

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Letters from Tau Ceti-e

Kaysey Hinkle

In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
The Alfred University Honors Program

May 9, 2014

Under the Supervision of:

Chair: Dr. Susan Morehouse

Committee Members:

Dr. Danielle Gagne
Dr. Juliana Gray



Letters From Tau Ceti-e

By: Kaysey Hinkle

Author's Note:

When people started asking me what my thesis topic was going to be, I always ended up giving them the same generic answer, “I’m going to write and illustrate a children’s story,” to which I received varying degrees of interest or indifference. Well, by late fall semester it had finally dawned on me that I had absolutely no idea what my topic for this children’s story would be. Yes, I had, somehow, acquired three committee members to help me, but I hadn’t actually thought about the most important aspect of my thesis; what in God’s name I was going to write about for round about thirty-five pages, and how would I incorporate illustrations?

I started jotting down little ideas for stories as they came to me, but nothing really seemed to catch my attention and make me think, “Yeah, I could totally run with this for thirty-five pages!” As can well be imagined, I began to wonder if I would ever come up with an idea I thought would work, but eventually I did. The answer to my thesis conundrum came to me when I sat down to work on my final project for the *Doctor Who* Honor’s Seminar I had been taking that semester. My final project for the class consisted of inventing my own alien race and constructing a planet and civilization for them. I ended up choosing a planet that we know actually does exist and we think has the potential to support life; it resides in what is called the habitable zone around its’ star. The planet was called Tau Ceti-e and, after a lot of brainstorming sessions and late nights, I got the idea that these so-called Cetians would be the great storytellers of the universe. I decided that this alien race’s job in the universe would be to travel all over space and pick up new stories from different galaxies and planets. It was after this that I decided it might be work some merit for me to attempt writing my children’s story in the sci-fi genre,

since I hadn't personally seen much in the way of sci-fi for children, and that I would use my final project for the *Doctor Who* seminar as my basis.

From there I, once again, got a little stuck on how to begin actually writing my thesis. Okay, I had an alien race that liked to tell stories, so what? What made them interesting and exciting and how was I going to make them appeal to children? One night, while babysitting a certain committee member's two daughters, I came across a copy of a *Magic Treehouse* book written by Mary Pope Osbourne; these were books I had absolutely adored when I was in elementary school and couldn't believe I had forgotten about them. Said committee member mentioned how her oldest daughter enjoyed reading the stories to her younger sister who could not yet read on her own and that it was an experience everyone in the family could be part of and enjoy. To me this seemed like the perfect kind of book to model my thesis after, a book that could appeal to young children while at the same time being accessible to older children as well. By this time I was about to go on winter break, but was determined to hash out a well formed idea for my thesis while I was home.

Of course, things didn't go quite as planned. Thankfully a few days before coming back to Alfred, I happened to bump into a former teacher of mine from high school and we got to talking about my thesis. She was very excited to hear about everything I had so far and she even suggested that I might someday use my thesis as a jumping off point for a potential literary career. She brought up another series of chapter books I also happened to love reading as a child, *The Boxcar Children* by Gertrude Chandler Warner. The layout for those books was very similar to *The Magic Treehouse* books, though *The Boxcar Children* were more in the realm of reality. It occurred to me that both series had a few illustrations in each book that were very well done, but

didn't detract from the reader's own imagination of the characters and situations; this seemed a perfect form to mimic for my thesis.

After returning to Alfred I began meeting with my committee chair and we hashed out exactly what age level I wanted this story to cater to. This was a tough conversation for me to have at first because I really wanted the story to cater to all ages, but eventually I came to realize that I had to actually pick a reading level to start with, so I ultimately decided on a reading level where kids are finally able to read for themselves and are starting to look at longer books. Then my committee chair and I discussed how the illustrations would roughly work in the context of the story and decided that a few illustrations would be best, as I was not writing a picture book.

The next problem came with trying to figure out a writing style to use for this project. I had no idea how I was to go about writing this story, so my committee chair and I had several conversations about it until, finally, the idea of pen pal letters came up. I decided that I would have a little girl on Tau Ceti-e be writing these letters to a little girl on Earth. I then looked up several pen pal assignments online to use as a sort of guide to get me going as I had done the pen pal assignment in elementary school but couldn't remember the exact details of it.

So I finally sat down and started writing these pen pal letters and had written around three or so before I started to realize something was still missing from the story; an actual plot. The most important part of any story is the arc of action, and I was completely missing that in my story. Up to that point I had been writing willy nilly without thought for how any of these letters would add up to something important or dramatic in the long run. My committee chair suggested that I do some character sketches and exercises in order to figure out exactly what it was my character wanted and what the driving force for all her actions was. Those sketches helped

tremendously and I finally had a *real* three dimensional character to work with, or at least the start of one.

Maris came from a very real place for me, as I too loved reading just about any book I could get my hands on as child; I loved to draw too. At first Maris was a bit of a flat character, but as the letters went on and I discovered more about her, she became almost real to me. With the help of my committee chair I began to think more like Maris would and react like I imagined Maris would react. Thinking and writing as a little girl would was much for challenging for me than I thought it would be, but it was also extremely fun and exciting to try and see her world as *she* actually saw it. I learned things like, “Oh, yeah, I probably *didn't* actually know how to properly use a semi-colon at Maris's age,” and “Hmm, maybe words like superior might not be in Maris's vocabulary.”

I eventually learned that, when I hit a rut in my writing process, that I should go back to the thing that sparked my thesis in the first place; *Doctor Who*. Although there are certainly some aspects of the long running British TV show that aren't exactly what I was looking to imitate, the general premise *was*. It was important for me that Maris's world seem very real to both myself and to my target audience, and *Doctor Who* is an expert at creating these types of worlds; also at catering to a wide range of age groups. I learned that sci-fi isn't an easy genre to work in, especially when you're trying to describe sensory details of things on another planet that weren't anything like what we have on Earth. *Doctor Who* helped me realize that sometimes you have to make words up with the knowledge that it may sound like nonsense at first, but when you put it into context people have to have a general idea of what you're talking about. At the same time though, sometimes the only way you can describe something is with what you as the author have

experience with, and if that means giving your character a silly reason for knowing what an old potato smells like, then so be it.

Eventually I got down to the wire and had to make the scariest decisions of all: what to edit and how. I decided to have my drawings be from Maris's point of view and had to figure out exactly how refined that would mean they had to be. I had to go back through and really embellish that arc of action and make sure the stakes were high enough for Maris in the end. By far, though, the biggest decision I had to make was whether or not to keep the third to last letter in the sequence or not. I went round and round about it in my own head as well as with my committee chair because I really *really* didn't want to get rid of that letter. I knew I had only been writing in Maris' point of view up to this point and was the concern that changing it suddenly might take away from everything I had built up so far in the story, but I thought it was important for Maris to actually get some kind of response back, even if it wasn't the one she was looking for. Without that letter from "D" I thought the story would seem too one dimensional and not quite as mysterious as I wanted it to. I also wanted there to be a character on the complete opposite end of the spectrum as Maris and have her realize that maybe she judged people who were different than her too harshly. In the end I decided to go with my instincts and keep that letter intact, but to have two reply letters from Maris so we could see how her attitude toward "D" and maybe other adults changes in the end and also to help the ending flow more with the story. I may yet regret that decision, but for now I'm happy I made it.

This thesis has easily been the most challenging piece of writing I have ever created but, believe it or not, it has also been the most fun. Up to this point in my college career I had never actually managed to write a fully developed story and, now that I have, I feel pretty damn good

about what I've created. I learned that you have to know what your characters want and how they intend to go after it, that you have to have a climax that the entire story is building up to, and most of all, I learned that you have to consider what audience you're catering to. Writing to suit the needs of a younger reader was entirely different than writing to suit the needs of an adult. The biggest thing I learned in regard to writing for kids is that you have to resolve the ending for them more than you would for an adult. Maybe I'll return to this story one day and turn it into a real, physical book, but for now I'm content with it and look forward to sharing it with my friends and family.

Kaysey A. Hinkle
Alfred University
Class of 2014

Dear Delphi,

04-10-2595

Hello! My name is Maris and I'm very glad to meet you! Miss A., she's the teacher of my "Understanding Other Planets" class, says that we should all try to make friends with our pen pals because it's always good to have lots of different kinds of people for friends. My old best friend, Tauri, just had to move away because her dad got a new job on another planet. I'm gonna miss Tauri, she always had the best ideas for fun stuff we could do when we were bored. Hey, I know! Maybe you could be my new best friend? It's ok if you already have a best friend on your planet though because I think it's good to have more than one best friend. All the girls in my class say you can only have one best friend, but they're all stupid. I say you should make all of your friends best friends! You probably think that's a really weird thing to say, but at least if all your friends were best friends then nobody would feel like anybody else was better friends with you than them.

