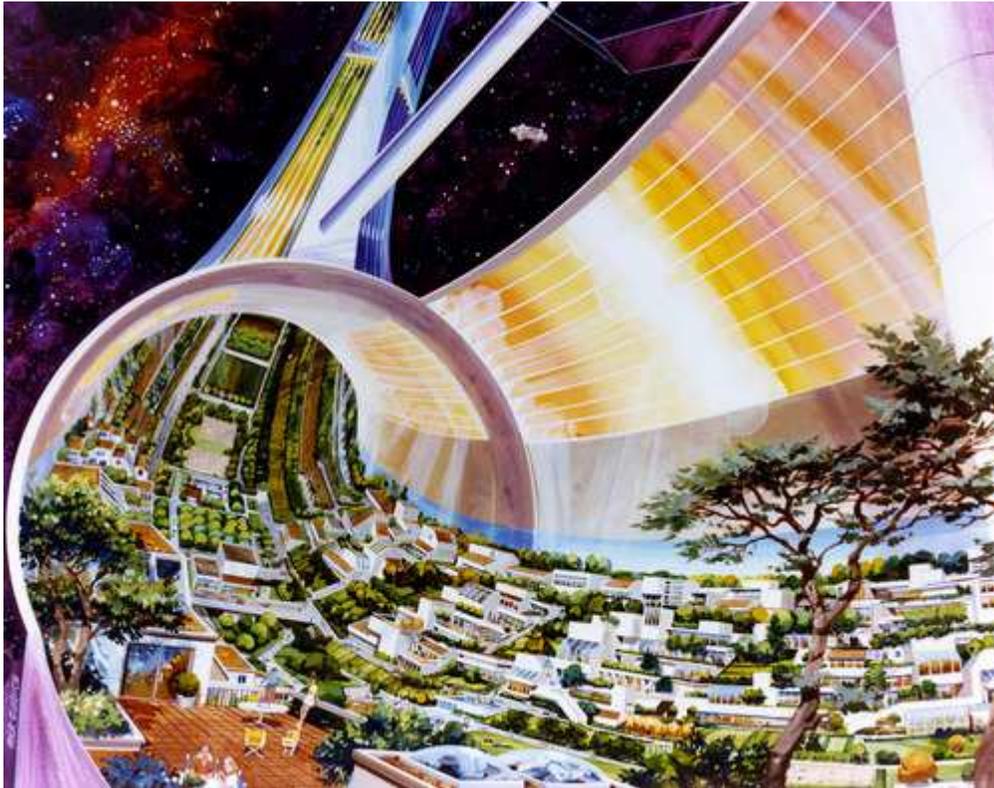


STAR BORN: Part One – Living Things



Father's corpse burns under an alien moon.

I find comfort in the superstitions that he is now reunited with our mother, dancing under an equally unfamiliar sky.

Sister finds resolution that these emolliating remains mark the end of a journey, and the end to his pain.

We thought the shoulder pains were a result of his removing the sun shields from the rover last spring. No, something was there. An ever-expanding tar within his blood that soon burrowed into his bones. He remembered that the name for it was "cancer," and was perplexed, as that was the one life form from Urth he was certain he left behind.

Apparently, mother had a theory that cancer was in every mammal. Either it is agitated awake by abuse and intake of poisons, a healthy life is lived and it emerges regardless, or it remains dormant.

I should process the theory and accept it as true or worthy of further study. But I am human, not just the spawn of scientists. I cannot help but attach value to things; and the notion of her theory chills me. Is cancer, then, the dominant life form, and we mammals merely exist to see it fed? The egg to the terrible tar monster?

I'd like to think I'm worth more than that.

The organisms that brought about our mother's rest were my sister and I, if only indirectly. Conditions become cramped when the rover is transformed into a space boat. That small cockpit was our birthing nest. My twin and I blossomed out from our mother and into the weightless heavens. My first memory of life was looking out the window at the universe and reaching to grab a star.

Their bliss of colonizing a new Urth had begun in earnest! But space only held promise, not promises, for my parents.

There were conflicting schools of thought among their scientific peers. The prevailing theory was that the closer you travel to the origin site of the Big Bang, the more chances for habitable worlds you will find. Those planets would possess the purest, raw, unadulterated stuff perfect for world building.

Father told me he and mother were among the minority who felt that more inhabitable planets, perhaps those even ready to become inhabited, would be found further from the blast site, due to the fact that the further the particles traveled, the more friction was created, the more materials were collected – the more chances to combust and collect and create.

