

BLUE SKY ECHO

G I N A M E N I C U C C I



B L U E S K Y
E C H O

B Y : G I N A M E N I C U C C I



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ONE

As I hurry out of the icy pasture, the brash buzzer of morning bells breaks the silence of the early suns. I move as fast as one can while carrying a pail of milk through slippery grass, staying close to the tall spear-topped fence near the woods. The faded blue hills and withering blooms, touched by the first veil of frost, mark the end of worgwen and the start of a new turning. And for me, a new beginning. My dad reassures me that after the rite of quell, I'll know peace. I want to believe him, but those aren't his words anymore. They're the Rorve's.

I head down the hillside in my puffy gray coat, trying to keep an eye on the pail's precious cargo as I take in the amazing sunrises. Against the brilliant green sky, the smoke trailing from the factories transforms into bright billows of orange and violet. Even though I'm in awe of the changing colors, some part of me aches for Earth. The only memory I have of my first home is from when I was a baby—a strange blue sky and a tendril of auburn hair, like my own.

Behind our dome, Pop's creating a small mountain of firewood as he splits another log. He wipes his brow with the sleeve of his jumpsuit, the drab gray uniform of every human on the island. With

each strike of the ax, it's as if my dad's crying out. He knows it's our last night together, but somehow, he still thinks of me as his little girl. I wave for him to come in for breakfast, and he acknowledges me with a slight nod and starts gathering the wood.

Inside, Gramps is hunched over the cutting block, deep in a cooking frenzy. His beard and jumpsuit are dusted with flour, and he's chopping up roots faster than the twitches of a natter in the claws of a bloodthirsty doboljack.

"It smells incredible in here," I say, setting the pail of milk inside the cooler box.

Gramps brushes the curls from his tan, watery eyes and offers a brief, crinkly smile.

I savor the familiar aroma of rax cakes and smoky herbs, nostalgic for every moment with family and friends. Dome 1055 in Section 9 is the only real home I've ever known, and after the rite of quell tomorrow, all the turnings with Pop and Gramps will be lost to me. I'm not sure how the Rorve soldiers alter memories, but even my dearest friend, Nayo, will become a stranger, and all my poems and melodies will be forgotten entirely. But it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make. My service to the Rorve will take care of Pop and Gramps for turnings to come, and for that, I'm grateful. I join my sweet Gramps by the fire stove to warm my hands . . . and say goodbye.

He stirs the broth in the steaming pot, and I wrap my arm around his waist, leaning my cheek against his shoulder. Gramps tilts his

head toward me, but when the buzzer echoes through the hills again, he pulls away. We're running behind today, and we can't be late.

Pop lumbers through the doorway and unloads the firewood into the fuel alcove without a word. He rakes his fingers through his shaggy dark-brown hair, ties it back, and plops down onto one of the cubes around the table.

After shedding my coat, I grab the basket of crispcoits from the cutting block. When I lean over to place them on the table, my necklace swings forward. About the size of my thumbnail, the pendant on the long strip of hide is a sphere of blue glass with patches of brown and green, covered with spirals of white clouds. My dad tied it around my neck when I was just three turnings old, and I've worn it ever since.

Pop looks at the pendant with a blank expression, as if searching for an answer, stroking his stubble. His thick brows form a ridge. He doesn't remember giving it to me.

"The world of blue skies and oceans was our home," I remind him, sitting down at the table. I touch my dad's hand. "Earth." The faint blue hologram over my wrist cuff flashes my ID number: 2165.

He pulls his hand away. "We live on Tzoll. This is our home. The Rorve provides for us," he recites. His face muscles twitch. Staring at his own cuff, Pop passes his finger through the hologram repetitively, sometimes his only response at the mention of Earth.

I hide the necklace beneath my undershirt, weave my damp hair into a long side braid, and button my jumpsuit to the collar.

Gramps pours the tea. “It’s almost time to go,” he says, turning around and tossing some chopped dewgrass into the broth.

Pop looks up and nods. His light-brown eyes soften as he cradles the tarnished cup and sips his tea. “You are of age now, Terra,” he says with finality. His tone is almost robotic, and he doesn’t look at me. “Today is your last day at the C.A.M. Academy.”

Pop’s always stating the obvious, repeating what I already know, but it’s not his fault. “We have one more day,” I conclude, biting into a crispuit. The yellow groonberry jam oozes out of the pastry onto my plate.