This letter is supposed to be me telling you about myself, Miss A. says we have to, "Make a list of some things you like to do, who you like to spend time with, what your family is like, and tell your pen pal all about you." Miss A. is a nice teacher but I don't think she understands how to talk to people in real life. She wants us to make a list of "personal traits, interests, hobbies, etc..." except that isn't how you talk when you just meet someone (unless you're really weird). You're supposed to get to know people little by little, not all at once. Otherwise it would just be super boring to try making friends with a new person because you'd both just be listing off a bunch of stuff and nobody would know what it means! My old best friend, Tauri, used to dare me to try making friends with someone new whenever my family went

on vacation, and I learned real fast that you shouldn't tell people about yourself all at once because then there's nothing to talk about later on. Like this one time my family visited a museum on the other side of Tau Ceti-e and I decided to try making friends with this boy I met, Henry. So I went up to him and started talking and telling him all about me and my family and how he and I should be friends because you can never have too many friends, but then he laughed and said I was weird and ran away; making friends with complete strangers isn't so easy after all. Tauri was a different story though because she's been my best friend since I was really little, so by the time she moved away last year we knew a lot about each other. You could tell we were really best friends because we each knew exactly how many spoonfuls of cereal we could fit in our mouths before we started laughing and squirted milk out our noses and my mom yelled at us for making a mess; I really miss having a best friend around now.

But anyway, I guess I should do what Miss A. says so I can get a good grade on this project (Mom says if I don't start doing better in school she's going to take away my books at home so I don't get distracted from school books). Like I said before, I'm Maris, and I'm from Tau Ceti-e, though I guess you'll probably get told that by your teacher so it's kind of silly that I have to say it again anyway. I'm nice, but kind of shy, and...umm I'm not sure what other things to say about my personality...I'm pretty smart, I just don't like school that much so I don't seem like I am. Smart, I mean.

I really really like books! My favorite thing to do is to collect different stories and then share them with other people! Did you know that's the job my planet has in the universe? We're called the planet of stories, and we know 'em all! Well the adults know them all, I'm still learning them, but someday I want to be the greatest storyteller out of everyone in the universe!

My dad works on the surface, so he doesn't get to share stories, but it's my mom's job to find out where new stories are and to send people to different planets to collect them; I wanna be one of those people who goes out and collects the stories. What do you want to be when you grow up? If I don't get to be the greatest storyteller of all time, my backup idea is to go to the library planet and become a librarian. Oh my gosh, Delphi, if you could see the library planet you wouldn't believe your eyes, it has copies of every story ever written and ANYBODY can go and read them! I wish I could go there someday.

Oh, my favorite color is blue by the way, Miss A. just made a list of things that we could tell our pen pals and that was the first one. I like blue the best because we don't really have much blue on my planet. I remember my favorite color used to be green until my mom came back from a trip to Earth and brought me something called a post card that had a picture of the ocean on it. Even in the picture I could tell the water went almost as far as the sand does on my planet. I couldn't believe how sparkly the water looked, it seemed like magic to me! Nothing sparkles like that on my planet, everything is just dull and sandy colored. I thought it was amazing that there was a place in the universe with so much water! It must be really awesome to be able to see water like that every day. My mom said there are so many different animals living in the ocean that they don't even know what all of them are! We just have a lot of bugs on my planet, but we know what they're all called, some of them are really big and scary though.

I'm supposed to tell you what I look like too, but maybe it would just be easier if I drew you a picture of myself instead? What do you look like, Delphi? Maybe if you know how to draw then you could send me a picture too? It's ok though if you don't know how to draw, I'm really the only one in my class who likes to draw anymore, they all say drawing is for babies but

I think they're just jealous because they CAN'T draw. I even like to draw the things that happen in the different stories I read, it's too much fun not to!

I really think it's cool how you'll be able to read this in your language even though it's written in my language. Here on Tau Ceti-e we make this special paper that kind of acts like a translator, but it can only do so much since there are different words in my language that don't mean anything in yours so I guess that'll be something we have to figure out. Miss A. said this kind of thing usually only happens with stuff like animal and plant names, so she gave us all a copy of an Earth book with lots of different kinds of plants and animals with pictures that show what they look like. Miss A. said we should try to explain sort of what our plant or animal looks like by comparing it to one of your plants or animals, so if I say something and you don't know what it is then just ask me and I'll do my very best to explain what I'm talking about!

Ok, well I'm not sure what else I should say in this letter, since I still want to have stuff to say to you the next time around. I guess I'm just supposed to say good-bye now right? This is the part of a letter I still don't get. Miss A. tried to teach it to me but I just think it's weird how you have to say that you're going to go now or whatever. Maybe I'll get better at it since we have to write one of these letters every week. I also don't get why I have to say that I hope you will write back soon because you obviously have to since your class has this assignment too, though I guess if you wanted to fail or something you wouldn't have to write back. Oh well, I'll say it anyway. I hope you write back soon!

Your New Friend,

Maris

P.S. Sorry about the mix-up with your name, Miss A. said something weird happened on our end when the list of the people in your class got sent over and the only letter of your name that came through was "D." I guess Delphi was just the first name that popped into my head since that's my pet sulroe's name and I was just thinking about how I accidentally forgot to feed her this morning and she's probably going to end up eating the sofa cushions (again) instead. Mom and Dad will probably take away my weekly allowance to help pay for another new- Uh oh... Mom's new shoes were by the door when I left this morning...and they're made of- Oh that is so not good... Yep, I'm definitely dead now.

Delphi
and
Me



Dear Delphi,

04-14-2595

I was right about the other Delphi. That sulroe completely destroyed mom's new shoes and now I have no spending money because Mom says, "I will use the money from your allowance so that I can replace the shoes *you* are responsible for destroying, young lady, I told you having a pet was a lot of work and that you can't forget to take care of it, and this is what I meant!" Honestly, she doesn't have a perfect memory either! This one time, she forgot to open the launch bay doors before she pulled our ship into the garage and she backed right into them! The doors were so dented that we couldn't even open the garage for two whole days while we waited for the workman to come fix them! Dad was so mad because he had to share a ride to work with a guy that smells totally gross. I was looking through another book Miss A. gave us about Earth, it has interactive senses put in so you can really experience what it's describing, and I think the thing from Earth that guy most smells like is this stuff you call Limburger cheese (HOW do you EAT that stuff?? It reeks so bad!).

Like I said before, Dad works on the surface. His job is working at one of the power plants and making sure everything stays up and running. If something breaks, it's Dad's job to fix it. One day I even got to go to work with Dad since he wasn't supposed to have to go to work that day and he promised to stay home to watch me while Mom worked and I didn't have school. The thing is though, sometimes there are times when something breaks and, even if Dad isn't working, he has to go up and fix it as soon as he can. That's what he had to do the day I was home from school.

I remember it now as one of the scariest days of my life. Okay, something you should know (or at least that's what Miss A. says) is that my planet is waaaay hotter than yours because we're a lot closer to our star than Earth is to the sun. Since it IS so hot (Miss A. says it's like 5 times hotter than Earth is in the middle of the summer) most people don't go up on the surface during the day, only at night when it cools down. During the day the only people who are on the surface are people who work on the power plants, like my dad, but they can only be up there as long as they wear special reflective suits to keep the heat out; anybody who tried going out without one of those suits would be in BIG trouble really fast. The suits go all the way from your head to your feet and you basically look like a human mirror; except over your eyes where it's special tinted glass so you don't go blind (I hope I'm using the semi-colons right, Miss A. is trying to teach us about them today and wanted us to use them in our letters). The day I went to the surface with my dad he had to find me a suit to wear too, but the only one he could find that would fit me was kind of an older model. It wasn't very easy moving around in my suit since it was so big, it was like this time when I was little and had footy pajamas that were WAY too big and I kept tripping all over the place. Dad didn't have that trouble with his suit though because his and all the other workers have suits that are specially made for them so they fit perfectly. I didn't mind having a weird fitting suit though because I thought it was so amazing that my dad was taking me up to the SURFACE! I was going to get to tell all the jerks in my class how awesome it was and how they probably would never get to go there during the day.

When my dad and I finally made it up there I thought my suit was malfunctioning because it was SO bright! The panels around the power plant were so BIG too! They had to be at least ten times the size of me and there were over a hundred of them! Dad said the panels help

collect energy from our star and the power plant converts the energy into power for everyone to use (He said I should try not to look directly at them because it could still hurt my eyes some even with my suit on). We weren't on the surface very long before something went really wrong. My arm started hurting really bad, and, when I looked down, I saw there was a hole in the suit! I must not have noticed it right away because the material was bunched up and covering it before. Now the heat from the surface was burning my arm! It felt like my skin was melting off and I started screaming and crying. My dad turned around real fast and, when he saw my arm, he picked me up and put his hand over the hole in my suit so the heat couldn't get into the rest of my suit and burn me more. Even though Dad was running his fastest, it felt like forever before we got back underground and made it to the hospital (I think that's what you call it on Earth). When I got there the doctor's were really worried about how much I was yelling so they gave me some medicine that made me sleepy. I don't remember much else about actually being in the hospital, but my mom says I was in there for almost a week because of how bad my arm was burned.

