

Chapter 1: Alpha and Omega

“Don’t!” the boy yelled. “Don’t trust her!”

The familiar voice rang out through the girl’s ears, as a translucent image of the speaker appeared in front of her, fixed upon a thin screen. This was both an image and a voice she thought she would never experience again. It was a moment she wanted to savor. But the boy’s shouts prevented her from lingering in that moment.

“Do you hear me?” the boy yelled at the girl again. “Do not trust her! I know you, and I know you’re going to want to trust her. But don’t!”

“Who? Don’t trust who?”

“Whatever you do, don’t trust – “

A tremendous explosion erupted in the background. The girl thought she heard a piece of the name, but she couldn’t make it out. The information seemed rather moot at this point anyway. Unless...

The footsteps grew louder as she heard the guards approaching the door. She heard the distinct click of a lever as someone on the other side futilely attempted to engage the airlocks. She realized that her time was now very limited and quickened her pace on the keypad beyond what she had originally thought was quite fast. She heard muffled voices, followed a few seconds later by a sharp,

crackling sound that reminded her of the sound a communication's device made during a bad solar flare. Then, she saw the sparks coming through the door and understood what was happening. The guards were using a laser torch to melt through the door.

She had played out this scenario in her head many times over, and each time she had thought it would be fear that she'd experience most. And while fear certainly was present, there were other feelings that surprisingly and easily superseded her fear. Perhaps the strongest emotion she felt now was loss. She knew that the soldiers arriving at the door meant that someone she loved was certainly dead. If they were now coming for her they must have first gone through him. How could she be immersed in danger and foster fear, knowing that her greatest fear was already realized by someone she loved, by someone who had laid down his life for her? If he could face death for someone he loved, then she could face death for the memories of one she loved. One she still loves. At this present moment separation seemed a much worse fate than death, so what was the cost of death if its reward was reunion?

But in the very moment in which the girl embraced death, she ironically experienced overwhelming hope. She was confident in her purpose and mission, and hope was the product of that confidence. Or was it the cause? Either way, the girl knew her mission and she knew what the outcome needed to be. She could not fail.

She had done nearly all that she could do, and now relied on the computer to do its job. The data was configuring at what seemed like an astonishingly slow rate. 85...86...87. With each percentage gained, her assailants seemed to cut through another inch of the door. Inches and seconds. That's all that now separated her from success or failure, and all that separated her from no the promise that all was not lost. She remembered one last trick she had to employ, and began frantically typing again. 93...94...95. She could now see the soldiers' dark outlines appearing through the severed door, as the large chunk which had been cut out was eased out of its newly created frame.

The soldiers looked as though they had come dressed for another intergalactic war. The soldier who appeared to be the leader was even more heavily armored than the others, covered from head to toe with what appeared to be scaled armor. The girl had only ever seen such armor once before, as only the elite soldiers were said to wear it, and even then, they usually only wore it under special circumstances. Soldiers on earth did not have need of technology this advanced, as humanity had resided in a halcyon period since the end of the Great War. Now, this Farklane armor was worn mostly by soldiers who were pressing on into the dark recesses of space, or those who maintained order over the highest security prisons in the galaxy.

Regardless of the reason, this soldier the girl now saw was wearing such armor. With it, he could chase his enemies through nearly any extreme. He could survive the harsh tempests or the intense solar radiation of Ardua. He could

survive an assault by 10 of the most violent prisoners on Farklane (for which the armor was named). Or he could live to face another day after being bitten by a powerful lithodent on Alpha Xerox. The armor could be tremendously useful in dire circumstances. But not only did the armor serve this function of survival in harsh conditions, its unique and originally intended function still resided within the armor, even if said function was rarely needed or utilized. The technology made the wearer nearly invulnerable to plasma or heat based weapons, which were practically all that was used today, and which was, unfortunately, the only trick the girl still had up her sleeve.

The soldiers made eye contact with the girl. Realizing she was only a teenager, they seemed to relax in posture, though not in intent. The leader barked a command to one of his subordinates, a short, **red bearded man**. The leader placed his hand on the soldier's back and giving him a helpful nudge through the small hole in the door. While the soldier's body blocked the line of sight of the weapons that were trained on her, the girl quickly pressed a button. At that moment, the soldier who had just leaned his torso over the threshold was promptly severed into two. It was an eerie sight to behold, as the dying soldier's mouth kept opening, as if to attempt to verbalize the agony on his face, yet no sound came out. His diaphragm was left behind in the other part of his also still writhing body.

