

Letting Go

By Silvia Petrescu-Prahova

"Father." The word left her pale lips like breath on a cold winter morning. The dark man clasped her small fingers tighter.

"Daughter, no. I can't." He looked at her, pleading with his eyes. She was lying in a small cot connected to a beeping monitor. Just minutes ago, she had been confirmed positive for solaris. "Not after your mother left us."

"Father, I love you, and I will forever. But you know they have to follow procedure."

"I can't do it. I won't give you up." He flung his arms around her torso. She squeezed him, then pushed him away. Ragged breaths were barely escaping her lips, and she closed her eyes.

"Please. Let go." He stood up, slipping his fingers out of hers reluctantly, pleading with all his heart she would change her mind. "Leave." He walked away, feeling a sharp tug in his chest, telling him no, don't go. Looking back one last time, he saw a doctor rush to her side and prop her up, covering her with a sheet and rolling her away. A wave of nausea and guilt swept over him, and he doubled over, clutching a small whale in his hands.

He stood up at last and, with a hardened heart, walked out of the hospital. The drab gray halls mirrored his insides, and he tightened his jaw and sat on a metal bench beside the street, head in hands, thinking.

Two Months Later

The dark man stood, still as stone, watching the processions below him. Tall, masked figures pranced about on sleek, grey horses, waving glow sticks and shooting blasts of colorful light from silver pistols under the swirling stars, moon, and sun. Small children watched from the sides of the gravel road, held by drably dressed parents. Above, scrolling holographic letters described what was going on below. Solaris Parade, they read. The Annual Celebration of Armorica's Star! He watched for a minute longer, then turned to the video screen behind him. A pale, stocky man leered through a black mask, surveying the dark man's office through the screen.

"Has the target been secured, Lear?" The man on the screen nodded and held up a picture of an older child. The dark man nodded his approval and Lear clicked off, gone. The man was alone once more.

He sat at a pristine black desk, fingering a small wooden whale, worn with ages of rubbing and clutching. He had come so far since that day. *The target has been secured*, he told himself. *Nothing to worry about*. He flipped the whale over. In rough letters, the word Luna was carved. He traced it with a long finger, thinking. A framed picture sat before him.

Captured with a lens, a laughing woman held a baby in her arms, her dark hair whipping about her face in the wind. A tall, dark man had his arm slung around her shoulders. Behind them Solaris glittered in the night sky and the moon shone faintly next to it. An Armorica Government sign flapped loosely in the wind. A poster about the risks of solaris and how to report it was stuck to an artificial tree. A fluster of movement and emotion, captured in a single photograph. A small stack of papers lay next to it, untouched, and he glanced at them.

They were mostly official looking government papers, paperwork asking for the release of his wife from the social network, or the press asking to publish an article in her memory, things like that. He crumpled them into a ball and threw them into the wastebasket.

"Master?" A small girl dressed in a white shift, her hair coiled on top of her head, appeared on the screen in front of him.

"Yes?"

"I have Professor Anatic's papers. Would you like to view them?"

"That would be wonderful, Anna. Bring them to my office right away, please." She nodded and clicked off.

The man leaned back in his chair, fingers clasped in his lap. A broad band of gold inlaid with a cloudy gem encircled his left ring finger, and a long scar marred his strong, dark forearm, thick and reddish brown.

The door opened softly and Anna deposited a neat stack of papers on his desk. He thanked her and she left, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

He closed his eyes and a memory flashed through his head. A small girl clutching an old doll in a dark corner. The long, rusty knife glinting in the moonlight. His arm, thrust onto the jagged blade, the silver pistol hanging unused at his side.

The man opened his eyes and set down the small whale he had been clutching so tightly.

The papers in front of him looked boring, but he rifled through them anyway. There was one about experimental theory, another about the hypothetical second Solaris, yet another about Anatic's theory on why solaris had occurred, and still another, this time about the Stearling experiment on heavy blood. He sighed.

The screen in front of him turned on, and a thin woman appeared, dressed in the standard navy and black uniform.

"MacIntosh, have you confirmed the capture of the target?" She stared at him, unblinking, pulling a wisp of pale hair behind her ear.

"Indeed I have, Professor," he replied in a clipped voice. She smiled approvingly. "Do you know where she is to be held?" he asked, barely daring to hope.

"The Anatic Lab, I believe. He wants to test her for solaris, and if it is confirmed, take her into quarantine." The man pressed his lips into a firm line, quenching his happiness with a wave of doubt.

"Thank you, Professor. Happy Solaris Day, by the way,"

"And you too," she replied, and clicked off. He looked at his digital calendar, pulling a hand through his dark curls and leaning forward. A new date had appeared, the very next day, in fact, that read Suspect Testing, 15:00. He had a plan. He would wait until the testing was over, and then he would go visit her.

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The next day, the dark man sat at the desk, watching his digital clock intently. The minutes seemed to tick by like sludge, one after the other, in an endless procession of time, and he anxiously awaited 15:00. The clock rang and the hour changed. He rocketed out of his chair, pocketing the small wooden whale.

He took the lift down to the pod garage, where he clambered into his own black pod and raced out of the garage into the cool daynight air, surveying the bustling roads.

He drove down a dark, narrow street, navigating the hovering pod through dark alleys, watching his podscreen with a fervor so intense you would think he was driving the pod with telekinesis. He stopped in front of a faded blue building and hopped out, looking right and left before entering silently.

He strode purposefully, and quite a bit nervously, down a white hallway to a door marked Solaris Tests and Quarantine. He went in and made his way down the rows of curtained beds from which emanated nothing but silence and the heavy air of sickness, and sat in a small wooden chair at the side of the last bed in the row.

Underneath a thin blue blanket lay a frail figure. Her sun-kissed skin was pale and bloodless. Small purple splotches covered her face and neck, the mark of solaris. Her dark eyes were closed. A long tube connected to a beeping monitor protruded from her hand. Her dark, curly hair spilled about her face in a halo of chocolate, and a small ebony pendant, a little heart, glinted at her throat. Her lips were

pale and slightly parted, as if to speak words that never came. Blood glinted ruby-red in a small dish on the bedside table.

The man clasped her thin, limp fingers in his strong, dark ones. He knew she was long gone, but he still treasured her touch. Closing his eyes, he let a mental dam break and flood of memories rushed through his head.

Playing, laughing, talking, at the park. The day of the initiation. Listening to exotic music. Sick days watching holo-TV. Cooking and baking for the neighbors. The day of the scar. The first day of school. The test, confirming solaria, which he had kept secret for all these years. The day she told him to let her go, that it was her time, that she loved him. The overwhelming feeling of guilt and sadness that had hardened his heart. Today, the day she left this world and moved on to another.

"Luna, I will love you always and forever," he breathed, feeling a tug in his chest. "May you rest in peace, and know that you are loved." He folded her fingers around the whale and placed her hands on her chest. *She looks so peaceful*, he thought. He stood, smiling sadly. Looking back one last time, he whispered four words.

"Farewell, my beautiful daughter."