I haven't been back to the surface since then, even at night. The scar the burn left on my arm ended up being almost as big as my dad's hand and I'll never forget how I got it. Sometimes I have nightmares about the surface and, when I wake up, my arm will be hurting a little; I don't blame Dad though, even though I think Mom might sometimes. I can still remember the first time my mom ever took me up on the surface at night, we saw so many stars that were so bright that we didn't even need a light to see where we were walking! I was really little then and I thought it looked like the whole dark part of the sky was getting swallowed up by the stars. Miss A. says Tau Ceti-e and Earth are kind of like neighbors in space, so we have some of the same

constellations, like Cetus and Aquarius, but we also have lots more! My mom gave me a story for my birthday that year that was all about how the constellations were made, it's one of my favorites! Mom told me it's a story she collected a long time ago, before she got her promotion and stopped going out and actually doing the collecting, from the Alpha Centauri system; it's called "Guardian of the Stars." She told me that it gives us all the lesson that we should always try to do our very best, even when things get tough. I just like it because it's a good story though, I hope you like it too Delphi.

Once upon a time there lived a great white horse called Talisus. Talisus was the most kind and gentle horse anyone had ever seen and he was always careful to behave himself whenever someone was on his back, especially if they were a child. Whenever Talisus was with other horses, even if they were new horses that he did not know, he was always very nice to them, never kicking or biting or stomping his feet. People came from far and wide just to catch a glimpse of the magnificent Talisus, and many brought their own horses with them in hopes that they might learn something from Talisus. Talisus taught them all how to be patient and understanding when their rider was scared or didn't know what to do, and he taught them to try their very best to do what was asked of them, even if sometimes it was really hard. By the time Talisus had grown very old he had many friends all across the universe, and many children too that would carry on his legacy.

When the time came for Talisus to leave his world behind and enter the next one, he had caught the eye of Estra, the goddess of stars, and she told him that, because he had been such a good horse throughout his whole life, he would be granted a place among the stars. Talisus was very grateful for such a wonderful gift that he immediately said yes and followed Estra into the

night sky. At first, Talisus was happy and spent every day walking among the stars and talking to them, even though the stars couldn't answer him back. Talisus knew that the stars must all have wonderful and amazing stories they could tell, and he wished the stars knew how to speak so they could tell him these stories.

Soon Talisus grew lonely up in the sky, since he was the only one Estra had ever given this gift to, and Talisus began searching far and wide through the whole universe for anyone that he might be able to talk to and share stories with. He galloped and galloped through the different star systems, his hooves leaving clouds of stardust behind him as he went, but he couldn't find anyone at all that could talk to him. By the time Estra came to see Talisus again he had galloped around the night sky so much that all the stars had gotten tossed around and had become lost in parts of space that were strange to them. Estra scolded Talisus for his mistake, but then patted him gently on the nose and said, "Go, Talisus, and put each star back where it came from and I promise you shall have a friend to talk to."

So Talisus did his very best to find each star and move it back to its original place, but there were so many stars! How could he possibly remember where each one went? Talisus didn't give up though, even though his task was very difficult indeed, and he kept on moving the stars all across space, trying to remember where they might have been before. Soon Talisus had made all kinds of new patterns and shapes in the sky, some even looking like different animals he remembered from his world. At first, Talisus was so intent on fixing his mistake, that he didn't notice what he was doing. Soon, though, Estra began to notice quiet whispers coming from her stars as Talisus added more and more stars to the shapes. Soon even Talisus heard the stars, and they began saying, "Oh thank you kind Talisus for bringing us all together! We had been so

lonely by ourselves for so long, but now we can speak and be friends at last!” Estra, too, praised Talisus for his work and promised that as long as he took care of the stars and guarded them the very best he could that the stars would always be able to talk to him and be his companions in the night sky. Sometimes, if you look up on a very clear night, you can see the figure of a white horse walking among the constellations, making sure none of the stars will be alone ever again.

The End.

I hope you liked my story, but I have to go now because Miss A. doesn't want us to write too much at once. She SAYS the translator paper can get confused if we write a lot at once, but I know entire books that are printed on translator paper and I know it doesn't get confused like that. I think Miss A. is just jealous because she doesn't have a pen pal from a different planet to talk to like the rest of us. I'm not sure if you've gotten my first letter yet, but I hope you'll get it soon and write me back!

Your Friend,

Maris



Talisus

Delphi,

05-01-2595

Hello again! I know I don't technically have to write a letter today, but I wanted to talk to you without Miss A. seeing my letter before I send it. Have you gotten any of my letters yet? Miss A. said that I shouldn't be pushy and that it might take a little while for you to get them, but I just want to make sure you don't think I'm a horrible pen pal and just not writing to you or something; I always try my very best to be a good friend, so I would never do something mean like that. A lot of the kids in my class like to play mean pranks like that, they think it's funny to make other people think they're going to be friends with them except then they just laugh at them when they ask to hang out or something. Jerks. None of them even CARE about their pen pals, they just say exactly what Miss A. tells them to and don't even try to make friends with them. One of the girls in class tried that *joke* on me once and I didn't realize it at first, but then when she started making fun of me and saying, "Did you really think someone like *me* would be friends with someone like *you*?" I didn't let her get away with it. Turns out Miss A. didn't think pushing the girl and pulling her hair was a good way to teach her not to be mean because I ended up getting sent to the office and they called my parents. I ended up getting detention and Mom was NOT happy.

Really though, Delphi, everyone in my class is just horrible! Like today my table was supposed to clean up the classroom after arts and crafts, but guess what? The stupid boys at my table wouldn't help me! Jenson and Mikal have been best friends basically since they were born and they're ALWAYS getting together and causing trouble. When I told Miss A. they were being jerks and making ME do all the work, those stupid boys had the NERVE to call me a tattletale!

After we FINALLY got done picking up all the paint, glue, glitter, and construction paper (we were making pictures based on pieces of real art we liked) and putting it away I went to sit back down in my chair and sat right in a puddle of glue the boys had dumped there while I wasn't looking. It was all goopy and cold my dress was covered in it, some of it even dripped onto my shoes! I had to go to the nurse's office and call my grandma so she could bring some new clothes to wear since mine were covered in glue. But it gets worse! My grandma can't exactly see very good anymore and the clothes she brought for me didn't match at all! She brought me me bright red pants with polka dots on them, which I really like except she brought a PLAID shirt to go with them! Mom says I'm terrible at matching my own clothes and even I know plaid and polka dots DON'T go together. The nurse said I would just have to wear them since I had already missed enough class that day waiting for my grandma, and when I got back to class everyone laughed at me even more! I swear I'll get those boys back even if I get a hundred detentions for it and my mom grounds me for life. Mom's always telling me that I should "Do your very best to be nice to everyone," but I am NOT Talisus and I don't think Mom gets that being nice doesn't mean other people have to be nice back, especially when everyone in your class thinks it's cool to play mean pranks on people.

We have ten boys in our class and nine girls, so there's always one odd girl whenever we have to pair up to work in groups because obviously no girl is gonna pair with a boy and no boy is gonna pair with a girl, that would just be gross. Tauri and I used to always pair up since we were best friends, but now that she's not here anymore guess who that odd girl ALWAYS ends up being? ME. I always end up having to do twice the work on a project all because nobody ever partners with me. But what's worse than having to work by myself is when one of the boys is

absent that day and I have to pair with the extra boy. The last THREE times it's been Jenson or Mikal and I can't even focus on the project because I'm too busy making sure they're not trying to prank me. I swear Miss A. does it to me on purpose because she doesn't like me or something. I don't know why, I mean I don't hate HER or anything. Miss A. is a pretty good teacher most of the time, except for when she forgets that we haven't learned something yet and puts it on our next test anyway. That just sucks.

My most favorite subject is art since we sometimes get to go on field trips to different museums and see some of the famous paintings and stuff there, plus I really like to draw. This one time we even got to go to a museum that had a real live copy of this painting by a guy named Van Gogh. I think it was called Starry Night? Anyway, the tour guide told us that he was an artist from Earth and that he was one of the best painters of all time because, even though people didn't always like him or his paintings, he always did his very best to paint what he thought the world looked like. I tried to pretend I was him once and painted a picture of myself like I thought Van Gogh would have painted me, but it ended up kinda blobby and weird looking, I guess it's harder than it looks to paint like a real artist, maybe I should just stick to drawing. I know painters don't always paint things the way they really look, just how they see them, so do stars really look like Starry Night from Earth? That would be so cool if they did. I think if the stars looked like that from Tau Ceti-e I would wish it was always night so I could watch them forever (plus if it was always night I'd never have to worry about getting burned on the surface again).