“After the rite of quell,” Pop continues, “you’ll be trained as a soldier in the Imperial Rorve. This a great honor. Humans have never been granted this opportunity. I . . .” His brow pinches in the middle as if he’s straining to find the words. “I will . . . miss you, Terra Lucca.” He stares at the small round window facing the sea.

“I’ll miss you, too, Pop. Both of you.”

I have to swallow hard to push the bite of crispuit past the lump in my throat. The Rorve has no patience for human emotions here on Grunkk Island, and I’ve always found it difficult to suppress them. That’s why the rite of quell is mandatory at age seventeen. It’s all about control. The Kayta people control the Rorve, and the Rorve regime controls everyone. On Grunkk, humans are actually forbidden to create any type of art. But that doesn’t stop us. Most of the young people ignore the rules in private. We dance by the fire, immortalizing our humanity. It is said that, even after the rite of quell,

the true nature of a human being cannot be removed completely. A tiny spark always remains. I hold on to that hope. Especially now.

The factories sound the second bells in patterns of two.

Gramps pulls the rax cakes from the oven, tosses the roots and moosch into the pot, and covers it. After I blow out all the lanterns and shut down the oil heater in our sanitation closet—finally upgraded with a flusher and shower—Pop tosses another log into the fire stove. And like every chilly morning since I was a child, we slip our matching gray coats over our jumpsuits, put on our brimmed gray caps, and hurry through the door.

It's a quick hike down the grassy hillside to the crowded line of humans heading down the road toward the factories. Pop stops, taking hold of my arm. "Did you lock the door?" he asks.

"I forgot. Go on. I'll catch up with you." I run up the hill. My scuffed gray boots are now soaked in water from all the melted frost on the tall blue grass.

The domes in the residential sections are identical semispheres, constructed with triangular panels and sealed in a thick outer layer that resembles white stone. Each dome is equipped with a lock pad next to the front door. I place my hand on the smooth metal square, and after it scans my palm, a red light appears over the door.

I race down the hill and along the road to find Pop and Gramps.

After the long trek down the hills through the residential sections, we enter the heavily guarded Industrial District by the coast. In the roundabout near the C.A.M. facility, I kiss Pop and Gramps on the

cheek. It's not part of our routine, but I'm worried that after tomorrow, I won't want to do it. I give each of them a hug, too, holding on to my grandpa for so long that he eventually wriggles away.

"We'll be late," he says. "See you tonight, Terra." Gramps turns away, heading up the road toward the Culinary Sector where he'll chop, slice, and cook in one of the canning factories until the last afternoon bells.

"Don't be late," Pop adds, looking back over his shoulder.

"I won't."

Pop works as a glassmaker in the Fabrications Sector. The long sleeves of his uniform hide the scars from when his clothing caught fire several turnings ago. Now he wears a protective fire suit, enduring scorching heat from sunrise to sunset. But he never complains.

"Be careful," I call after him.

He doesn't turn around.

My friend Nayo is waiting for me near the main entrance of the three-level C.A.M. facility. His smooth brown skin and short, curly black hair reflect the orange and violet light of the early-morning suns.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. "Third bells are about to ring. You'll be late."

"I don't know why I'm here. For our last day, I guess."

“You should go. I’ll see you at supper. Gramps made moosch stew and rax cakes.”

“We’ve got one more day.” Nayo wraps his slender arms around me in a firm hug.

I look up into his warm dark-brown eyes. “I’ll see you tonight.”

Third bells buzz through the street speakers in sets of three.

Nayo runs toward the road, pausing to look back. “We’ll bring meat rations.” His chin dimples up with a sweet, boyish grin.

He disappears into a river of humans all dressed in gray.

Nayo is like a brother to me. And even though our history will be forgotten, I take comfort in knowing that he’ll be taken care of. He’s one of the highly gifted humans, trained in biological hibernation mechanics at the prestigious B.H.M. Research Lab. His family gets additional food rations and fuel for his work there. They even have electric lanterns. And one day, Nayo might serve as an officer in the Rorve and have a dome of his very own.

But he’ll never be one of them.

I wait in line for the security check at the entrance to the C.A.M. facility. A hefty soldier of the Rorve guards the glass doors—one of the Kaytas. At close to seven feet tall, the Kaytas’ body and facial features are humanoid, but their skin is covered with fuzzy white hair that’s shorter than an eyelash. They’re not unattractive beings, but their unibrows grow long, just like the hair on their heads, and everyone styles them differently to keep them out of their eyes. This soldier has his brow parted in the middle and braided back on each

side toward his large, pointed ears, and his beard and mustache are woven into three chest-length braids.