My parents rocketed away from dying Urth with samples of every life form. They would find a world and plant a garden. What a beautiful Urth they would make.

But our mother's breast milk had become infected. The balms they had, the treatments they knew, it wasn't enough.

Aja Fujimara is buried on a moon, but not the moon that looks down on you, father. We have come very far from that.

STAR BORN: Part Two – Runaways



These were like no trees on Urth, but father still called them trees. There were so many, in fact, he called them the woods. Father was overjoyed to the point that he transformed the rover one last time. Our sailing days were done.

Father admired my sister's skepticism about this planet, but was able to stave her concerns with fact: when trees breathe, we breathe. Where trees drink, we will drink.

When we first landed, father was careful to set us in a clearing so as to disturb as little of the natural order as possible.

We felled a tree. Just one, father promised. We would use it to build a homestead. It is strange the feel of wood and soil when I have only known steel for so much of my life. It is difficult work to hew a thing already formed into something remade. It has not become any easier, we are just quicker at it now.

He administered the homestead's building from his deathbed. I remarked to sister that had we not completed it, father would still be alive, wishing to see it so. She remarked it was a stupid thought. I'm still waiting for an apology.

Sister smiled today, and it was nice to see. Despite our considerable labors to build the farmstead, she thinks it would be fun to sleep in front of the campfire tonight. It will make her happy, so we build the fire, then set our beds on either side of it.

Why do campfires give off light when all you do is stare *into them*, warm and mesmerized. I am lulled to sleep by its flickering shadows.

A finger presses upon my lips and my eyes awaken to Gemma. These depressed lips smile.

We discovered her planet about the year my voice had changed. It looked deserted because all the life was underground; endless caverns, rapids and waterfalls. And, at last, people. Sister and I had heard of society – indeed, it was our goal, our parents' goal, to create one – but to actually see one, to experience one with all its hustle and noise and superstitions – it was all too overwhelming for me.

Our races were not wholly dissimilar. Their skin was smooth in that it was hairless, but had an exciting, reptilian texture.

Sister deigned the planet "Lizardo" as sarcasm was her chief method of expression, then.

This was a decent society that opened its arms to us weary travelers. It is the only time I recall seeing my father cry. He shared with them the great historical document from dead Urth, the Intergalactic Magna Carta, which spoke of all the *good* humans would bring into space and onto other worlds; concepts and words that are useful to a society, but just school lessons on winged memories, to me.

Father told the Lizardo of his mission, and the remnants of the human race and planet contained in the rover. He introduced his children, Diana and Mercury, calling us the first humans born in space.

The Lizardo children were mostly nice. Some were not. Sister soon led her own faction. I took to myself, exploring the cavernous wonders, alone, or so I thought. I don't recall

the moment I realized I had a fellow traveler, but I do remember we played the game for... what? Maybe weeks on end?

She was much better at rock climbing than I was. So, one day, she showed me how. She gave me the confidence to achieve. I made her smile and I'm still not sure how. It was more than that, of course. I was unaccustomed to gravity and she dreamed of a world above.

The moment I kissed her, I knew all of the superstitions in the universe were true.

I found society to be madness, but Diana thrived in its order. Father was uplifted to be among likeminded kind. But Gemma and I were restless lovers and knew this was not our home.

Sister was confused, at first, when she discovered the mobile communicator I'd left for her, but quickly deduced my fateful action when she found the rover missing.

The rover bucked as Gemma and I raced across the rocky terrain of the overworld. We needed to be miles away so I could have the undisturbed time to safely transform the rover into the space boat.

It was father's voice I heard over the communicator. I expected anger, to be shamed, and instead was offered understanding. He and mother, after all, left to find their own star.

I stopped the rover and listened to his only request. Bring the remnants of Urth back. He had to fulfill his promise to mother to cultivate all of the species and knowledge of dead Urth into a new world.

Gemma cried and looked away. What superstition is this, I thought? I should have voiced that question.

The rover bounded back to the underworld's maw. One of the front tires slammed into a deep divet, and everything was a flurry as the vehicle rolled as fast as it ever travelled.

I awoke under the care of healers. Gemma's people bury their dead under a pile of stones, I discovered.

It took a lonely year to repair the rover.

Gemma's were a decent people. And the only decent thing for my family was to leave.

But you live again, my Gemma. What does your smile have to tell me?

DIANA: Brother... Brother...

MERCURY: *Mmmmmm* – why did you wake me? Let me sleep!

DIANA: Oh... I thought you were having a nightmare.