Anyway Delphi, mom's calling me for dinner and she gets really mad if I ignore her for too long, so I guess it's good-bye for now. I hope you get my letters soon and write back to me

because I think Miss A. might try and lower my grade if I don't get any letters back that I can answer. So please do your very best and write back soon OK? Bye for now!

Your Friend,

Maris

P.S. I know it might be annoying but you're going to get another letter from me that I have to write in a few days since Miss A. isn't actually gonna know I wrote this letter and she wants us to write one letter a week. I know you'll understand, teachers can be so annoying sometimes.

Dear Delphi,

05-08-2595

I still haven't gotten any letters back from you so maybe you didn't notice it's been almost two weeks since my last letter. We've been on vacation from school for the yearly festival and Miss A. said we didn't have to write letters again until we came back. I don't know exactly how long ago the festival started, but Miss A. says it got started when translator paper was first invented. It was a really important day in our history Miss A. says because before that it was really hard for Tau Ceti-e to talk to the rest of the universe since our language is so tricky to translate. Everyone was so excited when this guy (nobody really knew what his real name was, but we know he called himself J.S.) invented the paper that the whole planet threw this big celebration in his honor. Since then the festival has been thrown every year at the same time and everyone gets off work and school in order to go to it. I wish you could have been here this year, Delphi, there was so much to see and do for the festival that I don't think I even managed to see half of it! Of course Mom and Dad still think I'm too little to walk around by myself, so we only got to see the things *they* wanted to see. It used to be that I got to walk around with Tauri and her older sister since she was older and "more responsible," my parents said. I always thought it was cool that Tauri had an older sister, I guess my parents decided I was enough trouble as it was and that they didn't need anymore kids running around the house. Anyway, it used to be that Tauri, her sister, and I would walk around looking at the different festival huts for hours and hours and my parents wouldn't even bat an eye, but now I'm not even allowed to go three feet away without my mom yelling at me to, "Come hold my hand, Maris, before you get yourself into trouble!"

During the last festival, before Tauri moved away, she and I snuck away from her older sister and found this really funny shaped hut painted red and purple with yellow windows with three gypsy ladies standing outside it. We asked them who they were and they said they were sisters and that they were traveling around the universe to different planets in order to share their, “magical herbs and spices,” with as many people as they could. The oldest sister with the short hair and big flapping poncho dress pulled a little glass bottle out from under her poncho and waved it at us, promising if we sprinkled a little on our pillows that all of our dreams would come true. Then the sister with the bright red hair got mad and said that we didn’t need something as silly as that, and she offered us a little pouch with two smooth stones in it. “Take these and put them into your pockets,” she said, “and, as long as they stay there, you’ll have good luck for everything you do!” Finally the last sister shook her head and said that we would be stupid to take either one of her sister’s remedies and that *she* was the one with the *true* magic. She handed Tauri and me each two blue and green beaded bracelets, promising us that if we put them on now and promised to never take them off that we would be best friends forever, no matter what happened.

When we finally got back to Tauri’s older sister she was really mad at us and had gone and found our parents because she didn’t know where we were. Both our parents yelled at us for wandering off on our own and asked us if we knew what could happen to kids who wander off on their own, but I didn’t mind getting in trouble because if Tauri and I would be friends forever then it was worth it. A couple months later it didn’t matter anymore because Tauri was gone. My mom said that no fake magic bracelet from “some wiley crazy-haired drifter” was going to be able to keep Tauri with me when her parents had gotten new jobs in a different star system and

that I should've known that woman was just trying to make me believe in something that wasn't real. I haven't even *heard* from Tauri since she moved away, she could have a completely new best friend by now and thrown her bracelet away, forgotten all about me. I still won't take my bracelet off though, because maybe someday I *will* see Tauri again and she *will* still have her bracelet. Then how awful it would be if I HAD taken mine off! I wonder if Tauri misses me as much as I miss her?

Maybe it's rude of me to keep bringing up an old best friend when I'm trying to make new friends, sorry Delphi. Hey, I know! We could make each other a friendship bracelet like the ones Tauri and I have and then send them back to each other with our next letters! I know it won't be exactly the same because a gypsy didn't make them and put magic in them, but it could still be cool right? Tell me what your favorite colors are when you get a chance, OK Delphi? I want to make sure I do my very best to make sure you'll like your bracelet so you don't take it off. Oh! You probably need to know what my favorite colors are too, huh? Well, like I said in my first letter, my favorite color is blue, but I really like green and purple too; Mom says it's weird that my favorite colors are ones that we don't have much of on our planet, but I think that's *why* they're my favorites. I wish someday I could visit you on Earth, Delphi, I want to see the ocean one day and learn how to swim so I can see all the fish and other animals that live under the water. Maybe when I'm a story collector one day I'll get to go to Earth and visit all the cool places I've read about in books.

OK Delphi, it's almost lunch time so I have to stop writing now, but I promise to get to work on your bracelet just as soon as I hear back from you! Please write soon, OK? Happy Belated Festival, Delphi, I hope you're having fun on Earth!

Your Friend,

Maris

Delphi,

05-08-2595

I know I'm writing another letter I don't have to, but I just HAD to tell you about what happened in school today! You know how I mentioned the yearly festival we have on Tau Ceti-e? After we all got back from vacation from that Miss A. thought it would be a good project idea if we each got to learn about different holidays from other planets. Everyone in the class got assigned a holiday from a different planet and we have to talk about stuff like what happens on the holiday and why it gets celebrated, and guess what?! I got assigned a holiday from your planet! Christmas! Even though I'm kind of excited to learn more about what it's like on your planet, it does kind of seem like this project is going to be a lot of work...especially since we aren't working in groups this time (not that I'm complaining considering how annoying everyone else in my class is). But I guess I'll just have to do my very best and hope that Miss A. actually gives us enough time to do the project this time. Once she only gave us like two days to do research on a whole planet! Everyone's projects ended up sucking royally and my mom was super mad when my report card came that month...Anyway, I know it's a short letter but I really just wanted to tell you that I get to learn about an Earth holiday and ask if maybe you could tell me about how you and your family celebrate it?

I really want you to get my letters soon Delphi. Everyone else has gotten at least two back, but I'm starting to worry that you don't like me and that's why I haven't gotten any letters from you. If it's because I named you after my pet then I can call you something different! Really, it was just the first name that popped into my head and I promise I didn't mean anything

by it! It isn't ALL my fault since you haven't actually written back to tell me what your real name is. But please send me a letter soon so we can learn more about each other. OK?

Maris

Dear Delphi,

05-12-2595

It was so amazing! Today we went on a field trip to this planet that's made up of every single book and story ever made! Miss A. told us that, in order to do the very best job on our holiday projects we had to do the very best research job we could and that that meant going to the biggest library ever built! Everybody in class was so excited and, for once, we were all on the same page (do you like my joke since we went to a library?). None of us has ever been that far away from home before. Each of us has grown up hearing stories about this planet but none of us ever imagined we'd get to go to the library planet before we were even grown up! There were so many books and shelves that they had to give us a combination map and book locator in order to even START figuring out what part of the library you have to go to in order to find what you're looking for! There were a lot of kids whose parents came as as chaperones. I wanted mine to come too, but they were too busy with work, I guess they just didn't think the library was anything special to visit since they've already been there a million times before.

But anyway...I found sooo many books about Christmas on Earth that I didn't know which ones I should read! I learned all about Christmas trees and how you decorate them with lights and this shimmery stuff the book called tinsel; it reminds me a little of the suits we have to wear on the surface, but way prettier and less scary. Some people even decorate outdoor Christmas trees with stuff for animals to eat, but those weren't quite as pretty as the indoor ones. I wish we had Christmas on Tau Ceti-e, it would be nice to spend a whole day just getting presents from people. Oh wait, that kinda sounds bad ,huh? I read this other book called The Christmas Carol by a guy named Charles Dickens, and it said that Christmas is supposed to be

more about giving than receiving. I guess that's good, but what if you give someone a present and they don't give you one back or even say thank you? I think that would be worse than not giving anyone any presents at all because nobody would even appreciate what you tried to do for them. Don't get me wrong, it's awesome that Scrooge gave the nice Cratchit family a good Christmas, but the best part was them thanking Scrooge because then everyone got to feel good about it.