The long dark-blue coat of the soldier's Rorve uniform has two rows of black buttons and epaulets on the shoulders; he wears a pointed metal helmet and black knee-high boots. But most notably, he holds a zief over his chest. The blade of the electronic zief glows with a pale-blue iridescent light. It's as sharp as any traditional sword, but with just one tug on the hilt, the zief's blast of firelight would turn my body to ash.

I quickly wave my ID cuff in front of the lock pad beside the door. The soldier glares at me with cold black eyes, and his dark-purple lips curl into a frown. "Get on with it," he says, nudging me with the tip of his zief. When the pad beeps, I place my palm on the metal square, and the door opens. I've been walking through this door for my training and service ever since I was a child. In the beginning, I was so small I had to use a step stool to reach the lock pad.

At the end of a long hallway, I repeat the same ID procedure and enter my team's device lab.

Seated at the corner station, my insanely smart coworker, Mels, is always the first student to clock in and the last one to leave. I've trained with her at the C.A.M. Academy since we were about four and just learning to read and write script. We've never been close friends, but sometimes she'd hike up to the ridge with Nayo and me, and she'd join us for supper. And every turning, no matter how much snow, she'd come to my dome to help me bake rax cakes for the

Academy's worzen banquet. But lately, she hasn't been accepting my invitations, instead just talking about how she'll have me over to her dome when her dad gets promoted and they move into the upper-class residential section where all the Kaytas live. Like that's ever going happen.

"Hey, Mels," I say, hurrying by.

"Morning, Terra." She looks up from her viewing screen and tucks her long blond hair behind her petite shoulders. Her flawless skin may even be whiter than mine.

My dad and grandpa both have light-brown eyes and beautiful tan complexions, but my coloring is more like pink snow. Nayo says that I probably get my pale skin and green eyes from my mother, and I know he's right. The Rorve told us that she died when I was a baby, but I remember her. Just flashes of red hair under a blue sky.

I head down the center aisle to Table 13 and take my place at Station 4. My viewing screen lights up when I turn on the device. I'm going to miss my work here, even though it doesn't compare to the rush of composing a song. But still, I'm grateful. Some of the young humans on Grunkk aren't as lucky as Nayo and I are. I have only a vague recollection of it, but when we were kids, we were tested at the Rorve's Quell Center out at their headquarters on Merralte Island. Our scans classified us for the tech and science units.

Apparently, I was born with a creative ability that's useful in developing what's called environment script. The Rorve not only execute mind modifications but they download the memories of

humans and other interesting beings into a massive database and archive. They use that data to create their most lucrative source of entertainment, Ech-o-Life, a lifelike experience in a virtual world indistinguishable from the real thing. My specialty at C.A.M.—which stands for cognition archive mechanics—is in writing script for the Ech-o-Life virtual Earth. With just two shapes—a circle and a square—we're able to render the virtual worlds. I take the recorded engrams of human memories, process the letter sequence of life code and particle code, and write the script that builds the components for the environments.

After my team completes this work, the data goes to the V.L.E. Department where the virtual life engineers build the environments. They also create what are technically called bio-echoes of consciousness from the recorded memories. The Rorve rents the echoes in the Ech-o-Life complex on Merralte Island. Earth echoes are the most expensive. The Kayta tourists and soldiers of the Rorve, fitted with sensor helmets, are able to live human lives in the virtual Earth. When they take long vacations in Ech-o-Life, their bodies are stored in hiberchambers. I'm told that the Rorve has been accumulating echoes for over a thousand turnings and more than ten generations of human lives are stored within the archives. I just wish that I could go inside Ech-o-Life to see the finished product, experience Earth or some other world. One day, when I'm a vested soldier of the Rorve, I may see it for myself.

The day seems to drag on. Endless shapes and letter sequences crowd my head. I squint at the skeletal wireframes on my viewing screen, trying to visualize the organic shapes that will become part of the Ech-o-Life Earth world, rich with sights, scents, sounds, tastes, and textures. I spent the entire afternoon writing script from the engrams of a favorite Earth food. Something called chocolate ice cream, where the bio-echoes' visceral pleasure registered a staggering ten out of ten on the taste spectrum. All this script for virtual food is making me hungry for my grandpa's rax cakes.

Staring at the timepiece on my viewing screen, I save my data just as the last afternoon bells buzz through all the speakers.

