

THE PERENNIAL PROJECT

THE FUTURE HAPPENS TWICE



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*As a race, we survive on
planet Earth purely by
geological consent.*

— Bill McGuire

Chapter 1

TODAY THEY WOULD learn the Truth. The Truth, like everything else, was well documented and would be told according to the book. The Truth even had its own section and heading number at the top of page 6,484 and simply read *Phase III: The Truth*. Everything was done according to the book, and Phase III would be no exception. Of course there had been some minor deviations over the years, a small hiccup here and there, but the book with its precisely formulated milestones had always managed to keep the project neatly in line. Revealing the Truth was always seen as one of the most crucial phases of the project, and a few worried that it might jeopardize years of hard work. But today meant the start of Phase III, and at last the Truth would be revealed...

Julara, as usual, was the last to open her present. It had always been like that, at least for the past thirteen years. It was clear from an early age that Julara was the most emotional of the four children, and that she would have most difficulty accepting the Truth. Conditioning, therefore, had begun at an early age. Julara would have to learn how to wait, but more importantly she would have to learn acceptance. No one knew exactly how Julara would react to the Truth, but the best had been done to prepare her. The progress over the years had been quite good, but now, even on the brink of adulthood, there were still signs of the anxious child. Julara knew that paper was precious. Although excited, she carefully peeled away the bright ribbons, taking care not to tear the wrapping paper beneath. Andrew and Ellora smiled at each other; they appeared proud of their four children. For them, revealing the Truth would be no easy task, either; but they too had been well prepared.

The date on starship *Perennial* was August 25, 44120, and today the four children were celebrating their sixteenth birthdays. Much had changed over

the centuries, but the giving and receiving of birthday presents remained a cherished act. Each year there had been a birthday cake with candles—nothing fancy, but there again the children didn't know any different. For them it seemed enough to have one day together where they could celebrate the passing of yet another year on the starship. In fact, the scene had been much the same for the last thirteen years, only with the four children gradually changing with each birthday. At first they were just four innocent three year olds, unaware of their surroundings and the complex life that lay ahead of them; but now at the age of sixteen, and bordering on adulthood, they were considered ready for the Truth. In stark contrast, the children's parents never celebrated their birthdays. It had once been a topic of hot discussion, but Andrew—being Andrew—just awkwardly joked that they were too old, and anyway birthday cakes were a luxury that should be reserved for the children!

Each year after Ellora had cut the cake, Andrew would give a short speech. He would normally praise the children for the progress they had made over the last twelve months, and for the way they had worked together as a team. During their teenage years he had started to give more background information about their voyage, and although the children were constantly learning about their mission, their birthdays were commonly reserved for that extra snippet of information—in fact, the Truth had been in preparation for the last thirteen years already, yet the children were never aware of it.

As with previous birthdays, the crew was gathered in the Lounge, the largest room on *Perennial*. It had three large oval-shaped windows, where the crew could view the vast expanse of the universe. A large metal table dominated the center of the Lounge. It was often used for status meetings, but today it was the focal point of the birthday celebration. Andrew rose slowly. When he walked to the end of the table, the children knew that this was his cue to speak. They gradually lowered their voices.

"My dear children," he began. "Once again it is time to celebrate your birthdays, and of all the places in the universe that we could have chosen to celebrate this special day, we have chosen our very own Lounge." Andrew's voice sounded rather monotone. He was of medium height and weight, and wore a one-piece dark blue tunic that was fastened at the middle.

Julara's eyes sparkled as she smiled at her father. Every year, for so long as she could remember, he'd started with those very same lines. The children loved their father for his sometimes bizarre sense of humor, but now during their adolescence found it rather annoying at times. Today, however, was special and Julara felt only a deep admiration for her father.

"And this year," Andrew continued, "we have a very special birthday to celebrate. This year you have all turned sixteen. Each and every one of you has become an adult, and as with all previous birthday parties we are ready to share some new information with you. Only this year what we have to share with you is of an adult nature."

The children smiled at each other. Julara covered her mouth as she felt herself starting to giggle. They had sometimes wondered why their parents had been shy about nudity and explaining explicit sexual details. Perhaps now was the moment? Andrew's face, however, remained serious, almost solemn.

"As you all know, we're on a quest to find a new planet—a new home. Our own planet, Earth, remained under serious threat when we embarked on this mission, and as I speak right now might have even ceased to exist. For the last sixteen years you've lived a very isolated life, confined within the walls of this starship, but let me remind you that as founders of the new colony you are in a very privileged position."

Four pairs of eyes remained focused on their father. The teenagers felt proud to be treated as young adults; but at the same time Julara experienced a sense of nervousness.

Andrew continued slowly, hesitating with each word. "However, what I am about to tell you will spoil your party. There's something that we have to share with you. You are now sixteen, and we are confident that as young adults you are old enough to understand what we are about to tell you."

Julara glanced at Gilvan, one of her brothers, whose mood had changed as well. Their father sounded heavy and serious. This was not about something trivial, such as their sexual awareness, she realized, but something much more fundamental to their life on the starship.