As the girl and the soldiers all took this in, the leader pushed the others aside, lowered his helmet, and sealed it. With the sealing of the soldier's Farklane helmet, the girl

knew her fate was sealed along with it. 97...98...99. She was fortunate that the leader had not stepped through the plasma field first, as his armor would have likely left him unscathed, with an unhindered path between he and the girl. But while the plasma shield had taken her nearly home – if such a phrase could be used in her situation – that final one percent may have well been one hundred if she couldn't complete her task.

The leader climbed his way through the hole in the door, getting his head across the threshold without issue. But as he began to maneuver his **left arm** through the door, the girl heard him yell in pain. She saw the soldier drop his gun. But wait, he didn't drop his gun, but rather his whole hand. It appeared as though his suit had malfunctioned and failed to complete the seal between his glove and his forearm, leaving his wrist exposed...100. The girl pressed her last button as the soldier peeled his fingers – which were still clutched tightly to the gun - off the trigger guard and handle. The soldier picked up his weapon with his right hand. The leader raised the weapon purposefully, with a look of hatred in his eyes, and fired.

The girl crumbled to the ground. Her small contorted frame and tangled dark hair covering her face made her look like nothing more than a long forgotten rag doll.

Jada was dead.

“Captain! Are you all right, sir?” shouted one of the soldiers. His voice was filled only with fear, and absent of

any noticeable altruistic concern. His experiences with the captain made him understand that injury and defeat were two things the captain hated, especially when they came hand in hand. While he hadn't seen either happen often to his leader, it was because he had such a strong aversion and reaction to such things that the captain's subordinates did their best to ensure he never encountered them.

The captain did not respond. He stood up and walked over to the control panel, and with a few quick strokes, the plasma shield was down and the airlocks disengaged. While the captain's arm was undeniably in pain, he knew that he could waste no time in his attempt to fix the huge headache this girl had created for him. Plus, plasma weaponry had the wonderful benefit of cauterizing the wounds they created, which meant there was really nothing more that had to be done for him to heal other than wait. But beyond his detestation of injury and defeat, the captain also despised waiting. He did not have the time or the desire to wait. Victory favored aggression, and only the weak and fearful treated time as a shield rather than a bludgeon. Time may protect one momentarily, but its walls always crumbled eventually and ended in death. But when time was used as a weapon, though it may also lead to death, it had the chance – nay, the probability – of leading to glory. The girl he had just killed knew the value of time and aggression, as it was these very things which led to her momentary success. Now to combat the girl's victory over this battle, the Captain knew he had to employ the same aggression to win the next battle, and therefore, the war.

“We need to find out what that girl was doing in here,” the captain said. “Now! This sort of security breach doesn’t happen anywhere, and it certainly doesn’t happen here! I want to know what’s going on!”

“Sir,” one of the soldiers immediately spoke, “it looks like the last thing she did was send out a data stream to several locations across the galaxy.”

“What kind of data stream?” the Captain inquired.

“A very dense data stream, sir,” said the soldier somberly.

“How dense?” asked the Captain.

“Very dense, sir.”

“Damn it! That’s why it was taking her so long in here. Where were these streams sent, private?” bellowed the captain.

“It looks like...” the soldier paused as he quickly sifted through the clutter of data. His eyes landed on the relevant information and the soldier continued. “Five different places sir. One was sent to Alpha Xerox, one to Farklane, one to Xerxes, one to Pleiades 7, and...”

There was a significant pause. The soldier did not know how to appropriately break the news to his captain, and he was stuck in indecision. Was there any way to soften the blow? His hesitation was too long and the Captain knew his

pause was no longer due to parsing data. “And’ what, private?” asked the Captain impatiently.

The soldier responded in a hushed tone, “And Earth, sir.”

Everything went silent. None of the soldiers dared to look at the Captain, though they all kept him in their periphery in order to gage his reaction. They all knew that this was the worst news he could have received in this moment.

After a very long pause, the Captain calmly and decisively responded. “We need to get on this immediately. Send out a follow up signal to each one of those locations explaining what happened. Each station should implement the **Roe protocol.**”

The Captain’s response was surprisingly tempered. The soldier had just given the captain what was quite probably the worst news possible, and the soldiers had understandably expected a response of outrage. But instead, they received a response of acceptance. It wasn’t a resigned acceptance either, but rather, a determined one. The Captain now had a difficult mission ahead of him, and he was ready for the fight.