I hurry home, knowing that if I beat Pop and Gramps, I can go up to the ridge to pick starblossoms and watch the suns set. It's my favorite place to compose lyrics. The red light on our dome is still glowing over the door, a sign that I've beaten them home.

At the back of our dome, I open our storage bin and grab the hiking stick that I made out of a slender tree branch. I keep my scroll of poems and a piece of charcoal inside the deep, hollowed-out hole hidden by a chunk of moss.

I climb the hillside toward the ridge.

Beyond two rows of domes, the Section 9 milk grindts graze in the pasture under the leafy blue branches of the giant splendor trees. Our grindt, Cilla, trots up to the fence on legs as hefty as tree trunks, causing ground tremors and ripples in the mud puddles. She extends her wrinkly gray neck over the sharp rails. The black hair that grows

between her floppy ears and down her back tickles my face as her massive head nuzzles me. I kiss the small white horn over her nose. “I’ll see you in a bit,” I say, hiking up the hill.

At the top of the ridge, the jutting white-and-lavender rock face sparkles against the deep-green sky, picking up the colors of the pale-orange sun and the bright violet of our satellite sun, the nusnoon. The Rorve told us that the two giant nusnooms orbiting planet Tzoll draw power from our solar system’s tiny sun to provide ample light and warmth for our planet, but I’ve never thought of them as artificial satellites. One rises and sets with our sun, and at dusk, the night nusnoon ascends, glowing with its soft violet light. And during the season of worzen, when Grunkk Island freezes over, the nusnooms’ violet glow on all the snow and ice is really something to see.

I take in the fresh air and panoramic view of the gentle blue hills and the vast green sea beyond the smoke lines from the factories.

There are only a few withered starblossoms where I usually sit, so I hike north along the rocky ridge, humming a new tune. A shaded alcove is loaded with a patch of the white, star-shaped blossoms, and while plucking one of the long blue stems, I get the chills. I’m struck with a haunting remembrance. I was doing this very same thing with my dad when I was a child, singing a melody in this alcove at the same time of day. I think I’ve even had a dream about it.

I drop the blossoms.

At the base of the boulder, partly obscured under pale-blue moss, there’s something carved into the stone. I scrape the moss from the

surface, revealing the letters of my name. And then I remember. I dig a hole in the damp soil, and about a foot under the surface, I find a metal box. I yank it from the ground and pry open the top. Inside, a letter is wrapped in a piece of soiled cloth.

My darling Terra,

If you find this letter, it means that you haven't yet suffered the horrors of the quell. One of the soldiers here warned me of its effects and how I'll forget our life together. I write this letter in haste, as the Rorve will be coming for us within the hour. We'll bury it together in the starblossom patch where I carved your name. It's my hope that you'll read it one day and help us before it's too late.

Gramps and I have been with you in this nightmarish world for nearly six weeks, and the only escape from the Rorve is death. Humans have tried and failed, and I won't risk your life. Later today, we'll be taken to Merralte Island where we'll be screened for aptitudes and the adults will undergo the quell. I'm told that the Rorve will take most of our memories of Earth, but that the children won't be fully modified until their seventeenth year, and for that, I'm thankful. But after tomorrow, even though Gramps and I will remember our language and identities, we won't remember where we're from. I made the Earth necklace for you to help us remember. The Rorve will implant your name and face in my mind, and I'll be programed to nurture and provide for you.

I will do this with all my heart, but no matter what I tell you, no matter what lies the Rorve conjures up to change the truth, know this: when we were taken from Earth, your mother was alive.

It was the summer of 2035, and you had just turned three years old. We were about to open our show in Bloomington, Indiana, when our entire theater company was attacked. But your mother wasn't with us. She had driven into town to see a doctor. She was pregnant, Terra. You may have a brother or sister.

I've gone to every dome on Grunkk to find her. She isn't here. If you can somehow manage to avoid your quelling and gain access to the Rorve's hoverships and startunnels, you could travel to Earth to find her. You'll be free. Do this for me, Terra. Gramps and I will have long since had our tracking devices implanted. We will not be able to leave Tzoll undetected, and removal of the tracker is fatal. If you can't go back to Earth, find my echoes and bring them back to me, and do the same for Gramps, so that we can remember when we were a family. Your mother's name is Alana Quinn Lucca. We lived at Gramps's house in San Francisco, California, at 4560 Lombard Street. Her cell was 555-353-0377. She has your green eyes and dark-auburn hair. We all love her so much. Find her, my sweet Terra, and live well.

