

## **Dirge in D Minor**

**by J.L. Delozier**

Isra tucked the violin under her chin and mourned her confinement on the dark, terraformed land. The bow slid over the worn strings; music flowed over the rocky cliff on which she stood and soared into the outpost's burgundy sky, lit only by a pair of distant moons. Her latest composition, an ode to their binary presence, rewarded the moons for their pale light, ghostly as it was. They were a luminous constant in the otherwise chaotic new world. For twenty years past, their haloed beauty had been her only companion, excepting her violin. A frigid gust penetrated her tattered Mylar jumpsuit and made her shudder. The bow stuttered on the strings. The melody screeched to a discordant halt.

Delphinus Minor had bloomed with beauty once, a beauty as astonishing as it was deadly. A superbloom, to be exact—the same phenomenon which periodically vivified Earth's deserts. A sprinkle of water, and bam—instant oasis. In retrospect, her fellow colonists, with their embarrassment of scientific degrees, should have predicted the presence of alien seeds, spores, bacteria, and fungi awaiting suitable conditions to

resurrect them from dormancy. The agro biologists had chosen the planet specifically because it had once held a proper atmosphere and an abundance of water, the elixir of life. How arrogant of them to assume life had simply disappeared.

After the success of a small-scale model on Mars, the remote outpost became the first of its kind, entirely self-sufficient and capable of holding a city-sized population for perpetuity. They'd dubbed it "The Colony" with a capital "C," as if it were Earth's premier celestial suburb. Prepped by Isra's team, The Colony was supposed to welcome the initial wave of permanent settlers within fifty years.

The scientists began the process of recreating the planet's atmosphere; she'd designed and built the dome. Together, they'd amended the soil within the dome's warm, curved walls and doused the ground with water. They'd planned to grow crops, fancied themselves simple farmers, like the pioneers of the American Old West. Learned men and women, acting like a god in which none of them believed. The bloom appeared overnight. Her colleagues were dead within a week. The cosmos made them pay for their hubris, but Isra suffered most. She survived.

The moonbeams flickered, and Isra dropped her bow. Heart racing, she rubbed the grit from her eyes. The flickering continued. She fumbled with the transmitter imbedded in her wrist, finally managing to pulse a signal to The Colony's tower. The tower responded with a cheerful burble, spewing the same electronic message it had auto-broadcasted twice a day since the bloom.

The transmission was more than just a cry for help; it held a warning. Delphinus Minor was just the first of many Colony projects slated for development, each one larger than the last. There was an urgent lesson to be learned. She was the unlucky messenger. Why else would she have been spared?

She remembered the bloated bodies of the dead, grotesquely disfigured by microscopic flesh-eating organisms that made short work of her team. The Colony was built with a dome at its central hub and individual living pods radiating outward like spokes on a wheel. As the chief engineer, she'd been given the privilege to choose her own pod; as an introvert, she'd chosen the one farthest away. She rarely left. When she did venture through the air locks after a week of solitude, the dome was in full bloom.

The captain saved her life. Isra had stood outside the first of the airlock's dual doors and gaped at the alien foliage. Biofluorescent blue fronds swayed in the dome's artificial breeze. Long tendrils sprouted from orange-petaled flowers, their finger-like projections writhing on the ground, ready to ensnare anything unlucky enough to wander within reach. Familiar yet alien. Lovely but deadly. The door had been sealed, overridden by the captain's activation of the emergency operations plan. A handwritten note scrawled in red marker was taped to its surface. The jagged letters had bled down the glass, dripping with condensation from the unexpected bloom. *DON'T*. She'd staggered back to her pod, accessed the security cameras, and sent screenshots of the dead and the flowers and the note back home. *DON'T*.

She'd returned to the dome only once, a year later, to confirm that the emergency program had done its job. The condensation had evaporated with the artificial atmosphere, stripped through vents in the structure's retractable roof. Stricken of warmth and water, the plant life had withered away, leaving no evidence of its once florid presence. If not for the bones of the dead, still dressed in standard-issue Colony clothing, the scene would have seemed peaceful, expectant, with the ground plowed and fallow,

awaiting its next sprinkling of seed. But Isra knew better. An atmosphere was forming on Delphinus Minor, a process she had no idea how to abort. Already wisps of clouds lightened the burgundy sky, and the air, though cold and thin, was now safe to breathe. Soon it would rain. And then it would bloom.

The moons twinkled again, and she imagined a spacecraft plucking her message from within their tightly-held orbits. She didn't know what passed in front of the moons from time to time, dimming their light for a few seconds or less. Her logical left brain assumed an asteroid or a random chunk of debris—garbage left floating in space like the plastic in Earth's oceans. But deep within her right brain, buried in the darkness like the dormant seeds of Delphinus Minor, nested a kernel of hope. The slightest aberrancy, a mere flicker of light, and hope bloomed. Two decades ago, she'd sent her first SOS across ninety-seven light years toward home, informing them she was alone. And every day since, she'd waited for a sign.

The moonbeams steadied, and the fragile blossom of hope shriveled. With a sigh, Isra retrieved her bow from the rocky soil and brushed it clean, cursing her carelessness. The replicators could print a new one, of course,

but no machine could duplicate the sheen of aged pernambuco wood, the distinct scent of layered wax, or the perfect tension her grandmother had achieved by knotting each strand of horsehair by hand. Her peers had derived a great deal of amusement from her choice of personal item to bring to The Colony—everyone was allowed just one—but she had no regrets. Now that so many years had passed, she saw her grandmother's face reflected in the wood, and it reminded her of home.

The bow appeared unharmed, and she stroked its familiar surface, triggering a nostalgic flood of memories. She swiped her palm over her damp eyes and raised the violin to her cheek. The old Russian folk song, a melancholy dirge disguised as a prayer, had been her grandmother's favorite. Isra closed her eyes, turned her face toward the sky, and ran the quivering bow over the strings. The bass chords seemed to sink in the intense gravity, plummeting to the ground like the meteorites which peppered the landscape with ominous regularity. But the high notes floated, drifting listlessly through the stratosphere like volcanic ash. Perhaps someday, before the rain began to fall, someone would hear them. And maybe they'd come to take her home.

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