After the soldier quickly recovered from his surprise at the Captain’s response, he realized that he had been spoken to and was leaving his commander waiting. He quickly processed the captain’s last statement and responded. “Even Earth, sir?”

The captain thought for a moment. “No, not Earth. I’ll go there to take care of that myself. How far away are the other locations?”

“Alpha Xerox is five light years, Xerxes is seven, Pleiades is five, and Farklane is twenty,” said the soldier.

“I’ll go to Earth and Farklane. Earth is just too valuable, and Farklane is...well, Farklane. The rest should be fine, but we’ve got to move now. Hook me up,” ordered the captain.

The soldier responded with a firm “Yes, sir.”

“Uhhh, one more thing sir,” said one of the other soldiers who had bent down to examine the body of the girl.

“I don’t have time, soldier,” remarked the captain.

“But sir, I think this girl is pretty important,” replied the soldier.

“Everyone who comes here is important, you imbecile!” shouted the Captain. “Private, hook me up!”

The soldier hesitated for only a moment, and realized that his silence would be far worse for him in the long run. He spoke up confidently “Sir! This one is *very* important!”

The captain held up his hand to the private, signaling to him that he should wait to continue the procedure. “How, important?” the captain slowly but firmly enunciated.

“Galactically important, sir.”

“I see,” said the captain, as a contemplative look softened his typically hardened features. The captain’s focus and determination returned with vengeance as his decisions firmed. “Regardless, we don’t have time to wait. The girl is already twenty minutes ahead of us, and it will be at least another thirty until we can catch up. I’ll go on ahead, while you figure out all the loose ends. Send me the information as soon as you get it.”

“Yes sir!” the soldiers shouted.

“All right, captain, close your eyes,” said the private. “Just think, the next thing you see will be Earth.”

“Earth. It’s been awhile,” responded the captain ruefully. “I never thought I’d see Earth again.”

“Well, technically *your* eyes won’t, Captain,” replied the private, as he continued to punch away at the buttons on the console.

The captain grinned. “I can dream, can’t I, private?”

The soldier looked at the captain and matter-of-factly stated, “Sure you can, sir. But it’s only your dream if you’re the one doing the dreaming.”

Chapter 2

I hate high school classes. I especially hate my fourth period class.

But thankfully, high school isn't about the classes. It's about the friends. It's about the experiences. OK, so classes are definitely a part of your experience, but they're really only a small part. You can tune most of them out, still pass them, and end up living a fulfilled and successful life. Information in our world is always at your fingertips, so working hard to cram information into your skull seems pointless. Life isn't about accumulating information. That's what computers are for. No, the purpose of life is to experience.

Unfortunately for me, fourth period was ruining my experience of life. For the seventy-fifth day in a row I made my hatred of fourth period known to my friends. "Fourth period always sucks. It's almost as if the administration's goal is to torture you as much as possible. All you can think about is eating and hanging out with your friends, and they stick you in the slowest, most boring class possible."

My lovable, but flakey friend Bodhi chimed in, exclaiming, "It's a conspiracy! I don't know anyone who has a class before lunch that they actually like. I hate fourth period too!"

Leo, the other friend in our trio, was the pot stirrer. He always had some smart comment to make, and Bodhi was

always giving Leo fresh material to work with. It was really a wonder that the two were friends, yet they had a strange symbiotic relationship of sorts. “Well how do you get through first through third periods then, Bodhi?” asked Leo. “I wasn’t aware you did think about anything else besides eating and hanging out.”

“Well, I do think about one other thing,” Bodhi responded, with what was an unusually quick response for him. But as his smiling lips and puppy dog eyes turned towards me, I realized I had been set up.

Bodhi had developed a crush for me this year, and I was honestly confused. I wasn’t sure I honestly liked him for him as more than just a friend. The relationship would not have made sense socially, but maybe that was the bit of an allure for me. I had never been a stereotypically rebellious teenager, but neither had I been a completely thoughtless one. I wasn’t against rebellion, but rather I was against rebellion for the sake of rebelling. And my world – my family and my society – hadn’t given me any good reasons to rebel. My world made sense, which meant that rebellion didn’t.