All my love,

Pop

I hold the letter to my chest, and if I hadn't been so afraid to show my feelings all my life, I'm sure I'd be able to do what all humans would do in a moment like this: cry. My colleagues have written script for it, evident in thousands of human memories when people are either overjoyed or heartbroken. But my eyes are dry. The Rorve may have dulled that capability for the time being, but they made me strong. I place the letter inside the box and bury it. If the Rorve were to find it, we would all be killed for treason.

I jot down a few lines on my scroll.

*No tears for the strangers—
The mother and sister lost to me,
Or the brother who dreams,
With blue sky echoes,
Adrift on an earthly sea.*

I stuff my scroll inside the branch, gather the starblossoms, and head down the hillside, trying to imagine the face of a boy who looks like me.

At our dome, I hide my walking stick in the storage bin behind all the rods, shovels, and hunting traps.

Inside, Pop and Gramps unfold the extensions on the table, unstack the cube chairs, and fold the beds up into the walls to create more space.

I place the starblossoms in a canning jar and center it on the table.

When the first set of evening bells buzz, we wait for Nayo and his family to arrive.

My dad is like a different person to me now. His words in the letter, so passionate and tender, are so unlike the tepid voice of the dutiful man I grew up with. He said that back on Earth, our family had been separated while we were on tour with a theater company. If Pop and Gramps were performers, after their memories were downloaded, they would have been programmed for standard vocations. The Rorve has no need for human entertainers on Grunkk.

The door buzzer beeps, and I let Nayo and his family inside.

His mom, dad, and little sister, Kali, have the same lovely brown skin and curly black hair as Nayo. I've known Nayo and his parents nearly all my life, and Kali was born on Grunkk about five turnings ago. She's what's known as an Only, as in she's *only* lived on Tzoll. Anyone who wasn't born on Tzoll is called a Crouture. Such a brutal name for all of us human transplants.

Kali giggles, cuddling what I'm assuming is the cured meat wrapped in paper. "Here, Grandpa Lucca," she says, handing him the package. "It's Mama's good meat."

"Thank you, Kali." Gramps nods and smiles at her parents.

"Keep it in the cooler box," Nayo's mom says, hanging her coat on a hook by the door. Nayo looks like his mother—a delicate nose, rounded cheeks, and large dark-brown eyes. Her tight curls are always pinned up. His dad has cropped hair, greenish-brown irises, and a broader, more masculine face.

Nayo's family receives extra rations, and they've always been incredibly generous with my family. "How many times have you shared your meat with us?" I ask Nayo, smiling.

He wraps his long arms around me. "Not enough."

Even though Nayo's almost a full turning younger than I am, I have to look up at him. He's tall for his age, almost six feet. He's been promoted to the cadet training program early because of his advanced skills in bio-hibernation mechanics, a field that's in high demand in the Rorve's military.

Nayo kneels, and Kali climbs onto his back. Her black ringlets bounce against her little gray jumpsuit as Nayo gallops around the room. "The fastest grindt on Grunkk." Kali laughs. Her round cheeks and bright smile are just like Nayo's. Pretty soon, Nayo won't remember his time with her, but Kali will remember it, and it will be hard for her when the quell changes him.

Pop seems to brighten and forget all about the occasion for the feast. We're not celebrating. We're saying goodbye.

After all the stew and rax cakes are gone, we eat handfuls of groonberries with sweet grindt cream, my favorite treat. When the third evening bells buzz, I stand by the door with Nayo's family. Their warm eyes are telling me that they'll still love me, even if I can't remember them. "Good night," they all chime as Nayo carries a sleepy Kali out the door.

We clean up the plates and fold down the beds, and once I'm under the covers, Pop sits on the edge of my bed. He leans over and kisses my forehead, and I wrap my arms around him.

"I won't forget, Pop," I whisper.

"I will love you just the same," he says. That tiny spark of his human heart just shined through.

Gramps is almost stomping his foot, waiting his turn. "You *will* remember our dome number and recognize our faces. On Family Day, come home and I'll make your favorite." He leans over for a hug, and this time, he doesn't let go first.

I lie in bed, staring at the small round window of our dome, now glowing with the violet light of the night nusnoon. Will I still have the same favorites after tomorrow? The words in Pop's letter repeat in my head, a voice that will soon be silenced. If I undergo the quell, I won't remember his letter and my mom will be lost to us for good. I can't let that happen. In the morning, after I clock in at C.A.M., I'll find a way to ditch the recruiters and escape into the woods. I'll probably be caught . . . or killed, but I won't let the Rorve take my memories without a fight.