

Alpha 1

By Rachel Daly

A crisp, crimson leaf glides from its branch as I step outside. I notice everything; these are my last hours on earth, my last memories. A time bomb ticks away in the back of my head, reminding me of how little time I have left.

Alpha 1 will be ready to launch in just a few hours. All I have to do is get to base. I leave early, my family holding my hands as we enter our car. No one knows how long I'll be away, whether it will be a few months or a few years. I know I have to make the most of this precious time – it is precariously suspended from my fingertip.

Our Volkswagen stops abruptly at the entrance to the base, just a few minutes early. A welcoming committee shows me to the rocket after my last farewells. Boy, is she a beauty. Her smooth panels reflect like a mirror of ice, yet they are as sturdy as a mountain. I look out of the porthole window, prepared for glittering lights and vast, desolate emptiness. Our crew stand with me, alongside Officer Hammersmith. He was in the army not long before, and now he is our captain.

He leans into his radio and reports: "Alpha 1, standing by. Over."

A distorted, crackling, almost *robotic* voice replies.

"Prepare for lift off. Let the launch procedure commence."

I switch on the monitor to see us live. Millions, perhaps *billions* are watching us, hoping. Hoping there is someone else out there, that we are not alone. And that is our mission: to find sentient life.

After what seems like a millennium, I hear, "Five". "Four," comes a while after. "Three." I know there is no turning back now. "Two." The space of one second spreads out into decades of silence. "One." Everyone is on the line, waiting.

"Lift off."

A flick of a switch and the engines are roaring, stirring from their hibernation. Crows, pigeons and starlings all scatter as far as the eye can see before they disappear entirely. A spectrum of scarlet dashes up the sides of Alpha 1, then we ascend. People, then all kinds of buildings, blink from existence – before all that is left is a sapphire and emerald sphere.

A vast abyss engulfs us. Glitter is splashed everywhere, as though a child found the art tray. Yet, despite the immense allure, we are horribly, terribly alone.

Hammersmith picks up the radio. "Alpha 1 to Earth, I repeat, Alpha 1 to Earth, do you read me?"

There is nothing. Nothing but an atrocious abominable silence. Somehow, *somewhere*, the lines have been cut and there is no rescue for us, no way to retreat to our beloved home.