

dark star calling

**JULIA
KELLER**



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and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the
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DARK STAR CALLING

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PROLOGUE

TIME: 2297

A year has passed since the Intercept rose from the dead—not the complete Intercept, that is, but only bits and pieces of it, a motley montage of broken-off code and partial data and interrupted algorithms. The technology was still capable of harvesting emotions via a chip embedded in the crook of the left elbow of every citizen, but only from a few people at a time. Not from the entire civilization as it once did.

Now even the mini-Intercept is dead.

New Earth is free again.

But freedom has a price. A deadly crisis looms, and this time, New Earth is on its own. There is no Intercept to save the day. No Intercept to keep the peace. No Intercept to scoop up and file away feelings, and then deploy those feelings as weapons when people misbehave.

A world without the Intercept is a world of wild uncertainty, a world ruled by passion and by the vivid potential for catastrophe.

A world where anything can happen.

And usually does.

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PART ONE

Searching the Skies



1

The Robot Who Loves Knock-Knock Jokes

Star number 76.435.7863.”
“Negative.”

“Star number 76.435.7864.”

“Negative.”

“Star number 76.435.7865.”

“Negative.”

“Star number 76.435.7866.”

“Negative. Hey, Rez, I’m totally, *totally* starving. How about a lunch break?”

Rez looked up from his computer screen, scowling in the direction from where the remark had come. His scowl was deep and deliberately prolonged—even though it would, he knew, have absolutely zero impact on its intended target.

Not because that intended target was a robot. Robots were fully capable of reading human facial expressions and deducing the emotions generating them, and then initiating the appropriate behavioral change.

No, the scowl was a total waste of time for another reason:

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Because this particular robot wasn't about to change *anything*. He was not like other robots. He was not earnest and dutiful. He was not devoted exclusively to service and obedience.

This robot was a rascal. A joker. A screwup. A show-off.

If Rez had had his way, he would've traded in the AstroRob—short for Astronomy Robot—for another. But he couldn't. He had pulled this one out of the scrap heap and, when nobody was looking, put him to work for an off-label use. He needed to keep that fact as quiet as possible. Requesting an AstroRob through regular channels might have caused some nosy supply clerk in NESAs—New Earth Science Authority—to get a little too curious about why it was that eighteen-year-old NESAs director and chief technologist Steven J. Reznik needed an AstroRob in the first place, being as how the director's job was largely bureaucratic.

"Largely bureaucratic" was another way of saying that Rez spent his days approving *other* peoples' projects. Signing off on *other* peoples' requests for AstroRobs and BioRobs and TechRobs and ReadyRobs and other essential equipment.

Not doing his *own* project.

Yet that's exactly what Rez was up to—privately, that is. Under the table. His actions weren't specifically illegal, but they were . . . highly irregular. For the past three months, he'd been coming here on his nights off, first checking the roster to make sure nobody else had scheduled time on the telescope for the next chunk of hours—and then going to work.

His only companion on these secret shifts was the misfit AstroRob, an orphan from a long-shut-down project in the Dark Matter lab. An AstroRob that nobody missed because, frankly, he had been such an annoying little twerp to begin with.

But Rez needed an extra hand. So he was forced to endure

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the robot's completely infuriating and wildly inappropriate sense of humor.

Or what passed for a sense of humor.

A few weeks ago, he had nicknamed this robot "Mickey." He'd remembered, from his Old Earth History and Culture class, an animated character back in the twentieth century whose name—Mickey Mouse—became synonymous with time-wasting nonsense. "That's a real Mickey Mouse thing to do," people would say. Or, "Don't be such a Mickey Mouse."

Perfect, Rez had decided. It fit him. Mickey it was.

Tonight, for the past several hours, Rez had been in a bit of a trance, because this work—while critically important—was also tedious. Rez would call out the names of star after star on a randomly selected grid of galaxies, and then Mickey would check to see if there was any anomaly, any shift, any variation, in the light emanating from that star. Rez would systematically record Mickey's response on the spreadsheet whose ever-changing numbers quivered across his computer screen like a spiderweb trembling in a morning breeze.

And then Mickey had broken the spell with his ridiculous request for refreshments.

"Shut up," Rez snapped back at him.