But for as much as I wanted to maintain the order of the family and society which had provided so much for me, I also couldn’t deny the way that I felt. Sure, Bodhi was kind of goofy, and maybe he didn’t come from the best of families. But Bodhi was genuine and I knew that if, as a friend, Bodhi would do anything for me. Bodhi stripped away the thin veneer and pretense that is so common in

most relationships, especially relationships of the more aristocratic kind.

Nevertheless, I understood what the social expectations were for me, I didn't fit in all that well with the rest of the snotty rich kids, though I was certainly at the top of the list when it came to the most sought-after inheritance package. I should have been snottier than them all. In fact, that's probably why I worked so well with Bodhi and Leo. They weren't born into money. They weren't the goal-driven aristocrats who wanted nothing more than to uphold the family name and marry someone who was willing to undergo as much cosmetic augmentation that money could buy. Lord knows my future mate would want me to have my fair share of plastic surgery.

I had once seen a documentary on the evolution of cosmetic surgeries that dated all the way back to the 21st century. I couldn't believe the brutal things people used to be willing to go through to change their appearance when all it took in our time was a few short and painless procedures. The documentary pictured before and after shots of men and women throughout the centuries as plastic surgery progressed, and I always thought the before shots looked prettier, less fake. Somehow I liked my face the way it was. I wasn't perfect compared to their standards, but I thought I was pretty, even if nobody else but Bodhi did.

Bodhi and Leo were different. They seemed more like normal people who just happened to have more than the average amount of money. Nobody really understood why I

affiliated with them when I had the old money to get whoever I wanted, and I guess I didn't really either to be totally honest. I mean, do I choose between society and structure, or my individual desire? What makes the most sense? Individual desires may have been tested by generations of evolution. Perhaps I had a million forbears whose genes all led up to mine, making the desires I was given very well tested. But society was composed of billions of individuals with billions upon billions of forbears, which made society's desires far better tested than my own. It just seemed to make sense to fall in line. Yet I didn't. Maybe I was in rebellion.

Although I deviated from the normal expectations, I still wasn't fully committed to following my desires. I liked Bodhi and Leo as friends, but nothing more yet. Bodhi wasn't a bad guy, just not my guy. So when he put his moves on me and insinuated that he thought about me during class, instead of ignoring him or shutting him down like I normally did, I decided to play nice today. I looked right into Bodhi's eyes while I made mine sparkle. I raised my lips in a smile that conveyed anticipation, like a girl who knew she was about to get asked to prom. I responded. "Really, Bodhi? What else do you think about?"

Leo being Leo, cut off Bodhi's planned delivery. "He just wants you for your money, you know that, right, Jada?"

A look of surprise and betrayal crossed Bodhi's face, as his seeming partner in crime double crossed him. I knew that Leo had planted the initial pick-up line in Bodhi's head to

see my reaction. Now Leo was playing on my team to see Bodhi's reaction since he hadn't gotten the reaction he wanted from me. So Bodhi became the new show on display.

I decided to cut Bodhi a little slack. I don't know if it was so much a compassion for Bodhi, as he was a pretty tough guy. I think it was more the lack of satisfaction I was hoping to give Leo on his thousandth scheme of the year. "Well, Leo, it would be awfully selfish of me to accept Bodhi's advances. If I would say yes, I'd only be saying yes because I want him for his body."

Bodhi responded as only he could. "I'd consider that a pretty fair trade."

I playfully slapped Bodhi upside the head.

At this point, Leo had realized his plan had not gone in the direction he had intended. Neither of us elicited the level of response he desired, and I had hit a nerve with the admittance of Bodhi's good looks, the one thing that socially kept Bodhi just slightly higher than Leo. So did he just drop it and chalk it up as a good try? Nope. He improvised and changed his plan on the fly. "I agree with Bodhi. If he wants your money, he'll have to wait until you die to get it, but you'll be able to use him as long as you're alive. What do you have to lose?"

Bodhi, of course, agreed with that assessment. Now I was backed into a corner. I had read Leo's plan and felt some

sympathy for Bodhi, so I teamed up with Bodhi against Leo. The problem was, I wasn't really teaming up with Bodhi. Bodhi didn't realize he was in a battle, he didn't realize I was on his team because now his betrayer was "helping" him again. And even if he were on my team, we'd still be outmanned by Leo, the double-agent.

I responded. "What do I have to lose? How about my heart? My soul? