

## Farewell, Valaria

As the gravitational force of Earth exerted its pull on the shuttle pod, Marina adjusted her visor to take a better look. Earth appeared like a bright blue marble floating serenely against a black velvet curtain. It looked so much like her own planet, Valaria, that Marina imagined for a moment that it was. Then she remembered that Valaria used to look like this, before the Catastrophes.

“Nineteen hundred MS to landing. Invisibility shields activated,” intoned the shuttle pod command monitor.

“Fifteen hundred MS to landing.”

Marina fastened her helmet and strapped into the control seat.

“One thousand MS to landing. Navigation beams activated.”

Marina scanned the control panel. Every dial and gauge were functioning as expected. She flipped a switch to engage computer-guided entry.

“Five hundred MS to landing . . . Two hundred MS to landing . . . Touchdown in 10 MS, 5 MS . . . Landing complete. You may exit the pod,” directed the monitor.

Marina unfastened her seat straps and removed her helmet. Earth’s atmosphere was perfect for Valarians. No need for oxygen tanks on the Earth’s surface.

She turned on the pod’s communicator.

“Luna, this is Marina. Are you near the landing site?” she asked as she scanned the area visually from the pod window.

“Marina, this is Luna. Kendra and I are just one hundred Earth-meters from your pod. Invisibility shields are working perfectly. We’ll be able to see you as soon as you exit the pod.”

“Got that, Luna. So good to hear your voice. I’m exiting the pod now.”

Marina opened the pod hatch and stepped onto rocky, sun-scorched soil. Behind her, the hatch closed with a soft hiss. She touched her bracelet to record the pod’s location before examining the area around her. Luna and Kendra waved to her from the edge of the rocky clearing. Marina approached them eagerly.

“Sisters! Earth seems to agree with you. You both look so well,” Marina said, extending one hand to Luna and the other to Kendra.

Both Valarians bore a striking resemblance to Marina in appearance, as though they were real sisters: black hair, angular features, and slim bodies, devoid of curves, devoid of excess, devoid of anything superfluous.

“Luna! What is that garment you’re wearing?” asked Marina with suspicion.

“It’s called a dress. Do you like it?” replied Luna, spinning around to show off her bright yellow sundress with its flared skirt.

“I’m not sure. It doesn’t seem very practical. Is it ceremonial garb?” replied Marina.

“Some dresses are for ceremonies. But this one is for everyday use. Earth women wear them both for work and for leisure,” said Luna.

“Men don’t wear them?” Marina asked.

“Mostly, no,” replied Luna.

“Are men the ones that look kind of like hairy bears?” asked Marina.

Kendra laughed. “Some do, yes. But most men shave their facial hair and look civilized,” Kendra observed.

“Where have I landed, exactly? It looks like a deserted rock field,” said Marina, as she followed Luna and Kendra toward a wheeled vehicle.

“It’s the site of an abandoned aluminum plant. It’s close to civilization and freeways, but no one is likely to stumble over the pod accidentally,” replied Kendra, as she opened the front passenger door of the vehicle and motioned for Marina to enter.

Luna got in the driver’s seat and Kendra took the seat directly behind her.

“Before we take you to our field office, we want to show you around a bit, so you can see the situation for yourself,” Luna explained. “The United States has suffered the most virus casualties on the planet and Southern California is currently the hardest hit area. That’s why we thought the commission should send one investigator here.”

Luna drove down a broad thoroughfare, straight into the sun burning through a brownish fog a few fingers above the horizon. Marina admired the startling variety of the surrounding buildings, so dissimilar from the regularity of Valarian structures.

Luna pulled the vehicle off the thoroughfare into a vast paved clearing. In the middle of the clearing appeared a large, pale-green structure.

“What is this place? Is it a sports arena?” asked Marina.

“Yes, of sorts. It’s Santa Anita Race Track. It’s for racing horses,” replied Kendra.

“Are horses that smart?” asked Marina. “I thought they were one of the less intelligent Earth animals.”

“Earthlings sit on the horses’ backs and guide them through the race. But that’s not why we’re here,” replied Kendra. She pointed to the long lines of vehicles inching slowly around the parking lot. “That’s why we’re here.”

Marina stared at the vehicles with Earthlings inside. The passengers looked hot and frustrated. Other Earthlings wearing matching white coats and light-blue face masks motioned to the drivers and approached the vehicles with clipboards.

“Ah, now I understand,” said Marina. “This is one of the mass vaccination sites, isn’t it?”

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The three Valarians sat around a large table in a nondescript rented office. Marina noted how lacking in comfort and beauty the space appeared compared to conference rooms at home. Luna and Kendra had been on Earth for several Earth-years now and were probably used to this unattractive environment.