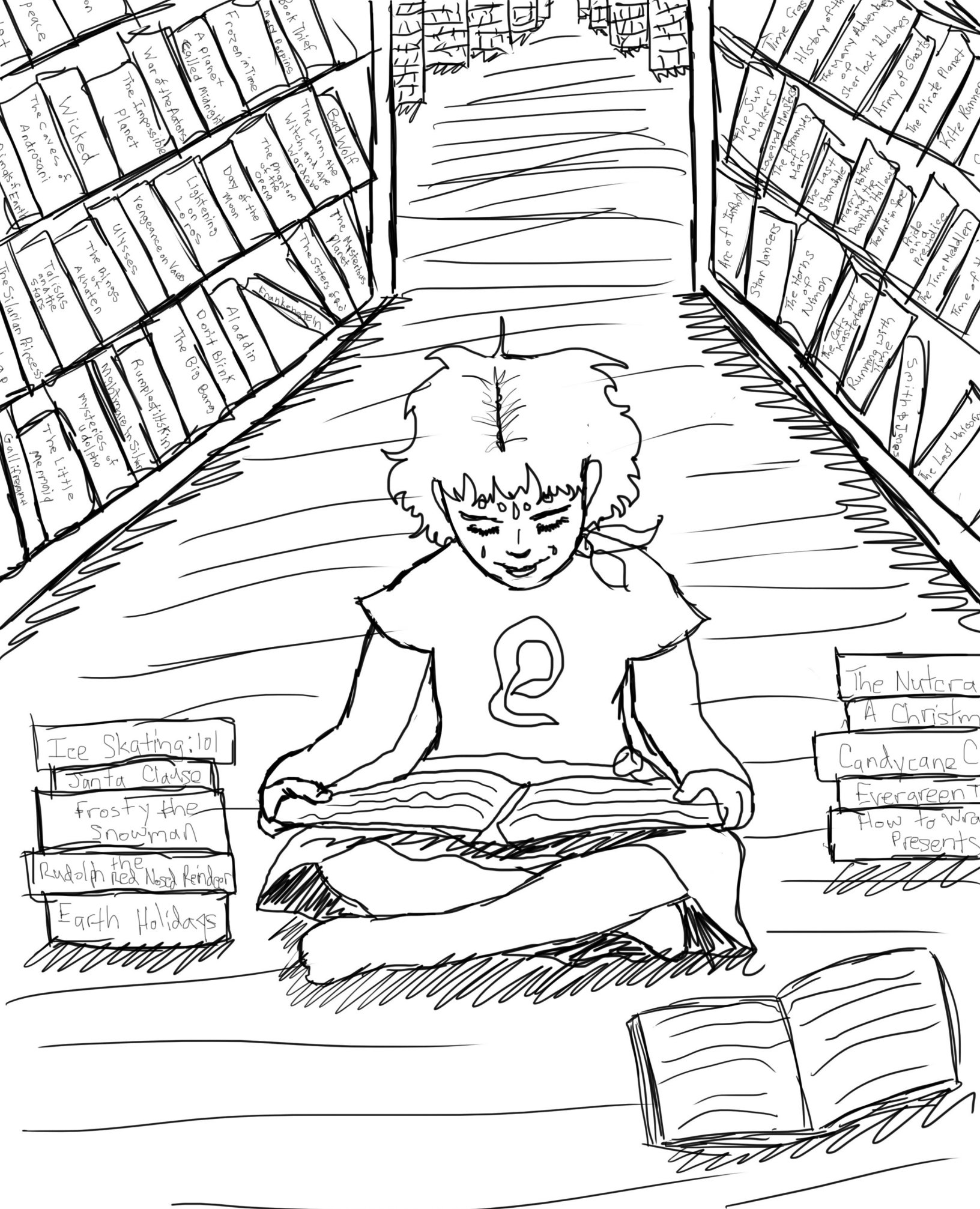
I also found out about this thing called ice skating where you put on these weird shoes with pieces of sharp metal on the bottom and glide around on frozen water. It sounded so scary and so hard to do, you must have to be like a professional to even try it! But there was this picture of two people skating together and the man was throwing the woman into the air and catching her. I think it must take a lot of trust to be able to do something like that with somebody else; I'm pretty sure my parents wouldn't be able to do that even if we did have ice on our planet because they're always too busy arguing. Do you spend Christmas with your family, Delphi? I'll bet you do. I bet that you get all kinds of fun presents from a whole bunch of people and that you even give people presents too! You probably have two or three Christmas trees in your house just so you can fit all the presents under them that everybody brings for each other. When everyone's done opening presents I bet all the kids go outside and go sledding while the adults stay inside and work on Christmas dinner. Then when you get bored you all make a giant snowman and find the perfect tree branches for his arms, the orangest carrot for his nose, the best coal for his eyes and buttons, and even a top hat that you took from your dad's closet. After everyone gets cold then I bet you all go inside and your moms and aunts give you hot chocolate with lots of

marshmallows floating on top. Christmas sounds way better than our lame yearly festival, now you probably think my planet is super boring.

Anyway, we didn't really get to stay at the library for as long as I wanted to because the librarians said something about having to close early for some reason. Anyway though it was still probably the best field trip I've ever been on. I hope I'll get to go back someday when I can stay for as long as I want to without anybody bothering me and telling me it's time to go back to the group. Have I asked you if you like books, Delphi? I must have. I have to go now though, Miss A. says it's already time for us to head home from school since we spent most of the day at the library. I'll write again soon, so please please PLEASE remember to write me back.

Your Friend,

Maris



Delphi,

05-12-2595

I've done something really bad. I don't just mean a little bad. I mean I did something really REALLY bad. It's so bad that I don't know if I should tell you because then you could get in trouble for being like my accomplice or something. I know you wouldn't tell anyone or anything, but if somebody somehow found out then I could get like arrested or something and then you could too because you knew about it. I just HAVE to tell someone though because it's driving me CRAZY! Please don't hate me, or think I'm a really terrible person. You know how in my assigned letter I was talking about how my class went to the library planet? Well I left something out about our trip, something I couldn't tell you in the other letter because then Miss A. would read it and turn me in. Okay: deep breath. I stole a book from the library. There I said it! I'm a thief! A crook! A common criminal! I've always hated people who take things that don't belong to them, and now look at me! I'm one of them! What am I going to do Delphi? What if Mom and Dad find it and then they tell the librarians and I get sent to the prison planet with all the other hardened criminals? What am I going to do Delphi? I can't hide the book forever because someone's bound to find out I have it eventually. The only one I can really tell about it is you Delphi because you're probably my best friend, even though we've never met and you've never sent me a letter back. I just know you'll understand. You have to understand!

Miss A. says we're supposed to, "Present information in a clear and organized fashion," so I'll try my very best even though she'll never see this. Here's what happened. When we got to the library Miss A. told us we were allowed to look around for our research as long as we paired off with a buddy. I got stuck with one of the stupid boys, thankfully not Jenson or Mikal this time

at least, and as soon as we walked away and couldn't see Miss A. anymore, he ditched me to find his friends instead. I would have been happy to get to walk around by myself, but I didn't want to get in trouble with Miss A. and have my parents find out, so I went after the idiot. But, like I said in my other letter, the library is really big, and I kinda got lost. That's when I ran into this kid from another planet who was looking at books about space animals. I asked him if he had seen anybody run past him that looked like a Cetian (that's what the other planets call us) but he said he hadn't.

By then I was pretty lost and the stupid boy who was supposed to be my partner had our map, so I had to ask this boy if I could look at his map. He told me that he didn't use a map anymore since he'd been to the library so many times that he knew where just about everything was. I thought he was lying, so I asked him to show me where the books on Earth holidays were, and he took me right to the section and even stayed and helped me figure out which books were the best! He told me his name was Peter and that he knew his way around so well because his dad was *actually a librarian!* I couldn't believe I met a boy so cool while visiting another planet! He wasn't anything like the boys in my class, he didn't pick on me or try to prank me ONCE while he was helping me! I really wish Peter went to my school, I bet he would make those other boys look so dumb they wouldn't even know WHAT to do!

When I was done reading the books and taking notes for my project he even helped me put the books back where we'd found them. I only had the *Christmas Carol* book left to re-shelf, but I just couldn't bring myself to put it back, the story had been so wonderful that I wanted to keep it and read it over and over again! Well the boy must have known what I was thinking somehow because he said that it was OK if I didn't put the book back right away. He said he

sometimes forgot to put books back right away because he just got so excited about reading them, but that you could always just leave the books on the desk by the door and the librarians would put them back. He said it was nice meeting me, but that he had to go meet his dad so they could go home. After he left I got so into reading the book that, before long, I lost track of time and realized it was almost time to meet back up with the class! I put all my books back and put my notebooks in my backpack and ran off to meet Miss A.

Before we left Miss A. told us that we had all better make sure we put our books back because books had been going missing lately and none of us wanted to be accused of stealing anything. She said the librarians had just installed memory lenses on some of the shelves so that the next time the a book went missing they would know exactly who had it last. Well I wasn't really paying much attention before because I was busy zipping up my backpack (I was in such a hurry before that I didn't even realize it was hanging open), but then I saw *The Christmas Carol* had ended up in my backpack just as Miss A. said the part about stealing! I was so afraid someone would see the book in my bag and think I was trying to steal it that I just zipped my backpack closed and hoped no one saw me! I didn't THINK I saw any memory lenses nearby when I was looking at the Christmas books, but I just don't know! They're supposed to be hard to see for a reason!

