

The Plants of Delos

by Jon Henn

Darkness covered the sky as three year old Micah Eckstein stood in an empty playground on the planet Delos. Pressing his face against the colony's mammoth dome, he squished his nose against its cool, smooth surface.

Micah exhaled sharply. He fogged the glass with his misty breath, then made a quick doodle with his finger before it vanished. He did this over and over, giggling to himself the entire time.

Finally tiring of his game, he gazed at the stars. His daddy said they were brighter than normal because the atmosphere of Delos was thinner than Earths -- whatever that meant. All he knew was that they twinkled like the bling on his big sister's t-shirts when Rachel heat-pressed fake diamonds into the fabric using her Debbie the Designer toys.

A force tugged at his mind ... insistent yet weak. Peering at a patch of small tubular plants outside the dome, Micah's head abruptly filled with music.

Come on let's dance ... let the music take control ... let the rhythm move you ...

The tune was one of his father's favorites. A song from back on Earth called an "oldie butter goodie." He wasn't sure what butter had to do with singing, but his mommy used it when she made cookie dough. She would let him lick the spoon. It tasted delicious. Was that a butter goodie too?

Getting down on his knees, Micah watched the tubular stalks sway to and fro to the vibrant music inside his mind. It was only in the last few days that the strange plants had connected with him. They were his friends -- his only friends -- and as one song ended and another began, Micah realized just how much he really liked them.

Celebrate good times, c'mon! Let's celebrate.

We're going to have a good time tonight.

Let's celebrate, it is all right.

The merriment tickled his brain. Smiling, Micah rocked his head from side to side. He remembered the first time he saw the plants his daddy was singing this very song. He was riding on his daddy's shoulders taking their first walk on the planet's surface. The plants towered above him weaving gently in the morning breeze.

His daddy was an eggy-neer. He told Micah he was going to build a city with a lot of men and machines once he cleared the land with flame throwers so construction could begin. That seemed like a long time ago; now the plants were growing back.

Pain snapped in his head as though someone had flicked their finger hard on his noggin.

I'm sorry, Micah thought. I let my mind wander. Pick another song. I'll be good.

His thoughts skipped about like they were being rummaged through by angry chipmunks. It made Micah dizzy, but when it stopped another of his Daddy's favorite songs popped into his brain.

*Don't you feel it growin' day by day,
People gettin' ready for the news.
Some are happy, some are sad.
We got to let the music play.*

Micah liked the song. He tapped his feet on the concrete seal that secured the dome deep in the soil.

*Oh, oh, oh, listen to the music.
Oh, oh, oh, listen to the music, all the time.*

The plants waved about as though they were dancing. Within their translucent stalks small slivers of pretty light glimmered like the stars at night.

Micah laughed out loud, breaking the telepathic connection. The tiny plants smacked his mind; Micah cried, wetting his cheeks.

"Micah," a voice said. "Micah, are you hurt?"

He felt himself lifted into his mother's arms. His mom always smelled like flowers.

"What's the matter, honey? Did you fall down? Mommy fell asleep on the lounge chair."

Mommy wiped the tears from his eyes. "It must be getting late. Come inside now. Daddy will be home soon for dinner." She gazed at her watch. "Why it's only 5:30. It's amazing how early it gets dark on this planet."

His mother carried him into the pod house. Before she sealed the air lock door behind them, Micah caught a last glimpse of the plants.

They were now a full foot taller and clamoring to hear more music.

Seated in his high chair at the dinner table, Micah stared at the most horrible food in the world — peas. Why his mommy fed him the little green balls of yuck was a total mystery to him.

"Here comes the starship into the space dock," said Mommy, lifting a spoon filled with peas towards him.

Reluctantly, Micah opened his mouth. The peas tumbled across his tongue. He was right. They tasted naughty.

"Do you know happens tomorrow, sweetie?" said Mommy as Micah chewed the wretched green things. "A starship is landing with sixty families in it. Isn't that wonderful?"

Micah didn't pay much attention to his mother's words, especially with a glob of mashed up peas burdening his tongue. He hoped that if he didn't swallow them his mommy wouldn't try to make him eat any more.

"There will be lots of kids your age for you to play with. Isn't that right, Daddy?"

Hearing the words "kids" and "play", Micah's big, round eyes jerked towards his father. Daddy was always right. If he said there were kids coming, then it was the butter goodie truth.

“New Zion is finished, son,” said Daddy proudly, cutting his goat chop with a knife and fork. “The dome’s atmosphere is Earth standard and the colony exceeds the NSA’s building codes for new planetary settlements. All that’s left to do is to clear some more farmland. What do you think of that?”

His daddy’s words went in one ear and out the other. Daddy hadn’t said what he needed to hear. His eyes wide, Micah stared blankly at his father while the peas in his mouth got lumpy.

“And who do you think is going to live in all those brand new homes?” said Mommy, giving Daddy a meaningful look.

Daddy raised his eyebrows, his jaw bouncing as he chewed his kosher meat.

“That’s why Daddy built such a big playground,” Mommy hinted to her husband.

Daddy’s eyebrow’s knitted together. His eyes glazed over. “The playground?” said Daddy, bewildered. “It can hold up to 500 kids.”

“And they’ll be playing in it tomorrow,” said Mommy, smiling through gritted teeth.

Recognizing his wife’s demeanor as a sign of impending trouble, Daddy struggled to say what he thought she wanted to hear. “Tomorrow?” Daddy said, speaking slowly and squeezing his eyeballs hard in their sockets. “Yes. There are about 200 kids on the starship ... coming tomorrow.”

The happy truth was confirmed at last. Mommy cheered and clapped her hands. Relieved, Daddy resumed eating his goat chops. Micah was so excited he swallowed the yucky peas.

Some time after dinner, Mommy and Daddy tucked Micah into his bed. His favorite teddy bear, Bongo, was scrunched tightly between his arms. Mommy kissed his forehead, telling him to sleep tight so he would be well rested to meet all of his new Jewish friends in the morning. Micah wasn’t sure what “Jewish” meant, but as long as he had playmates it wasn’t important if they were Jewish or not.

That night in his dreams, Micah was surrounded in the playground by lots of children with bright, shiny faces. Laughing with excitement, they swung on swings, rode the merry-go-round, and made sand castles in the sand box area. Micah beamed with joy. He had been lonely for such a long time. None of the other egg-neers had kids his age to play with. He was happy to have friends.

A sudden chill ran through him. Micah wiggled in his bed. The plants were calling to him. Something was wrong. All the dream children were in a panic.

A hazy picture formed, becoming clearer. Two of daddy’s workers wearing white protective suits carried flame throwers on their backs. They shot long gouts of flame into the playground at the children.

The children swayed to and fro; their feet grew roots deep into the soil. Relentless tongues, yellow and hot, burned them down one after another. Terrible screams pierced the air as their flesh blackened and the flames consumed them. Drifting cinders of pain-killed flesh burned in Micah’s youthful lungs.

Clutching at his bed sheets, Micah stuck his thumb in his mouth. His little heart raced. The tiny hairs on the back of his neck stuck straight up like toothpicks.

Without warning, a wave of anger surged through his tiny soul. From a great distance away, Bongo roared for his offspring to attack.

The unscathed children snapped to attention. Their arms turned into vines that snaked forward with great speed. Whipping around the legs of the fire-monsters, the vines jerked their legs out from underneath them. As the two men hit the ground, the vines dragged them violently forward. Other vines seized them, pulling them further across the ground where even more vines pulled them further still.

Bongo howled again as the men were towed into his sand box. His leafy hands, sharp as razors, cut the mens' flesh again and again.

Dragging them back and forth, blood and screams spurted from the men with each new slash. The brutal carving separated flesh from bone. Arms, legs and shrieking heads tumbled away from the hacked up torsos. Other vines yanked the gory pieces across the field of slicing sharpness until every last part of the fire-breathing monsters was pared into tiny bits.

The sand box was soaked with rich red blood, whittled bones and shredded tissue. Bongo growled his approval. This had happened once before ... it would never happen again. Howling, his wrathful defiance echoed in Micah's petrified ears.

The surviving children were in shock. Shivering, their life force ebbed away from their exposure to the murderous flames.

Micah was curled into a catatonic ball as Bongo telepathically crept into his mind, aggressively burrowing through his brain. Tears dripped out of Micah's eyes when suddenly his inner world was engulfed by soothing music. The gentle sounds spread forth, calming his fears with melodic tenderness. Before too long, Micah, Bongo, and the other children fell into a deep, peaceful sleep.

The following morning the starship landed. Micah and his family were present along with the other egg-neers. A cargo ramp touched the soil as sixty families of Jewish settlers disembarked into the thin air of Delos. The new arrivals played musical instruments and sang praises to God for sending them to a new home where they could escape from persecution.

Cradled in his mother's arms, Micah clapped with joy as 200 kids came into view. Soon they would all be playing in the playground together. He could sense the plants thirsting for music from them. It was going to be a wonderful day.

In a gulch not far from the settlement, tubular life forms swayed hungrily to and fro. As the plants absorbed the music, slivers of light glimmered through them as they began to grow.