Mickey answered with a sound that was engineered to resemble a snicker. Robots didn't get hungry. Hence they didn't need food. But sometimes—if they happened to have been programmed by someone who regarded stupid humor as a good thing, a view that Rez found totally bogus—they did make jokes. Groaningly awful ones. Stupidly juvenile ones.

"If you want to know the truth," Mickey added, "I could really go for a bucket of bolts in chipotle sauce."

Rez's scowl intensified yet another degree, despite its futility.

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He added an eye roll. He was not amused. He'd been working hard. This was a serious matter. He didn't need the aggravation.

He knew the guy who was responsible for the funny—the *allegedly* funny—robot. It was a programmer named Dave Parkhurst, a.k.a. Dumb-Ass Dave. Spiky yellow hair, baggy trousers, food-stained tunic, big stinky feet: Rez had gone to school with him and could picture him—and almost smell him—to this day. Because of Dumb-Ass Dave's wacky plan, what lived inside Mickey's cranial cartridge was a tiny, telltale wiggle in the otherwise rigidly straightforward lines of instructional code. The wiggle had been put there by Dumb-Ass Dave to enable at least one industrial-use AI machine, normally a bland and predictable variety, to crack jokes at regular intervals.

To be, that is, a first-class, all-purpose goofball.

Dumb-Ass Dave had somehow persuaded his bosses to let him endow a handful of robots with a sense of humor. *It'll help morale*, he had argued. *Lighten things up*.

Rez, on the contrary, believed quite firmly that things did not need to be lightened up. In fact, if he'd had his way, things would be darkened down, not lightened up. But he'd lost the argument. The Dispute Resolution Subcommittee of the Conflict Strategy Division of the Science Committee of the New Earth Senate had sided with Dumb-Ass Dave.

"I told you to zip it," Rez muttered.

Mickey's response was swift and sure: He emitted a noise that was indistinguishable from a human fart.

Rez's irritation flared again. He didn't say anything out loud, though, because he didn't want a back-and-forth conversation. Time was too precious. They could be interrupted any minute by some eager-beaver staff astronomer colleague with actual authorization to be accessing the telescope, and

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Rez had a ton more stars to get through tonight to make his quota. His schedule was terribly ambitious.

At least Mickey's latest attempt at humor hadn't been a knock-knock joke. Knock-knock jokes were a favorite of Dumb-Ass Dave's. Last week, the AstroRob had interrupted their labors with the following:

Mickey: Knock-knock.

Rez: (silence)

Mickey: Knock-knock.

Rez: (silence)

Mickey: Come on, Stevie-boy. Live a little. Knock-knock.

Rez: (after a heavy, exasperated sigh) Okay, fine.

Whatever. Who's there?

Mickey: Uranus.

Rez: (another sigh) Uranus who?

Mickey: Uranus ought to be pretty sore by now, after all this sitting around!

It was the lamest, lowest, stalest gag in the history of both New Earth and Old Earth and probably a grab bag of other planets, too. But Rez was forced to put up with it. His hands were tied. He needed this shiny metal pile that specialized in turning out lousy jokes.

"Hey, Stevie," Mickey chirped. "If you're running low on chipotle, I'll take honey mustard sauce with those bolts instead. On the side."

"Hilarious," Rez responded. "Freakin' hilarious."

"Wait, I got a question for you. Why did the robot cross the road?"

Rez fumed silently. Maybe ignoring him would work.

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“Okay,” Mickey said, “so I’ll *tell* you why the robot crossed the road . . . to get to the other sidereal motion!”

Rez needed to calm himself down, so he sat back in his chair. He let out a long sigh. He rubbed his eyes. When he opened them again, he took an appreciative look around his lab.

Not even a bothersome AstroRob could diminish his pleasure in this space.

He had custom-engineered it to his exact specifications. Sure, it might be crowded, cramped, and jammed with whatever cast-off and won’t-be-missed materials he could scrounge, but it was just what he needed. It was accessible only through a small, half-hidden porthole, and wriggling through that porthole required an intricate series of acrobatic maneuvers, topped off by an ability to twist, leap, and land with abandon. So he never had to worry about uninvited guests.

Rez had quietly carved this workspace out of a forgotten corner of the Sagan Observatory in Mendelev Crossing. He had installed a long, busy control panel across one wall, a wall broken only by a small niche for the AstroRob and his monitor and screen. The control panel was set into a rectangular slab of shiny chrome; the glass-fronted dials and gauges fluttered with constant activity. From both armrests of Rez’s red leather chair, joysticks jutted; with these, he could rotate the chair up and down or side to side or turn it in a circle. Affixed to the ceiling that loomed a bit too close over his head, a row of toggle switches awaited the quick flicks of his fingers.

Out in the real observatory, protruding from the vast gap in the roof, was the giant telescope. It stared unblinkingly into the night sky, its gaze peering deep into the wilderness of stars.

Somewhere within that wilderness was the single star Rez was determined to find.

And so here he sat, muscles tensed, senses on high alert

as he steadily checked the readout from the telescope's night watch. He examined star after star after star. Every night, he traveled millions of miles—but he never left the lab.

The only person Rez had thus far confided in was Violet Crowley, daughter of Ogden Crowley, the late founder of New Earth. She was the closest thing he had to a friend. She was also president of the New Earth Senate and chair of the astronomy subcommittee, and at first, she hadn't understood why he was so obsessed with setting up his own research area.

"You've already *got* an observatory, Rez," she'd said. "With the biggest telescope in the history of . . . well, in the history of really big telescopes. And you're in charge of it, right?"

"Yeah. But other people want to use it, too."

Half-exasperated, half-amused, Violet had shaken her head. "Ever heard of a little thing called *sharing*, Rez?"

He scowled at her. He'd heard of it, sure. He just didn't want to do it.

And then she had asked the obvious follow-ups:

"Why, Rez? Why do you need a secret spot all your own to make your observations? What in the world are you looking for, anyway?"

The answer was right there in her question: The thing for which he searched wasn't *in* the world at all. It wasn't on New Earth, and it wasn't on Old Earth, either, the original planet that now served as little more than the rickety scaffold for the gleaming new civilization that thrived above it.

He had told her the truth because he trusted her. It was a funny feeling—trusting somebody, or at least anybody other than his little sister—and it didn't come naturally to him, but Violet had proven herself to be worthy of that trust.

So had the others: Shura Lu, Kendall Mayhew, Tin Man Toliver. He just hadn't had a chance yet to fill them in about his

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project. But he would. Because they were a team. A year ago, they had banded together to keep New Earth from being destroyed.

One by one, the special features of their faces flashed in his mind: Shura's intense dark eyes; Kendall's square jaw; Tin Man's confused frown. And Violet's pale forehead, crinkling with concern each time she asked Rez if he was okay, which she frequently did. He pretended not to like it—"Don't *fuss* over me," he'd snap at her—but he sort of did. It was nice to have somebody care about you, even if you had to pretend that it annoyed you.

There was one more face that he pictured, too: His little sister, Rachel. She had been only eleven years old when she perished in the chop and heave of the dark waters of an Old Earth ocean. Heartbroken but resolute, Rez had overseen the cremation of her body, sending her ashes into space in a small capsule programmed to disintegrate in a matter of days, ensuring that his sister's remains would drift amid the stars forever.

If he'd been antisocial and prickly *before* Rachel's death—and he had, because he didn't like having people interrupt his work with the silly things they said—then he became a million times *more* that way afterward. He was shattered and bereft. But the difference was that now he couldn't control it.

He wasn't mean on purpose anymore, to get people to back off and leave him alone; he was mean because he was hurting.

Outside of his staff at the observatory, the only people Rez interacted with on a regular basis were Violet, Shura, Kendall, and Tin Man. And that's exactly how he wanted it. The fewer people he had to deal with, the better.

They were all doing different jobs now from the ones they'd been doing a year ago. Saving New Earth had made them famous, and New Earth president Ahmad Shabir had insisted

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that they accept promotions: Rez headed up NESAs. Shura was in charge of all government-sponsored research. Kendall became chief of police; Tin Man was his top deputy. Those new roles made sense.

Except for one.

The one upgrade that didn't make sense was Violet's. She had been appointed to the New Earth Senate to fill an unexpired term, following in the footsteps of her father, Ogden Crowley, New Earth's first president. He had died of old age shortly after they returned from their adventure on Old Earth.