I knew I couldn't put the book back now because we were leaving and Miss A. doesn't like to be late. I looked around for the desk Peter was talking about, but there were too many different desks around and I didn't know which one was right! So I ended up taking the book home with me! Oh Delphi what should I do? I don't want to go to jail! Especially because it really wasn't all my fault in the first place! Maybe if I bring the book back and tell them what

happened with that kid then they'll forgive me and everything will be ok after all...Oh who am I kidding Delphi, adults never understand or listen to kids when we try to tell them something. I think I better go now. I need to figure out what to do with this book soon or else the librarians are sure to find out it was I who took it and then I won't get ANY chance at all to give it back before they notice. If I get thrown in prison then good-bye Delphi, and Merry Christmas.

Maris

Delphi,

05-13-2595

My mom is driving me nuts! She's been bugging me for DAYS now to "stop spending so much time in my room and come be with the family." I should tell her she should try being with the family when she has a big giant secret to hide! Plus all Mom and Dad do anymore is fight, fight, fight. I can't stand it! I remember when I was little they were always so happy and smiled at each other all the time. Once I got home from school and mom and dad had taken their shoes off and were dancing around the house SINGING! I told them they were crazy, but then my dad just picked me up and made ME dance with them! We danced around the house for hours. It was way past dinner time by the time Mom finally pulled me off from where I was dancing on my dad's feet. She said we'd just have to have sweets for dinner since it was too late to make real food. I couldn't believe it! Mom almost NEVER lets us have sweets, let alone for a meal! After we ate, Mom and Dad even let me stay up past my bedtime with them (I ended up falling asleep on the couch)! That's still the best night I ever remember.

Yesterday, Mom finally decided that she would MAKE me come out of my room even though I told her I had a bunch of homework to do; I thought for sure that excuse would work! She told me that we were going to spend more time together as a family and that we were going out to see a concert that night, all three of us. But by the time I got home from school Dad still wasn't back from work and Mom was getting mad. She said that if we didn't leave soon we wouldn't get to see the concert at all (that would have been fine with me). Mom finally decided that we would just have to go without Dad, so we got in the ship and she sped us to the big theater downtown.

By the time we got to the theater the concert had already started and when my mom told the ushers we had tickets and had just been running a little late they said there was no way we could go into the theater in the middle of a song, that we had to wait until it was over. Well I thought that sounded ok, but Mom argued and argued and ARGUED with them and said that she didn't think it was very good customer service for them not to let us into the theater when she'd "paid good money to see this." She kept yelling until finally she said she wanted to speak with their manager. I was afraid we were going to get thrown out of the theater when she said that and that everyone at school would find out how crazy my mom was. Thankfully though we didn't end up waiting for the ushers to find their manager because the first song ended right as they were going to find him and we were still allowed into the theater.

There weren't as many people at the concert as I thought there'd be. Everyone at school always talks about how awesome concerts are and how many people show up to them, but then the musicians started playing the next song and I realized why there weren't more people. Mom had taken me to a *classical music* concert, aka the most boring, uncool thing I could ever be seen at. We ended up having to sit in these crummy blue hover seats for like three hours listening to the *musicians* play what sounded like the same song over and over again. Mom didn't even listen to most of it because she was too busy looking at her Holophone and trying to call my dad to even pretend to be paying attention to the music. When the concert was over, Mom didn't even bother asking me what I thought of the music and she just drove us home without even turning on the sound system. By the time we got home, my dad had finally gotten back from work, and as soon as we got in the door he and my mom got in a huge argument about how he "never makes time for his family." I don't really think it's his fault, though, if he has to stay late at work.

Dad's job is super important for everybody on our planet, not just me and Mom. Without Dad making sure everything stays working at the power planet, it would stop working and then nobody would have power at all! I don't know why Mom doesn't understand that. Why do parents have to be so dumb and argue all the time, Delphi? It's so stupid because every time they yell at each other they just end up saying the same things over and over again and nothing ever changes. I guess that doing your very best to get along with other people doesn't apply to my mom and dad.

I'll bet your parents don't argue all the time, Delphi. They're probably like my parents were when I was still little and I bet you guys all get along great and go on family outings on the weekends. Just be careful though, Delphi, because you never really know when your parents are gonna turn into crazy people and, once they do, there's no going back from there. I wish I had a sister, then at least somebody in my house would want to talk to me about stuff I actually like instead of stupid things like school and grades. You probably have a sister that you're best friends with and you get to hang out all the time and even share outfits with. Even though sometimes you probably get mad at each other, I bet you spend a lot of time together. I guess the closest thing I have to a sister is Delphi the sulroe, but all she does is eat and sleep all day so she's not a very good substitute.

I gotta go now, sorry. Mom's yelling that I have to give Delphi the sulroe a bath. Ugh. I'll write again soon, Delphi.

Maris

P.S. I still don't know what to do with the book. Even though I feel really bad about accidentally stealing it, I've been sneak reading it at night and I still really love it. Maybe if I returned the book the librarians would realize I'm just like Scrooge, I make mistakes sometimes, but, eventually, I do fix them! I'm not even as bad as Scrooge though! He made mistakes for a really long time before he changed and then people forgave him, and I've only made one mistake! So the librarians will have to forgive me, right? I don't know, Delphi, maybe my mom was right when she said I don't know how to tell when something is real and when it's not. She says that not everything you read in stories is how things are in real life, but aren't they based on real life? What if this ISN'T like Charles Dickens' book?! What if the librarians don't forgive me for my mistake?! What if they think I stole the book on purpose even if I tell them it was an accident?! I'm doomed.

Delphi,

05-14-2595

It's almost been a week and I haven't been able to stop thinking about how much trouble I'm going to be in if someone finds out about me. I've been so scared that my mom or dad will come into my room and find the book that I've had to re-hide it like at least a hundred times. This stupid book is driving me crazy! I keep having nightmares that the librarians come and find me and see that I really *did* steal the book and then they send me to the prison planet for all eternity and my parents don't even come visit me because they're so mad at me. Oh my gosh. What if Delphi the sulroe finds it and eats it?! I gotta go, Delphi, I've gotta go re-hide that book before that food crazy animal finds it!

OK, I'm back. Delphi the sulroe shouldn't be able to get to the book now even if she tries. I hid it under a bunch of old blankets on the top shelf of my closet this time and, since sulroes aren't very good at jumping or flying, it should be safe there. Maybe I should just get rid of the book so that, even if the librarians DO come looking for it I can just say they must be wrong since I don't have a book like that. But I don't know if I could really make myself do anything to hurt a book on purpose...I love stories and it would be just awful if I did anything bad to one of them! If somebody found out that I destroyed something so important then I could never become the greatest storyteller in the universe! Nobody would ever trust a storyteller who destroyed a story on *purpose*! I've always done my very best to treat stories like Mom and Dad taught me, but now I've gone and stolen one away from it's home and even thought about

destroying it. What if I'm turning into a hardened criminal?! Ah! Mom's knocking on my door! I gotta stash this letter!

Wow that was close. Mom almost saw the letter! She asked what I was doing and I lied and said homework. I don't know if she believed me or not, but it seems OK for now. I know what you're thinking, Delphi, why don't I just tell my parents what I did? If I explain that it was just a mistake then they're sure to understand and help me fix it, right? It's a good idea, in theory, Delphi, but in practice I know my mom would completely flip out. She says I should tell her whenever anything's bothering me, but I don't think she took into account if I did something really bad that I can't tell her about without her getting mad.

If I can't destroy the book and I don't know how to make it back to the library planet without my parents finding out, what else can I do? Maybe I could stick it in Jenson or Mikal's backpacks at school? But then if they found it they would know it had to be me who put it there because I was the only one doing a project about Christmas! Or maybe I can put the book in my backpack and just pretend I didn't know it was there. When the librarians come after me I could just say I don't know where it came from or who put it there. That's dumb though, everybody knows what a book from the library planet looks like, and it's not like I wouldn't have used my backpack since I went to the library. They'd definitely find me out, there's no way I'd get away with pretending I didn't know where it came from.

I have no other option, I know what I have to do. I have to get that book back to the library planet! But how can I do it without anyone knowing I'm gone? I guess the library planet isn't sooo far away, I think it only took us three hours by shuttle, so if I could somehow sneak

out after Mom and Dad think I'm asleep then maybe it'll work...But what if they suddenly decide to come check on me in the middle of the night and then they freak out because I'm not there?! I know this is a really bad idea since all the stories I've read say that anybody who tries to run away without someone noticing always ends up getting caught. But this is really important, so I can't mess it up! I bet if I go during school then Mom and Dad will be at work and won't even be thinking about me. I'll just have to be really quick because school only lasts for 7 hours.

