest as Abby tried to think of a way to convince her parents. While she did not technically need their permission, she would be unhappy without their blessing. To sneak off and leave the planet without letting them know was childish and cruel—especially when there was no way back.

Da raised his hand. “If you take our young, who will work our fields and..?”

Abby carefully hid her disappointment. She knew her father would not allow his children to go. Maybe Jin, but not Ray. And certainly not his daughters.

The science officer said, “We are not taking anyone without their consent. For those that wish to come, you must be tested. You have ten days to decide. We leave in twenty.”

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