MERCURY: Now I close my eyes, and I've lost her.

DIANA: It's just your mind, anyway.

MERCURY: ...thank you, sister.

I sit up, to sister's consternation.

DIANA: Get to sleep. Tomorrow we have a garden to grow.

MERCURY: And you mock *me* for chasing ghosts.

She sits up, cracking her knuckles.

DIANA: Your girlfriend died so this garden could grow. Do it in tribute to her, if not our parents.

MERCURY: They're all gone, sister. Gemma. Our parents, their world. The seeds we plant from dead Urth will join this soil and create something new, anyway. Or they'll be rejected, and then it all will have been for naught.

DIANA: It wasn't for naught, brother. It was for love.

She exudes warmth, briefly, before her eyes wince to say I-told-you-so. She rests her head. Better let her sleep, or she'll get cranky.

No doubt sister is awake by now. She'll see my walking stick missing and reason I'm on a hike to clear my mind of ghosts. Wearing father's jacket. Well... it's a fine jacket. Keeps out the wind. Not too hot. Zipper's busted. And it has my favorite patch, Peppermint Midnight. Our homeland. Well, their homeland.

Wish I could recall the name. Eng... English? English land? Or English is the language? That distinction was important for some reason.

Oh, and Franch! Father was going to teach us Franch, but he wasn't that good, and... we didn't know it, at all. Mother was going to teach us Franch.

Yes, there were three lands. Franch, Peppermint Midnight and English. They were all born together, or had wars, or... I don't know. No matter now.

What I would give to taste peppermint again!

Father was not superstitious, but he enjoyed the idea of a tradition where – at least for a day – all things were at peace. People gave thanks. In the world mother and father wished to make, those traditions could be enjoyed without... dog mouth? Is that the word? He cursed it enough, early in our travels.

But once every year, father would retrieve the striped stick from the cold storage, and he'd cut off two small pieces as a reward for my sister and I being good all year – a taste of peppermint! Sweet, stinging clarity.

And now I have wandered too far...

Something is rustling in the woods. I hear whispers, but these are no ghosts.

I *hear* English.

A beast tackles me from behind and I roll and roll and – Gemma! GEMMA! I am sorry!

STAR BORN: Part Three – The Intergalactic Magna Carta



I awake, immediately aware I am a prisoner.

My wrists are shackled behind my back. I am on the clean floor of a space rover, but I can see our woods behind the three nervous humans assessing my destiny. She of golden hair is the first to speak.

HEIDI: I am Dr. Heidi Vonn. These are my colleagues. Dr. Mavis Murphy, and Dr. Declan Oulet. We... we are from Earth.

She smiles and I do not feel scared.

HEIDI: And we are not here to hurt you. Do you have a name?

MERCURY: I... I am brother. N, no. Wait. Mmmerkery. *Mercury*. Mercury Fujimara.

MAVIS: Fujimara?

The three consort. Vonn looks at me with a small, concerned smile.

HEIDI: You resemble an Earth scientist of the same name.

MERCURY: He was my father. Dr. Aja Fujimara was my mother.

HEIDI: Yes... I... I knew them. But they did not have children.

MERCURY: Not on Urth.

Vonn is visibly trembling, but I am restrained from offering comfort.

HEIDI: May we see them?

I explain why not.

In return, they explain that my father was a very reputed Urth scientist, for a time.

MAVIS: The spacecraft your parents were developing, we're still catching up to it. They refused to share any more of their ideas, though, until the nations all agreed to signing an Intergalactic... Magna Carta?

HEIDI: Magna Carta, yes.

MAVIS: Your parents did not want the mistakes mankind made colonizing Earth to be repeated on any other planet the race might inhabit.

HEIDI: It... was to the point of zealotry. Your father, especially.

MAVIS: He didn't want advertising, or religion, or instruments of war polluting space. It was a chance to start over. Your parents wanted rights for all things and peace in all places.

HEIDI: And for this, they were ridiculed. Disgraced. Then they... simply disappeared. We in the scientific community, I was just starting out, we thought, Oh, they must have been murdered. Their voice must have been gaining listeners and ran afoul of the wrong fortune seeker.

She is quiet for a moment.

HEIDI: I am ashamed to say we had more belief in murder than in imagination; that they could have taken to the stars, hoping and dreaming...

She barely finishes the sentence before the tears do.

MERCURY: Did you leave soon after them? Before the Urth died?

Silence is never a good response to any question.

I am glad I am chained and the floor when I am told the Urth is thriving.