Well Delphi, I better go make plans to go to the library planet tomorrow, maybe it's too soon, but I just can't wait another day knowing I could get caught at any minute! Wish me luck Delphi, I hope you'll write to me if I end up on the prison planet!

Maris

I know I said I had to go, but I just realized I have no idea how I'm going to get enough money to get to and from the library planet... I only have part of the money myself since Mom took away my allowance because of the incident with the other Delphi. What am I gonna do? I could try and see if Mom will give me back my allowance, but then she would know something was up (plus there's no way she's gonna forgive me for her shoes this soon). I'm too young to get a job, and that would take too long anyway. I mean I could- No. That would be really bad. I couldn't do that. But, this IS an emergency...Sorry for my rambling, Delphi, you see, Dad keep his money on top of his dresser and I could probably take some of it without him noticing. I know it's not a super good idea, but if I did it then I could just slip the money back after my next birthday (Grandma always gives me money in a card). If I did that then it wouldn't really be

stealing, right? It would just be because I have no other choice. Just like the Aladdin story on your planet, right Delphi? If he didn't steal bread he would have gone hungry and then never would have met Princess Jasmine and lived happily ever after. I don't care about the lovey-dovey stuff, but I definitely don't want a bad ending to MY story. OK, Delphi, I'm going to do it. I'll let you know how things go.

Maris

Dear Delphi,

05-14-2595

It's been so much fun talking to you that I almost forgot it was only because of an assignment for school! Today Miss A. says since it's almost the end of our school year it's time for us to write one last letter to our pen pals from Earth. She says she wants us to be able to focus on getting ready for our exams that are coming up. I'm not so sure how well the exams are gonna go for me since I kind of have trouble with tests. I just think it's so unfair to ask us right on the spot to come up with stuff we learned about at the beginning of the year! How am I supposed to be able to remember all that when it happened like forever ago! I guess I'll just have to do my very best and hope that my grades will be good. Miss A. doesn't want us to talk about end of school stuff in this letter because she says that's boring and our pen pals probably don't want to hear about exams and stuff. Instead, Miss A. wants us to talk about what we're going to do for our end of the year vacation that's coming up soon. I don't know if *I'd* call it a vacation though because *my* family never actually goes anywhere because of Dad's job at the energy plant. Miss A. said that I should talk about where I *wish* I was going for vacation instead.

I wish that my mom and dad would go on vacation from work so that they could take me to visit a bunch of different planets around the universe so that I could collect different stories. I would learn stories about pirates on Alpha Centauri who steal the nolgons and then are foiled by a super secret Alpha Centauri task force that specializes in kicking butt! Next we'd visit Belthenia and I would get to see the tallest waterfall in the whole universe! If I'm lucky I might even get to learn about the civilization of people who live in the caves behind the waterfall and how they can only speak in the language of water. In my wish, Mom and Dad would even

surprise me and take me to visit you on Earth, Delphi, and we would arrive just in time for Christmas (and you know how much Christmas has been on my mind lately)! We'd get to watch it snow and even learn how to ice skate! Maybe, if I was good, Mom and Dad might even buy us all hot chocolate and candy canes and we would go see a performance of "The Nutcracker!"

Or maybe Mom and Dad would decide to go to just one planet, but we wouldn't be able to decide which planet to pick, so dad would make a list and I'd have to close my eyes and point to one. Of course we would end up going to the great circus planet and I would get to see animals from planets all across space! There'd be lions and elephants from Earth, giant melroths from Solphirus, beltirks from Calodius, and even the famous multi-colored ragiloids from Vosia! All the animals would have bright colored ribbons tied to them and they would all know how to do at least five different tricks. Mom and Dad would buy me all kinds of sweets and snacks to eat while we watched the shows, and afterward I would even get to go for a ride on one of the Earth elephants! I would get my face painted, get a balloon animal from one of the clowns, and I would play at ALL of the game booths and win a giant stuffed animal to take home with me! I remember when Tauri went to the circus planet that's what she said she did.

I know I won't really get to do any of those things on my vacation. We'll probably just go and visit my grandma, but it's still fun to imagine that I'll be doing something exciting instead of something boring. Grandma's nice and all; it would just be a whole lot cooler if we got to go somewhere other than just across the planet for once. Maybe when I'm older Mom and Dad will let me go to some of the other planets by myself since they're always so busy. It would be awesome if I could go back to the library planet on my own. What time of year is it on Earth now

Delphi? I know our year is only half as long as yours, even though our planet is older, but I still don't know exactly how your calendar works.

Miss A. says we shouldn't spend too much time saying good-bye to our new friends because it'd be sad, so I'm not going to say good-bye at all! Even though I know I have to focus on exams soon, and even though I still haven't heard back from you, I'm still going to keep writing to you anyway! I think, once you get my letters, you'll want to be friends with me and keep writing, too! So good-bye Delphi, but only for a little while! I'll write to you again when exams are over! What's it like on your planet at the end of the year? Do you have a lot of exams too?

Your Friend,

Maris

I'm sitting on the shuttle we use to travel to different planets and I think I'm in trouble. I don't mean future trouble this time either, I mean actual right now, not good, trouble. I did what I said I was going to do: I ditched school today to take the shuttle to the library planet, I even got enough money to make sure I would have enough for the ride there AND back. But now something's gone really wrong and I don't know where I am. Everything started out fine. I got on the right shuttle and made sure I knew how many stops it was until the library planet, but I was just so tired from staying up too late planning my trip that I fell asleep in my seat. By the time I woke up I didn't know how many stops it had been, but I knew it was too many because the constellations we were passing didn't look familiar to me. I didn't know what to do, so I just stayed on the shuttle and hoped that we'd eventually end up somewhere I knew. Soon, though, we got to the last stop and the pilot said that everybody had to get off here, no exceptions, so I did. I really wish I'd picked one of the other stops to get off at though because this planet is strange to me and there are too many people around that whose planets of origin I can't guess.

I want to go home. It's too cold on this planet. Tau Ceti-e is known for being really warm since we're so close to our star, but I think this planet must be a very long way away from its' star. If I don't figure something out soon I'll have to spend the rest of my money to buy something warmer to wear, even if that means I won't have enough money to get back home. How far away am I? Maybe if I walk around a bit I'll find a map, or at least something that says what planet I've ended up on. But what if the shuttle comes back while I'm gone and then I miss

the only ride back to Tau Ceti-e for the day? I don't even see a shuttle schedule anywhere that I can look at to see when the next pick up is. Maybe the shuttle only drops people *off* here and doesn't pick anybody *up*? I think I'll have a look around after all, but I won't be gone for long since I want to make sure I don't get any MORE lost than I already am.

This reminds me of the time I got lost at the market when I was little. My mom was trying to haggle with the produce guy and I got bored listening and wandered off. I didn't even realize it happened. One minute my mom was right there, and the next minute a strange lady with big bug-eyed glasses was asking me if I was lost. I ended up wandering in circles for, what seemed like, a long time before my mom finally found me. She was crying and told me not to ever scare her like that again, and didn't I know how dangerous it was to wander off by myself? I guess I've always had a tendency to go off by myself and get lost. Even though we argue sometimes and she doesn't always understand me, I wish my mom would come and find me now. But Mom and Dad think I'm at school, so I have to fix this on my own. Maybe that's why I brought my notebook and am pretending you're here to help me, Delphi. I know it's lame to be scared, but then I guess I'm kinda lame. I'll be back soon, Delphi, I'm going to check around for a shuttle schedule.

Maris

I had to buy something warmer to wear because the wind is really cold here. There was only one store close to where the shuttle stop was and the guy running it had a big scar across his face and looked mean. He said I didn't have enough money for a real coat, but he sold me the heavy piece of fabric draped over the table he sat at and said I could use it for a poncho if I cut a hole in it. When I said I didn't have anything to cut the hole with he just scowled at me and ripped a hole in the fabric with his bare hands! I was so scared that I just gave him the rest of the money I had and put the poncho on while I was backing away.

When I went to take a step to head back to the shuttle stop to wait, I tripped on a rock and ended up stepping on the tail of a really big, and really hairy, animal. It turned around and stared at me, then it started growling and its hair stood up on the back of its neck. I knew right away that it was a Mulrock and that I was in big, BIG trouble now. I ran away as fast as I could and forgot all about trying to stay close to the bus stop. All I knew was that I had to get away from the big sharp Mulrock teeth that were chasing me and trying to bite at my heels. I ran as fast as I could, but the Mulrock was big and could keep up with me. Just when I thought I was starting to get away from it, I fell and scraped my hands and both knees on the stone covered ground; it was then that the Mulrock almost had me! Finally I ducked into an alleyway. I turned around a big brownish red building, and down another side street before I looked back and realized I wasn't being chased anymore.

I sat down on an old bench next to this even older, broken looking fountain. It took me forever to catch my breath, it felt like my lungs were on fire! Now I'm sitting here trying to

ignore the stinging coming from my hands and knees where I fell and cut them and wondering if I'll ever make it back home. I don't know if I will though because I realized I ran so far and made so many circles that now I don't even know which direction the shuttle stop is anymore. Not that it matters if I can find the shuttle stop or not because I don't have any money to get a ride back to Tau Ceti-e. I'm in such a mess, Delphi. I should've listened to all those stories a lot better before I tried to go back to the library planet by myself. How well did being on his own go for Talisus? He was the best horse ever and he still got into trouble when he was by himself. I'm just average, so what's going to happen to me? Maybe a goddess will take pity on me and give me some stars to help me. Ha. Yeah right.

Do you think my parents will find me, Delphi? They've probably realized I'm gone by now, but will they be able to figure out where I tried to go or where I actually ended up? Mom's going to be SO mad at me, especially when I have to tell her about how I stole some of the money Dad keeps on his dresser so I could make it back from the library planet. I was going to pay Dad back after my next birthday because I knew he wouldn't miss it before then, but now he's going to know for sure and then he's going to hate me. Why can't my very best BE the very best, Delphi? How come I can't do anything right even when I try? What else can I do e

x

c

e

p

t

Dear Maris,

05-15-2595

I'm sorry. I am so so sorry, but the letters you've been trying to send to your pen pal (Delphi, was it?) have gotten a bit flung about in space and haven't ended up exactly where you intended them to go. You see when there's a temporal shift in an area of space where a mail ship is traveling, some of it's contents can accidentally be displaced. Thus your letters end up somewhere completely different from where they're supposed to go; say the inside of a traveling man's space ship on his way to visit Earth. It really is quite remarkable the way the universe works because, as it turns out, I ended up running into you during my latest visit to the planet Falpar. I couldn't believe it when I saw someone as young as you in such a place, and so far from home. (I couldn't believe that you'd managed to fall asleep there too! There are a lot of shady characters that roam that planet! But perhaps you didn't know?)

I know you must be very confused as to how you got home without knowing it, so allow me to explain. You see, when I saw you and found the letter you had been writing on the ground, I thought it best I return you to where you belong since it was the least I could do to apologize for reading your letters when they weren't supposed to be for me. I also apologize for not being able to do anything about your scrapes, I seem to have misplaced my first-aid kit somewhere in my ship; I really **MUST** do something about the organization in here. Anyway... I'm a bit bad with directions and such, so it's possible you didn't end up in *quite* the right place you were supposed to, though I can't imagine I was *too* far off. Oh and you might also be wondering about that little *trinket* I found on the ground next to your latest letter. Well you'll be happy to know that I've returned it to its proper place in the library and explained to the librarians that *I* had

simply been in a rush the last time I left the planet and had forgotten to put all of my books back before I left (Charles Dickens is one of my favorites, you see). Though I know through your letters that you are aware stealing is not a practice someone should make a habit of (even if it is only by mistake) I should tell you that stealing from someplace like the library is not quite as high a crime as you thought. Yes, though the librarians have likely been looking for the lost book and may have come to you to get it back, they certainly would not have taken you to the prison planet for it; though you're parents likely would have had to donate a bit of money back to the library in order to make up your mistake. Oh! One moment, my ship seems to have entered an asteroid storm without my knowledge; the autopilot must be malfunctioning again...

Dear Maris,

(I apologize for taking so long, navigating through those asteroids proved a bit more of a task than I thought. Then there was the encounter with the Silu- Ah, but never mind, it's not important) I have thoroughly enjoyed reading your letters; you have quite a good grasp of language for one so young! I am certain you have great things awaiting you in the future. I have traveled to many different planets and star systems across the universe and have yet to visit your Tau Ceti-e, a rare occurrence for someone like me. I am very curious about the translator paper you have described as it can even translate into my own native language (which is very difficult indeed). I think your wish to travel the universe and collect people's stories is something you should never ever give up on because stories are what makes up each and every one of us and, the more you have, the less you have to fear of ever being truly alone. I know it's hard on you that your parents don't always seem to get along or understand you, and I won't say it will get

better right away, but know that it *will* get better eventually. Parents are a tricky business to figure out sometimes, but I know you're smart enough to keep at it until you get it!

Growing up is hard on everyone (believe me I *still* don't think I'm grown up), but it's also a lot of fun! You get to do all sorts of things in school that help you learn a lot of really great stories, AND you get to go on so many fun and fantastic adventures when it's field trip time! Someday maybe you'll never want to stop growing up! Who says there's a limit of how long it takes for someone to be fully grown anyway? Maybe your mom and dad just need to be reminded sometimes how fun it can be to be your age, and that's your job to take on now! Help them remember how to have fun and go on silly or exciting adventures, even if they're just in your own back yard! Do people on your planet have back yards? I think everyone must have some kind of back yard, why I once visited a planet where back yards were at least five times as big as front yards, and there was a special day of the year entirely devoted to the celebration of back yards and- sorry...that got away from me a bit.

Anyway, it's important to remember that there are times when your parents will ask you to work hard and to be serious rather than silly and fun loving, but we all need that balance. Your parents will always want you to "Do your very best," but just know that they're trying to do THEIR very best for you too! Oh my, the anti-gravity alarm is going off on my ship, I'll be having to go take care of that now, so I'll say good-bye. If you DO happen to start traveling to different planets someday, then perhaps we'll see each other again and you can tell me about all the new stories you've collected. Keep being yourself, Maris, and don't forget what I said!

Your Friend,

"D"

Dear Mr. D,

05-15-2595

Thank you very much for rescuing me from Falpar, getting me back to my home planet before anyone noticed I was gone, and most of all for returning the library book I had taken without permission. I guess you read all of my letters, so I'm sorry for how disorganized and informal I was much of the time; if I had known I was speaking to an adult I would have written more carefully. However, I don't understand why you waited so long before writing back to say that my letters had been getting lost? Maybe you thought I was so desperate for a friend that it wouldn't matter if it was someone my own age or not? Well, as you know, adults don't really understand me very well, so I think this will probably be the last letter you get from me. As for your advice on my parents, I won't promise to follow it (after all, you are a stranger), but I might at least think about it. Please don't think I am ungrateful for everything you did for me today, I just think I'd rather forget this whole thing ever happened. I think I will have to sit down and think hard about what kind of person I am and hope I can do better in the future. Thank you again, sir, for all your help.

Sincerely,

Maris of Tau Ceti-e

Delphi,

06-15-2595

Hi again, it's Maris. I know it's been a while, but it's the last day of the year on Tau Ceti-
e and I wanted to write to you. I know you aren't REALLY Delphi, but that's how I still think of
you. I wanted to tell you that Mom and Dad have started to get along better now since they hired
more people to work at the power plant and Dad doesn't have to work so many extra hours
anymore. I should also tell you that I told Mom and Dad what happened with *A Christmas Carol*
and how I got lost trying to return the book to the library planet and you ended up saving me; I
even told Dad about the money I took from his dresser. I don't think they believed me at first, but
then I showed them your letter and their eyes got really big. They were pretty mad at first and
yelled a lot. Mom said she couldn't believe I thought I couldn't tell her what happened, and Dad
was upset that I broke his trust; they basically said I was grounded forever.

A few days later I think Mom and Dad calmed down a little and they told me I did the
right thing by telling them what happened, even though I should have told them before all the
crazy stuff happened. Mom said if I did *really* well on my end of the year exams at school AND
started taking more responsibility for my chores around the house (like taking care of the other
Delphi and making sure she doesn't destroy anything) that they *might* un-ground me for end of
the year vacation. It turns out I'm not as bad at tests I thought (if I actually study for them) and I
even ended up getting the highest grades in the class! Boy was Miss A. surprised! You should've
seen her face! You would've fallen on the ground laughing!

When Mom and Dad came to get me from school that day I showed them my exam
scores and they told me they were proud of me. I know they've probably told me they were

proud of me before, but I was SO happy to hear it after all the bad stuff I've done this year. I guess I was wrong when I thought Mom and Dad were going to hate me forever. We didn't end up going to the circus planet or anything (since I DID still do a lot of bad things) this year, but Mom and Dad said if I really try my very best this year that we might get to go on a bigger vacation next year. So I just wanted to say thanks again for everything, Delphi, and I hope you're having fun traveling the universe!

Your Friend,

Maris

P.S. I almost forgot! I got a letter from Tauri the other day and it turns out she and her family are coming back to Tau Ceti-e to live again soon! I can't wait to see my best friend again and tell her all about my crazy adventures while she was gone! She'll be so surprised when I tell her about you too! Bye for now, Delphi!