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Kristine Kathryn Rusch: Echea

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I can close my eyes and she appears in my mind as she did the moment I first saw her: tiny, fragile, with unnaturally pale skin and slanted chocolate eyes. Her hair was white as the moon on a cloudless evening. It seemed, that day, that her eyes were the only spot of color on her haggard little face. She was seven, but she looked three.

And she acted like nothing we had ever encountered before.

Or since.

We had three children and a good life. We were not impulsive, but we did feel as if we had something to give. Our home was large, and we had money; any child would benefit from that.

It seemed to be for the best.

It all started with the brochures. We saw them first at an outdoor café near our home. We were having lunch when we glimpsed floating dots of color, a fleeting child's face. Both my husband and I touched them only to have the displays open before us:

The blank vista of the Moon, the Earth over the horizon like a giant blue and white ball, a looming presence, pristine and healthy and somehow guilt-ridden. The Moon itself looked barren, as it always had, until one focused. And then one saw the pockmarks, the shattered dome open to the stars. In the corner of the first brochure I opened, at the very edge of the reproduction, were blood-splotches. They were scattered on the craters and boulders, and had left fist-sized holes in the dust. I didn't need to be told what had caused it. We saw the effects of high velocity rifles in low gravity every time we downloaded the news.

The brochures began with the Moon, and ended with the faces of refugees: pallid, worn, defeated. The passenger shuttles to Earth had pretty much stopped. At first, those who could pay came here, but by the time we got our brochures, Earth passage had changed. Only those with living relatives were able to return. Living relatives who were willing to acknowledge the relationship—and had official hard copy to prove it.

The rules were waived in the case of children, of orphans and of underage war refugees. They were allowed to come to Earth if their bodies could tolerate it, if they were willing to be adopted, and if they were willing to renounce any claims they had to Moon land.

They had to renounce the stars in order to have a home.

We picked her up in Sioux Falls, the nearest star shuttle stop and detention center to our home. The shuttle stop was a desolate place. It was designed as an embarkation point for political prisoners and for star soldiers. It was built on the rolling prairie, a sprawling complex with laser fences shimmering in the sunlight. Guards stood at every entrance, and several hovered above. We were led, by men with laser rifles, into the main compound, a building finished almost a century before, made of concrete and steel, functional, cold, and ancient. Its halls smelled musty. The concrete flaked, covering everything with a fine gray dust.

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