The environmental collapse my parents, my father, had spoken of had become so dire that the race finally found a way to profit from its repair.

Father spoke of human greed as a thing so tangible it finally took humanoid form in my mind.

There was only room for essentials on the rover. Still, mother had hid between the learning books a colorfully drawn adventure book about an Urthen god – born in the stars and escaping from a dead planet as were we. His cloak was the same bright color on the peppermint stick.

When I would envision Greed, it took the form of a monster I wanted the Urthen god to punch in the face. My father spoke of it as a thing all-consuming, and I wanted to believe there existed some hero who could defeat it.

The scientists show me pictures of the Urth my parents had forsaken, and I am in awe.

MERCURY: What is that? It is everywhere, what is that?

MAVIS: I'm not sure what you mean, Mercury.

MERCURY: That thing! That... *color!*

MAVIS: ...green.

I am heartsick for my parents.

I need to vomit, but my body suppresses the meager amount of food in my belly to remain.

Mother and father left a wretched Urth, but bad people have turned it green.

The rapture of love made me believe in superstitions, but the anguish of it makes me call them lies.

The events of this life, when they are not random, are perverse.

My body concurs with the spew of vomit.

The soapy water on my shirt has dried and Mavis has tired of holding my head over the toilet. A confusion to myself, I remain in chains, yet thank her for her kindness.

We are alone in the main area, my vomit having been removed, and this rover's floor is once again clean. A bed has been made near the spew site that I assume is for me.

Doctors Vonn and Oulet are within earshot outside, conducting an experiment, or timing a test. My sister would know, though I hope she does not hear them. I need to escape here and warn her, but the sick has left me weak.

I hear the scientific babble and imagine it is my parents talking. I do not want to be sad, but at least this time, sadness has returned my focus.

I smile at Mavis so she does not fear I will vomit. She appreciates it, smiling in return.

She appears to be a lovely woman painted over a man. I ask her if she is man or woman.

MAVIS: I am both.

MERCURY: Oh.

I point at the patch on “their” jacket, Peppermint Midnight, and tell “them” it is familiar to me. I point out the patch on my father’s jacket and mention it is almost the same, except mine has less stars.

MAVIS: That means you’re an American. Here. You’ll like this. Stephen Foster.

“They” return from their private cupboard with what “they” tell me is an ukulele. It is small, flowingly shaped and dead – until “their” steady fingers pluck it, then it *oing oing oings* like the mewling of a baby creature. The fingers align with the strings and the sounds become an equation in movement, the chaos has been stripped away to the soul sound underneath.

MAVIS: *Oh, Susannah, oh don’t you cry for me...*

I do not know this song, or this Stephen Foster, but when I hear it, I know that I am American. It is as if the American Earth itself rose up from the foundation to embrace and claim me for its own. I cry for a home I’ve never seen. Not, throbbing, violent tears. Just gentle newborns tumbling innocently out of my eyes and down steady cheeks.

The others have followed the music to us. They are not American. Their patches are for other places, but it is evident on their faces those places are missed, as well. For a moment, we are human.

The song concludes and bright-eyed Heidi rushes to her cupboard.

HEIDI: You must hear Beethoven!

She plugs pebbles into my ears and taps a device connected to them. I close my eyes and daydream to the full, awe of sounds becoming one, and of a song that pushes off the sand, and rolls back in; it pushes further out, but rolls back again. It pushes out –

and I fly. Suddenly I am racing through the cosmos, my outstretched fingers feeling star streams trickle through them. It does not make me feel American, but alive. My soul is alight with wonder.

Stories are shared between them, but what was once an honest commune becomes an experiment to see how I will respond to various songs. They are scientists. It is their nature.

I was a person a moment ago. I am no one's pet, and refuse to be treated as one. I take my shackles and lie on the mat they prepared for me. I listen to their whispers and close my eyes, envisioning my escape.

A finger presses my lips and I awake.

It is Diana. She is clever and picks at the shackle lock until I am free. She has her knapsack and it contains the scientists' antenna, and our hammer, one side glistening with a dark substance. We leave in stealth, and are a good pace into the woods before—

HEIDI: Stop!

To my surprise, Diana does.

DIANA: It is fine, brother. We are safe.

HEIDI: You... are you Dr. Fujimara's daughter?

DIANA: Yes. Who are you?

HEIDI: I am Dr. Vonn. I knew your parents. They were good people.

DIANA: Then respect their wishes and leave.

HEIDI: Let us help you.

DIANA: My brother was not in chains before your arrival. Your kind of help is not needed.