Kendra projected a light beam onto the far wall of the room. “Here are some scenes from early in Earth-year 2020, as the pandemic was beginning. Things were off to a good start, with the virus spreading rapidly throughout the planet. Mortality rates were very high early on,” Kendra explained.

“And then things went wrong,” Marina said.

“Correct. It appears that the virus was not deadly enough. You recall that we were trying to avoid the SARS scenario from Earth-year 2003,” replied Luna.

“Yes, of course. We miscalculated with the SARS virus and it was too deadly. The victims died before they could spread the virus to more Earthlings. That’s why we designed the new virus to be less deadly,” said Marina.

Kendra projected a set of new images on the wall. “These graphs show the death rates from January 2020 to now, January 2021, across all of the Earth’s continents.”

Marina was a bit annoyed. She had already examined the same graphs on her trip from Valaria. “We have distributed new strains to the field teams. Did the teams deploy them?” Marina looked from Kendra to Luna.

“Yes, our team and the others deployed them. But the Earthlings got ahead of us and developed vaccines that appear to be effective against the original virus and most of the new strains,” replied Luna.

Marina rubbed her eyes as the images on the wall faded from view. She was tired from the excitement of the pod landing. She had hoped to receive a more positive report, some insight she could take back to Virus Control Headquarters.

“As you know, we have field teams working on five other planet candidates, just like the teams here on Earth. The investigatory commission will take samples of the virus back to Valaria for further study. Meaning all the strains, the manufactured ones and the naturally-occurring ones,” Marina said. “I’ll communicate the disappointing news in our meeting with Virus Control Headquarters tomorrow. I brought a new strain with me, but we’ll need to review the situation further before Virus Control makes a decision on deployment.”

Marina rubbed her eyes again and stifled a yawn. “Will you be taking me back to the pod now?” she asked.

“We can do that, or you may prefer to stay in a hotel. It would be much more spacious and comfortable,” replied Kendra. “We even brought some Earthling clothes for you to wear during your stay.”

“So thoughtful of you, sisters. Take me to this hotel as I need rest very soon.”

Marina stretched out in what the hotel desk clerk called a “king-size” bed. It looked big enough for at least three kings. Then she remembered that Earthlings demonstrated a remarkable tendency toward obesity.

She examined the digital control device next to the bed and determined it belonged to a wall-mounted screen. She flipped through various images: Earthlings in vehicles, offices, and houses; Earthlings preparing food in elaborate cooking rooms; and angry, screaming bear-men waving colorful banners and climbing on a domed building. She turned off the images and fell into a deep sleep.

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When morning arrived, Marina felt very refreshed. The bathroom contained a decent-sized shower. Marina nodded approvingly. She spied tiny bottles of colored liquid lined up on the vanity. The first one was labeled “shampoo.”

“Bracelet: translate shampoo,” directed Marina.

A voice replied, “Shampoo is a cleanser for fibers, such as carpets and rugs.”

“Bracelet: translate conditioner.”

“Conditioner is a tonic to improve or restore the condition of an object.”

Marina frowned. Why would she be inclined to cleanse the carpet or restore its condition? Most puzzling.

Her eyes lighted on a rectangular object wrapped in decorative foil. She hoped it would be chocolate, but its fragrance suggested herbal and floral notes. Lavender, she decided. A lavender-flavored candy brick, perhaps. She unwrapped the object and realized it was a fancy soap bar. Only slightly disappointed, she placed the soap on a ledge inside the shower and stepped inside. The soap produced satisfying suds but left her short, black hair feeling sticky after a brisk towel drying. When she fluffed her damp hair with her fingers, the delicate lavender scent lingered in the air.

Marina inspected the clothes that Luna and Kendra had selected for her. There were two shirts and two pantsuits, one a medium blue and one charcoal gray with narrow white stripes. There were also two dresses: one with a pink-and-purple floral design and the other with a green-and-black geometric pattern. Luna’s contributions, undoubtedly. Marina tried on the green-and-black dress and examined her reflection in the mirror. The sleeves covered her arms entirely but the hem of the dress ended above her knees. She shook her head. Why would she want to expose her legs? She would need to ask Luna about the purpose of dresses.

Marina removed the dress and tried the blue pantsuit. With a shirt under the jacket, it was tolerable. Not as comfortable as Valarian garments, but tolerable. She looked critically at her reflection in the mirror. With her almond skin and violet eyes, she could pass easily for an Earthling. She stashed a handful of face masks in her shoulder pouch. Although Valarians were immune to the virus, she would need to wear a mask in public to avoid suspicion.

Marina used her bracelet to notify Luna and Kendra that she was ready. She carefully donned one of the masks and took the elevator to the hotel lobby, where the aroma of cooked bacon and eggs wafted from the adjacent café. The smell nearly turned her stomach.

Earth food. Good thing she packed her nutrition bricks. She plucked one from her shoulder pouch and unwrapped it.

A masked bear-man standing near the hotel entrance asked if she wanted an Uber. Not knowing what an Uber was, she shook her head. She knew some American English but didn't intend to speak to Earthlings unless absolutely necessary. She would let Luna or Kendra do any talking that might be required.

The bear-man winked an eye at her. Frightened by what his intentions might be, she stepped outside the hotel entrance to wait for her companions. She didn't have to wait long. Their vehicle stopped directly in front of her.

Luna jumped out of the front passenger seat and held the door for Marina.

As Marina fastened her seat belt, she nodded toward the hotel entrance. "One of the bear-men winked his eye. What does that mean?" she asked.

Luna and Kendra laughed.

"He was flirting with you. It means he likes you," offered Luna.

"Likes me in what way?" asked Marina.

“He finds you attractive. He’s letting you know he’d like to know you better. Maybe go on a date,” explained Luna.

“What’s a date?” asked Marina.

“It’s where two people spend time together, usually with food and drink, and decide if they’re compatible. If they are, then they spend more time together. And eventually they probably have sex,” replied Kendra. “Earthlings spend a lot of time either having or thinking about sex,” she continued.

Marina knew about sex from Valarian history books and from knowledge of Valarian animals that reproduced sexually. Valarians had been reproducing through cloning for hundreds of generations now, which meant that all Valarians were female.

“Have you breakfasted?” asked Luna.

Marina nodded. “I ate a nutrition brick. The smell of the Earth food was rather nauseating.”

“Yes, it does take some adjustment. Kendra and I usually stick with the plant products. They’re easier to tolerate. We picked up some fruit. You can try some when we get to the office,” said Luna.

Marina gazed out the windshield as they passed vehicle-fueling stations, tile-roofed stucco buildings, and countless palm trees. The variety and quantity of colorful signs were almost overwhelming.

“Why are there so many signs?” asked Marina.

“It’s called advertising. The merchants want you to stop at their stores and buy their products. They’re trying to get your attention,” replied Kendra.

“And the signs don’t make Earthlings dizzy?” asked Marina.



“They’re used to it, I guess. Luna and I don’t even notice the signs much anymore. Do we, Luna?” asked Kendra. “Well, here we are at the office.” Kendra pulled into the narrow parking lot situated between two ugly beige buildings.

While Kendra set up the projection beam for the meeting with Virus Control Headquarters, Luna arranged a variety of fresh fruit on the conference room table: strawberries, kiwis, oranges, and papaya and melon slices.

“We can take off our masks here,” observed Luna.

“I’m so glad,” replied Marina. “How do Earthlings tolerate them?”

“They don’t. They’re sick of them, but they’re one of the few things the Earthlings are doing right. Or I guess I should say wrong,” replied Luna.

“You do recognize that we want them to die off from the virus so we can take over Earth, don’t you?” asked Marina.

Luna winced. “Of course, I do. It’s just that I’ve become kind of attached,” she replied.

“Attached to the place or to the Earthlings?” asked Marina.

“Both, I guess,” replied Luna.

“Are you having sex with Earthlings?” asked Marina.

Luna looked to Kendra for support. “I don’t have to answer that, do I?” she asked Kendra.

Kendra shrugged. “Does it really matter to you, Marina? You’ll be returning to Valaria, probably in a matter of days. And Luna and I will be returning when our jobs are done. Whether we come back in the re-settlement is not for us to decide.”

Marina sighed. “You’re right, of course. I’m just a little jealous of both of you, being out here on the field mission. I’m hoping, though, that we’ll all be chosen for the re-settlement. I can tell that you both like it here.”

The projection beam flickered to life. A group of five Valarians in gray and white jumpsuits appeared in a semi-circle in a softly glowing conference room. Along the walls, tall leafy trees drooped over a collection of brightly-colored lounging pillows. Today, though, no one was lounging. The expressions of the five women were quite somber.

“Greetings, Marina, Luna, Kendra. Thank you for joining our meeting today,” said Zula from the center of the semi-circle.

“Hello, Zula,” replied the three Valarians in unison.

“I have with me the heads of several units working on the re-settlement project. Sisters, please raise your hand as I call out your unit. We have Logistics, Virus Development, Actuarial Modeling, and Planet Viability,” announced Zula.