"First of all," Andrew said, "there are a couple of things that I'd like to explain in detail. The first is the speed of this ship, and the second is the distance to our target planet. There's no easy way to say this, but actually, the information we originally told you is incorrect."

Julara's dark blue eyes met with her father. "The information is incorrect?" she muttered.

"Yes, that's right. The information is incorrect." Andrew lowered his head momentarily, looking almost ashamed.

Gilvan spoke next. "You mean you made some type of miscalculation?"

"No," Andrew said, "there were a number of things that we couldn't tell you in all detail before today, because you were just too young."

"Too young?" Julara repeated, looking hurt. "You mean that you lied to us?"

Like the other teenagers, Julara was tall and strong, and although emotional at times, she was an ambitious, self-confident young woman. Rarely did she show anger toward her parents, but the way her father was speaking now made her feel insecure—never in her life had she been lied to. There had always been trust among them, something of vital importance on the starship.

Andrew moved toward Julara. He placed his arm around her shoulder, but it was her mother, Ellora, who spoke next.

She chose her words carefully. "We didn't want to lie to you, but as your father pointed out, you were just too young to understand all of the consequences."

Julara's mind was racing. Why would she have been too young? Today she had turned sixteen, but even as a young teenager she would have been able to understand such complex issues. She traded a look with her sister, Sabelle, and then shifted her eyes back to her mother. "What exactly do you mean by all of the consequences?"

Ellora fell silent again and let her husband continue.

"I'll come to that in a minute," Andrew said calmly, returning to his place at the end of the table. "But first I want to tell you more about the speed of our starship. It's much slower than we told you in the past."

"It's not half the speed of light?" Sabelle asked in disbelief.

"No, it is not. As a matter of fact, it's only 600 kilometers per second. It's the maximum velocity that the engineers could achieve at the time of our departure."

For a few seconds everyone remained silent. Only the distant humming of the ship's engines could be heard from behind the ship's main bulkhead. 600 kps: that seemed really slow for their ship to travel among the stars. How could a starship be so slow?

Sabelle smiled faintly, not sure whether to believe her father or not. Maybe this was one of his weird jokes, but surely not on their sixteenth birthday, and surely not of such a serious nature.

"But Dad," she probed, "you told us we're going to reach the planet in two years?"

"Indeed we will." Andrew nodded at her. "Indeed we will," he repeated.

This sounded reassuring. For a brief moment Julara relaxed. They would see the planet as promised—and within the next two years.

Of the four children, Gilvan was by far the smartest when it came to figures. His favorite classes included calculus, geometry, and physics. Andrew had expected him to speak next.

"This means," Gilvan said with a frown, "that the ship cannot have left Earth eighteen years ago, as you've always told us."

"That's right."

Gilvan didn't need much time to do the rough arithmetic, but announcing the result seemed much more difficult, because he simply couldn't believe it. Julara noticed the worried look on his face.

For a time no one spoke.

Julara's mind drifted as she glanced around the Lounge. The candles on their cake were still burning. They hadn't made their wishes yet, but nobody felt in the mood anymore. Their starship was traveling much slower than they had ever believed. Their birthday had taken a strange turn. Julara was still waiting to hear about the *consequences* her father had mentioned a few minutes ago.

Ellora stepped next to Andrew. "We will now illustrate how this journey became possible, how our starship is in fact able to cross great distances," she said, her feminine voice bringing a certain calm to the situation.

Andrew observed the four children before he continued. "We've told you how babies develop inside a woman's body."

Julara nodded in acknowledgement. She wanted to become a doctor and already knew a lot about pregnancy. In theory she already knew how to deliver a child, something she'd practiced on a number of occasions in the Virtual Environment Compartment. She could also use the ship's enormous Knowledge Pool stored in the main computer system. It comprised more or less everything that human civilization had learned during its existence. The plan was to start the colony based on this level of wisdom. The database

contained plenty of material on pregnancies and babies—something Julara always found fascinating.

"You've also been told about the process of in vitro fertilization," Andrew went on. "An embryo can be conceived in a test tube outside of a woman's body. The embryo can then be frozen using a technique called cryopreservation. Some time later the human embryos can be thawed and allowed to develop in a normal way." Andrew paused for a moment waiting for a reaction as he glanced around the room. "You see, due to the speed of our ship and the nature of our journey, there was no choice but to freeze—"

Julara interrupted him harshly. "We were *frozen*?"

This time Andrew managed to stare the children directly in the face as he disclosed another part of the Truth. "Yes, Julara, you were frozen."

"All of us?"

"Yes, all of you."

By now the party mood had completely vanished. Julara was simply appalled by what she'd just heard. So many questions were flashing through her mind. Why was their starship flying much slower? Why had their embryos been frozen? And above all, how could her parents allow something like that to happen? Never before during her short life on the starship had she experienced anything like this.

"But how long, just how long has our journey been so far?" Julara asked, stumbling over her words. "Get to the point!"

"Please bear with me one moment," Andrew said, ignoring Julara's impatience. "As I said, we also need to talk about how far this ship must travel."