Mavis emerges from the structure, navigating Declan's slow and confused footsteps. He is bleeding and holds his damaged head.

DIANA: Your night watch will survive the concussion. Tend to him as I will tend to mine. We will return in the morning to discuss your departure.

HEIDI: I... what is your name?

DIANA: You do not need to know my name.

HEIDI: Ms. Fujimara... we're not leaving.

DIANA: This is our planet! You were not invited!

Sister brandishes the antenna from the knapsack like the warriors in our histories drew their fine swords.

DIANA: I have removed your transmitter, and will place it where I hid your food rations. You cannot call home. You have nothing to eat. You will not make demands. *You will leave. You will leave.*

We bypass our farmstead to sleep in the safety of the locked rover. It has kept wolves at bay. It will do the same for apes.

But such assurances do not assuage Diana, who stares sentry into the old horizon.

MERCURY: Think they'll come?

DIANA: I don't know. Mother and father were scientists. But... I do not know other people. I should be pleased. Father told me that the soil of every new world always runs red with someone's blood. I did not want to believe him. But I am prepared to. now.

She is so... resolute.

MERCURY: And then others will come.

DIANA: I'll be even more prepared for them.

MERCURY: And then this world will be like all the other worlds father kept running from.

DIANA: Not running. Searching.

MERCURY: Then why stake a claim to a land already in dispute? Let's keep searching.

DIANA: Because I saw their star maps, brother. Planet after planet after planet. Each with a flag pinned upon it. Ours was next on the trajectory, and there are others after that.

MERCURY: Sister... what good is a planet if we are its only two people? We will farm. We will die. And they will rob the planet from our corpses.

DIANA: I cannot control what happens then. But I am alive now and I choose to be free.

She punches her pillow and plops her head down, turning her back to me. My eyes begin to close but are opened by her curious voice.

DIANA: How many people do you require, brother?

MERCURY: Enough to make more.

DIANA: You'd have made half-breeds on Lizardo.

MERCURY: Yes. And I'd have been happy. But it was not meant to be.

I close my eyes and roll over, turning my back to the world.

DIANA: I know. And I am sorry.

The scientists await us with arms crossed under scowling faces. Diana is impishly animated when she has the upper hand. She throws a familiar, dirt-dusted parcel at their feet.

DIANA: A day's ration so you may prepare for your journey off-planet.

Heidi moves forward, intent to scold, but is held back by Mavis' touch. "They" step toward us, impressed that sister and I stand our ground.

MAVIS: I'm sorry, Mercury. You were the least rational expectation of what we anticipated to find here, and we did not know how to process that. We overreacted and could have handled that a lot better.

I say nothing. The weight of chains is not soon forgotten.

MAVIS: And you, Ms. Fujimara. We will honor your request to go. But others will come.

DIANA: I know. Which is why, if you wish to have enough food for your journey –

HEIDI: This is ridiculous!

DIANA: - you will report that the planet is uninhabitable.

HEIDI: We have soil samples! Atmospheric analysis. Any ruse would be uncovered, and I will not risk my professional reputation so you can have planet treehouse all to yourself. Let us build the planet you wish to see.

DIANA: Then leave.

MAVIS: Ms. Fujimara. What would you have me say?

DIANA: Tell them... the planet is... whatever it is people fear most. Whatever will keep them away.

MAVIS: Which is?

DIANA: Poison. The planet is full of poison.

MAVIS: They would exile their prisoners here.

DIANA: Tell them nothing is here. It's a wasteland.

MAVIS: Then they will use it as such. They will bring their trash or erect towers and such for infrastructure.

DIANA: Tell them, then, it is inhabited, but all are diseased.

MAVIS: They will send doctors, missionaries and bread.

DIANA: Then tell them what that they truly fear! That this was a once great planet, but its resources have been stripped and wasted, and now it is teeming with billions of distraught people in need of work, food and home!

MAVIS: And organizations, criminal and otherwise, will flock here to exploit cheap and desperate labor.

DIANA: Then tell them it is a highly advanced civilization -

MAVIS: And they will send businesspeople to trade. And if it is a primitive civilization, they will send soldiers to conquer. Now what is it you would have me tell them?

Diana squinches her face, the trunk of her body expanding and contracting from frantic breaths to a slowly measured rate.

DIANA: Tell them the planet is an organism disguised as a planet and it will devour all who disturb it.

MAVIS: And they will kill it.

Diana finally breaks eye contact with Mavis, and looks into the trees, at a loss.

Now it is Heidi who appears consoling. She places her hand on Mavis' shoulder and steps in front of "them" to meet us eye-to-eye. Her voice is soft and sincere.

HEIDI: Do you see the problem all of us share? There is no answer to satisfy the riddle. If there is a place ripe for plundering, nothing will keep them away.

DIANA: I believe you are genuine when you say you wish to help my brother and I. I believe you do have our best interests at heart, now that the surprise of us has waned. What I fail to believe is how you and your compatriots could know something is wrong,

are aware of the impending doom it will bring, and, rather than stop it, allow yourselves to be bullied into submission and hive mind that there is no other option. Prepare your journey. I will ponder the riddle.

We take our leave not two steps before sister arrives at:

DIANA: Oh. There it is.

I ask what, looking underfoot, but she turns to the scientists, confronting their exasperation with confidence.

DIANA: I know the fear that will keep them off planet. Tell them there's no money in it.

I never know when we are walking away or when Diana is still conducting business, so I just follow.

DIANA: We will conclude this on the morrow.

The night is cold and we huddle like pups in the rover. Sister is quiet in deserved slumber. The peace of her form is betrayed by aged, journeyed hands, scratched by rock and cracked by weather. Are these the hands you have when you dream, or do you wish for something softer?

Once more we venture to the old horizon, but the scientists appear unmoved. Dr. Vonn – Heidi – presents us with an offering.

HEIDI: I believe you know what this is. Your parent's work. Or a version of it, anyway.

MERCURY: The firing mechanism for your engine.

HEIDI: Yes. A show of good faith, to trade for the transmitter. We have discussed your solution to the riddle, Ms. Fujimara... and your fellow scientists concur. Give me the transmitter and I will deliver our prepared statement.

DIANA: Why would you trade the device that will keep you here, when what I want is for you to leave? This is a trick –

HEIDI: It is our only thing of worth!

DIANA: Brother, we must –

MAVIS: Ukulele!

Sister tries to run, but I stop her at the sound of Mavis' familiar word.

MAVIS: Our music has worth. Doesn't it, Mercury? We will trade you our music.

Sister sears into my eyes, already blaming me for if we are betrayed. Still, she considers the exchange.

DIANA: Music. Yes. I know the word. Fine. Bring me your music. And everything else. Bring me your culture! All the things you possess that make a people a culture, that makes people *people*, bring these things to me as a trade, and then I will believe you. Bring me the treasure of you, and then you can have your antenna to call home.

The scientists do not argue. In fact, they are happy to share. With pictures of family and places come stories. Music fills the woods for the first time, in harmony with my sister's laughter. There are books of great passion, heady things, simple pleasures; prayer beads and remembrances.

But humanity, alas, is also duty and work. Heidi, focused, intriguing, secures the antenna and transmits the clearances jargon. I can see my sister's fists clenching. Finally, the message:

HEIDI: We did not realize it until it was beyond all hope, but the gravitational pull of this planet is unyielding, and removes all options. We are stranded, and cannot in good conscience advise a recovery. We have analyzed the colonization possibilities of this planet from all perspectives, as was our mission. The conclusion we have reached is that there is no safe way to conduct business on this planet. We cannot justify the expense, human or otherwise.

The transmission ends, and we new neighbors sit in a heavy silence.

Minutes pass before the message is received and a human voice on the other end responds. Other human voices chatter indistinctly in the background. The human voice says they are sorry, but they do not sound sorry. They sound as if they were reading a statement. The lives of these three scientists are just background noise to other conversations, and other prepared responses. The lives of these three scientists are an expected, acceptable loss. There is even a procedure for it. It is cold in space.

Like our parents, these three voyagers have left their home to find the promise within uncynical human hearts.

DIANA: If you come here without brands upon you, I will gladly call you friend. What say you, brother?

MERCURY: I am ready to plant a garden, and I hope it grows green.

#

STAR BORN

By Stephen Sonneveld

Publishing Information and Picture Credits

Part One

<http://s-sonneveld.tumblr.com/post/107087291613/star-born-part-one-living-things>

January 4, 2015

NASA Ames Research Center, NASA ID AC75-1086-1. "Toroidal Colony: Cutaway view, exposing the interior." Art work by Rick Guidice, August 26, 2012.

Part Two

<http://s-sonneveld.tumblr.com/post/107106641864/star-born-part-two-runaways>

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Part Three

<http://s-sonneveld.tumblr.com/post/107142143455/star-born-part-three-the-intergalactic-magna>

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Art by Stephen Sonneveld, using a photograph from the NASA archives

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