Marina knew all of these women and their impressive credentials. She felt a slight twinge of homesickness, watching from the beige blandness of an anonymous conference room in a Southern California office park.

“I know you were expecting to hear from Virus Development and from Actuarial Modeling about our next steps in tweaking the virus to overtake the Earth population. Virus Development has produced several new strains that Actuarial Modeling has ranked in terms of expected effectiveness and timeliness,” Zula continued. “However, it is with some sadness and frustration that I’ve been compelled to include Planet Viability in this meeting. First, though, I’ll ask Petra, our head of Actuarial Modeling, to make a brief report on her unit’s work.”

As Petra rose from her seat to address her Valarian comrades on Earth, Marina’s mind wandered to her last meeting with Petra, just before Marina had left Valaria. Marina had said some slightly unprofessional things to Petra, revealing perhaps more emotion than she had intended.

“Marina, remember your place. It’s not appropriate to use words like that with a superior,” Petra had scolded.

Marina refocused her attention on Petra’s image in the projection beam.

“Hello, sisters. I wish my unit had better news to give you. Unfortunately, Earthling scientists have been faster and more successful than we projected in designing and producing vaccines. Despite their fumbling vaccine deployment, our models indicate that Earthlings will have the existing viral strains under control in another Earth-year,” Petra reported.

Marina’s brain refused to listen to the rest of Petra’s words, hearing instead the disappointment Petra had expressed that other day.

“Not appropriate,” Petra had said.

Marina watched Petra’s mouth moving in the projection beam image, but all she heard was “not appropriate,” the words still stinging in her memory.

Marina pinched herself to pay attention to the image. She saw Petra’s smile fading to a slight frown. “We won’t find out, though, whether our projections are correct. Sister Fiona will explain,” Petra concluded and sat down.

Fiona made a brief wave with her hand as she rose from her seat. “Hello, sisters. As the head of Planet Viability, it’s my task to identify the planets that are best suited for re-settlement. When my unit first identified Earth quite some time ago, it appeared to be an excellent candidate, with an atmosphere and gravitational size very similar to Valaria. It was, however, densely populated with a species of intelligent beings that would need to be either dominated or destroyed. We recommended destruction. And that’s been our focus for roughly twenty Earth-years.”

Fiona paused briefly to compose herself and then resumed. “During that time, we’ve continued to observe and measure the physical conditions on Earth, including sea levels and

temperatures, glacier thickness, and air quality. We knew that conditions were deteriorating when we began our project, but we believed we could reverse them once we took over the planet. However, the population destruction phase is taking longer than expected and the planet's conditions are deteriorating faster than expected. In other words, the planet is no longer viable." Fiona resumed her seat, appearing crestfallen from the news she had just delivered.

Marina looked to Luna's and Kendra's ashen faces.

"Thank you for your report, Fiona." Zula stood to address the three women on Earth. "I know this decision comes as a shocking blow to you, sisters. It's a shock to the other Earth field teams, too. As soon as arrangements can be made, we'll have your shuttle pod convey you to the interstellar transport to bring you home," said Zula in a calm, measured voice. "You'll receive further instructions, including how to dispose of the virus samples you have in your possession. If you have any immediate questions, I'll try to answer them now."

Marina was too stunned to respond. She could hear Luna sobbing softly from her end of the conference table.

"Nothing to ask just now," Kendra replied for the group. "Thank you for giving us this opportunity," she added just before she flicked off the projection beam.

"Opportunity? An opportunity to kill Earthlings?" sputtered Luna.

"I didn't mean it that way," replied Kendra. "I'm fond of them too, you know. But I'm ready to go home."

"We messed up their planet and now we're just going to abandon them. For no purpose." Luna wiped the tears from her face and stared at the plate of half-eaten fruit in front of her.

"Maybe not," Marina said in a low voice.

Luna looked up from the fruit. "What do you mean?" she asked.

“I mean that maybe we don’t have to go back to Valaria. Maybe we can stay and help the Earthlings,” replied Marina, a plan beginning to form in her mind. “I have the new virus sample that we were planning to release. It’s here in my shoulder pouch,” Marina said, touching the pouch lying next to her on the table.

Kendra looked at her suspiciously. “You mean give it to the Earthlings? Do you think that’s a good idea?” she asked.

“I don’t know yet. I’m thinking out loud,” Marina said. “I’m a virologist by training,” she mused. “I know how this new strain was designed to work. Maybe I can help the Earthlings develop better vaccines.”

“If you’re staying, so am I,” Luna announced, smiling broadly through her tears.

“Good, because I’ll need your help. To start with, I need to understand about dresses,” replied Marina, smiling back. “And shampoo.”