He put one hand in his pockets and strode toward one of the large oval windows. When he again had the full attention of the crew, he continued with his explanation. "As you all know the distance between stars is enormous. The closest star to Earth's sun is Alpha Proxima. It's already more than four light years away. Unfortunately, it doesn't have any orbiting planets. It's

part of a triple star system, unfavorable for sustaining life. Some other stars, however, do have planets. They were first discovered in the late twentieth century, but most of them have huge giant planets like Jupiter—not inhabitable at all—far too close to their suns."

Andrew was still standing close to the window filled with myriads of stars. With his left arm he was pointing outside.

Julara looked fretful. Why was her father avoiding the answer about the duration of the journey? Andrew met her angry stare. He was getting closer to the Truth. Take it step by step, the Project Manual stated.

"It took science some decades to discover the first smaller Earth-like planets orbiting other stars. One of the closest and most promising is Acantarius. We already told you it's orbiting our destination star Omega Altaris."

Acantarius—the promised planet, Julara thought. They would reach it in two years, her father had said earlier; they would be able to leave the ship.

Andrew raised his voice, saying, "The Omega Altaris star is eighty-two light years away from the Sun."

The four teenagers stared at their father, completely speechless. Everybody tried to analyze what this meant. Not only did the ship fly more slowly, it also had to cross a far greater distance.

"Eighty-two light years..." Sabelle faltered. This sounded like an incredible number. Like the others she felt totally stunned. Here was another lie!

Julara clenched both her hands. "Dad, you told us that we have to travel *eight* light years."

Her father looked into her blue eyes. "It wasn't true, Julara. I am deeply sorry, but again, we will reach Acantarius in two years. Still, you have to realize that this ship set out from Earth a long time ago. A very long time ago."

Julara became very alarmed by her father's apology. Gilvan, in his mind, was already calculating. He looked paralyzed, unable to speak.

So Andrew told them. "Our journey started 42,000 years ago."

There was a period of forced silence. The young crew looked at each other in shock. Nobody was able to move or speak for some time. The manual predicted that the Truth would be difficult to accept.

Julara tried to recover herself. "*42,000 years...*" She let out a loud gasp. "I just don't believe it!" She sprang to her feet, blood rushing into her irate face. "Dad, no ship can travel that long." Her mind was churning as she slowly trudged toward the windows. Ellora approached her and put an arm on her shoulder, her daughter already taller than her.

"But it is true," Ellora said softly, "and we expected that you'd be furious. You have every right to be."

Julara spun around, staring down at her mother. "I'm...extremely furious. Furious at this nonsense!" She withdrew from her mother's touch. "It can't be right," she said desperately. "Tell me this is just one of Dad's bad jokes."

"Julara, if you look at the speed and distance, it must be true," Gilvan said, his eyes showing resignation. The arithmetic was on his side. His brother, Ronyo, supported him with a short nod.

"I don't want it to be true," she retorted, directing her anger at both her brothers.

When she took her seat again, she felt like taking a plate from the table and throwing it against the wall. But everything on this ship was so precious, and her education had taught her to control her feelings. So Julara did not throw the plate; instead she blew out the candles and finally made her secret wish. *Don't let this be true, please!*

Gilvan turned his head toward her. "If you divide the distance by the velocity, you—"

"No!" Julara snapped. She drew breath, glaring at him. "I don't care about your formulas, Gilvan. We've been told this ship left Earth eighteen years ago. We were born on *Perennial* two years after departure. No ship with a crew on board can travel for thousands of years."

Sabelle said, "42,000 years seems such a long time—an eternity, really."

Thinking about the implications, Gilvan addressed his father. "This means that you were born on the ship as well. You've always told us that you have actually seen Earth."

"Is this another one of your damn lies?" Julara asked, her lips quivering. "I'm very disappointed in you."

"There's something else..." Andrew's voice sounded oddly calm, as if nothing had happened. "We expect you to be even more upset and hurt; but we also have great faith in you. All of you are very strong and can face up to this."

He studied the teenagers with an impassive face. Moving toward the Truth. Step by step.

"Given the real duration of our voyage," Andrew said, "you might assume that we are traveling on a generation starship, yet this wasn't the choice of this ship's builders. Your grandparents indeed lived on Earth."

Again Julara was puzzled. Grandparents? She understood the concept of a generation starship. They had talked about it in one of their engineering classes. It meant dozens of generations of humans living and dying on the same ship. Was *Perennial* that kind of ship? But her father had just ruled it out altogether. Their vessel wasn't a generation starship. Suddenly a terrible thought hit her: the embryos!

She gave her father a blank stare. "The technique of cryopreservation?"

Andrew nodded. "As I already said, you were all stored as frozen embryos before this journey began. That way you could travel for thousands of years."

After being quiet for the last ten minutes, Ronyo spoke next. "But Dad, this means that the both of you were frozen too. Who raised you, if this isn't a generation starship?"

Ellora selected a soft and gentle voice. The book had given her the duty of disclosing the last and most disturbing element of the Truth; somehow the expectation was that it would be less traumatic when told by a woman.

(...)

Go to www.meet-matt-browne.com and learn more about the book or email me at meet.matt.browne@gmail.com