

Futures

An intersection of parallel lives

Blood ties. By Wendy Nikel



You don't need a reason to save people," I argue with the boss. But apparently, if I'm flying on her dime, I do.

In the end, it's the chickens that win her over. The records I uncovered deep in the archives state that two centuries ago, when the *Novus* and its passengers departed to colonize H3985, they carried with them two dozen hens and five roosters. Science has rail-gunned itself ahead since the generation ship left on its voyage across the Galaxy, but even with nutrient tablets making food superfluous for human survival, there's plenty of Old-World purists who'd pay trillions for a bite of a genuine, non-synthetic drumstick.

It's all about the bottom line. Supply and demand. Upward-sloping graphs of profit margins.

With the boss's permission finally given, I slip into my sleek *Raptor* (a thousand times faster than the largely forgotten *Novus*), and point its nose towards the dot of sky where I

hope to find the lost ship – a sliver of space that the experts have collectively decided isn't actually that promising after all, revenue-wise.

As I fire up the engines, I think of the other discovery I'd made in the archives. The information I didn't share. A record of an ancestor – sharing my surname, my blood – who'd deserted Earth, although his pregnant wife had refused to. A broken family. A connection severed. A monumental choice by two people I'd never met that, like Earth growing smaller behind my ship, grew smaller in significance as time marched on, until that one life-altering decision became nothing more than a dot on the timeline of my family history. And yet, like Earth falling out of sight somewhere below, that one dot makes all the difference.

The boss checks in on the communications link on day 71 of 82. There's nothing to boost the signal between here and there, so her voice sounds thin and awash with static. She's second-guessing now, anxious about what I'll find. What life has become aboard the

isolated *Novus*, if life still exists there at all. She makes me promise that if the inhabitants have resorted to cannibalism, I'll grab a few chickens and get out, ASAP.

"Get the chickens," she reiterates. That's the important part, all logic aside.

On day 81, a dot appears in the distance. I spend the day staring at it across the expanse. When I wake from my next sleep cycle, the cylindrical ship looms in my window. I've found it.

I slow the *Raptor* to match its speed. Apprehension, excitement and determination combat in my chest, crowding out my breath. Here's what I've waited for since first uncovering the records. Since first wondering 'what if?' What if I'd spent my life stuck in a jettisoned tin can, in a civilization sent spinning slowly towards somewhere I'd die without reaching? In rescuing the *Novus*, I was rescuing that could've-been-me, too. In my own way, I've warped the timeline, doubled back on my family's past, so that these lives, which for the

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past two centuries have run parallel, now have the chance to intersect.

The *Raptor* hatch was retrofitted before we left, and it slides easily into the *Novus*'s dock. I pause, stop, catch my breath. This is my moment: the moment of intersection. Of truth. How will history describe it to those farther down this temporal line? Will they know the bravery it requires, approaching this amputated limb of humanity?

The airlock swings open, and the air that greets me is fresh. *Clean*.

"Goodness gracious, are you okay?" The woman standing before me looks strong. Bright-eyed. Healthy. Kind.

Behind her, the ship opens to a jungle of lush flora, the likes of which haven't been seen on Earth for decades. There are trees here, taller and thicker than any I'd ever seen, and vines and

grasses and shrubbery, too. Men and women pass beyond the leaves, speaking softly to one another. Laughing. Smiling. A chicken rushes unhindered across a moss-covered path, followed by a trail of fluff-feathered chicks. I stare, dumbfounded, at the tiny creatures.

"Someone get this pilot a cot; she's dazed." The woman taps an unfamiliar device to my forehead and frowns. "Dehydration, malnourishment and hypertension. Lots of toxicity in her bloodstream as well. Get her something to eat, STAT, and then we'll see what we can do about the rest."

I brace myself as I'm surrounded, but what falls upon me is not the cold touch of shiny-armed med-bots subtracting credits for care prepayment. It's gentle human voices, gentle human arms and gentle human faces guiding me to the softest bed I've ever felt. Water

trickles down my throat, tasting strange and sweet without the familiar chemical sting. Music floats in the air, unhampered by screeching newsfeeds or the periodic advertising blurb. Even the scents are softer – more subtle and easier on my throat.

Everything is so ... peaceful.

"Good thing we were here to save you."

I look up. The surname on the woman's badge matches mine. Her eyes bear the same shape and colour as my own.

"Yes." I realize then with sharp, sudden clarity. "It is."

Wendy Nikel is a speculative-fiction author with a degree in elementary education, a fondness for road trips and a terrible habit of forgetting where she's left her cup of tea. For more info, visit wendynikel.com.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Wendy Nikel reveals the inspiration behind *An intersection of parallel lives*

I wrote this story during the spring of 2020. Amid the coronavirus lockdown, while watching the world around me change so rapidly that I could barely keep up, I'd been trying to find the time and energy to write and struggling to come up with anything that didn't involve the topics flooding all our minds: viruses, quarantine, isolation, epidemics.

Somewhere in the haze of social media posts and messages encouraging us to #stayhome and #staysafe, I stumbled across a sentiment that became the opening line of this story: "You don't need a reason to save people." I'd jotted it down in my writing notebook, but it still took me some time to discover the story I wanted to tell with those words.

Although this story is, in part, about the motivations (altruistic or otherwise) that we have for the 'rescue missions' we take on in our lives, it's also about the objects of our sympathies and our perception of them. Do we see them merely as the sum of their economic potential? Or do we recognize that a different combination of choices and chance could have led us, too, along that same path? Are we seeing others as they really are, or only as we want to see them, so that we can be the heroes of the story?

With the ending of this story, I also wanted to show that even the smartest among us needs a little humility — to listen to others and acknowledge that sometimes we don't have the whole picture, and sometimes we don't know best after all. We need to be willing to admit we were wrong and move on from our mistakes, particularly in times of crisis.