Violet, a *politician*? It seemed like a stretch, mainly because she had a quick temper and could be headstrong and impulsive, and she would much rather solve exciting mysteries or hang out with her friends at a club called Redshift than sit through a bunch of boring subcommittee hearings about budget priorities. But Rez could sort of see the logic of it, too. Violet was fair-minded, and she believed in justice. Her last name was the best-known one on New Earth. People, especially young people, respected her.

And New Earth was becoming, day by day, a young person's world. President Shabir himself was only twenty-four. The original settlers were dying off, and the younger citizens were gradually taking over the positions of authority.

Accepting the Senate job meant that Violet had to give up her detective agency, Crowley & Associates. Her assistant, Jonetta Loring, had taken over the firm.

As Rez thought about his friends and the changes in all of their lives, he couldn't help but think about Rachel: If she had lived, what would she be doing now? His sister was brilliant and driven. To what noble cause would she have lent her blazing talents? In what amazing way would she have left her mark on New Earth?

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Thinking about Rachel, he felt a familiar ache. That ache was so intense that it made everything stop in Rez's mind. It was a distraction worse, even, than Mickey's bad jokes. And he needed to get back to work.

He took a bite from a half-eaten energy bar—because unlike a robot, he *did* get hungry from time to time. He chewed. He swallowed. He indulged himself in a swig from the nearby canister of water, wiping his mouth on the too-long sleeve of his gray tunic. He almost never thought about his appearance, but occasionally—like right now, when he leaned over to set the canister back down—he'd catch a glimpse in the reflective chrome on the side of a piece of equipment and realize anew that he was nothing special, looks-wise. He resembled thousands of other guys. Millions, really.

Did that bother him? No. But it was indisputably true.

He had medium-length brown hair, milky pale skin, light brown eyes, a nondescript nose, regular ears. Normal, normal, normal. The only special thing about Steve Reznik lay beneath the surface like an underground spring that secretly keeps the landscape alive:

His brain.

He scratched his chin. There was a faint thatch of stubble there. It could've been crusted dirt for all that Rez cared.

He turned his attention back to the computer screen. That screen was home to a rippling hive of orange numbers that roiled against a blue-black background. If he squinted just right and engaged his imagination, he could momentarily persuade himself that he was enjoying an aerial view of an orange grove infiltrated with vermin.

Mickey made another noise. It was quite loud. Because his body consisted of six expandable cylinders topped by a square gray metal box that squirmed with circuitry, sounds tended to

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expand and intensify as they branched through his layers. If that particular noise had come from a human being, it would have been immediately classified as a belch. An impressively gross one.

Rez had no choice except to put up with it, just as he put up with the farts, wheezes, sneezes, snorts, hiccups, and sighs, not to mention the bad puns, third-rate limericks, and witless wisecracks. He needed Mickey, warts and all. He didn't want to use a human assistant. He couldn't run the risk of word leaking out about his search until he'd gathered all the evidence. Until he'd made an airtight case.

And, most important, until he'd found a solution.

Because if his suspicions were correct, his prediction would start a mass panic across the six cities of New Earth. So he needed to have a remedy, a solid plan, ready and waiting for when he made his revelation. At the same moment he announced the coming catastrophe, he would offer hope. And in this case, he knew, hope came exclusively in the shape of a star.

That star would be a new sun, around which a new New Earth would revolve.

"Hey, Rez," Mickey blurted. "I just flew in from Saturn. And boy, are my arms tired!"

Rez groaned. He grabbed the joystick and tilted his chair forward. He needed to start calling out star locations again. It was the only way to stop the AstroRob from lobbing stupid jokes: Keep the damned thing busy.

"Star number 76.435.7867," Rez said, focusing on the telescope's steady harvest of data.

"Negative."

"Star number 76.435.7868."

"Negative."

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“Star number 76.435.7869.”

“Negative.”

The night wore on.

Rez sifted through the stars.

Shortly before dawn, just as the sun was tipping over the far edge of New Earth’s eastern quadrant, flooding this compartment—and all of New Earth—with luscious lemony light, he saw it.

But it wasn’t what Rez had been searching for. It was something wildly, disturbingly different.

And it filled him with the most intense and overwhelming torrent of raw emotion he had ever felt.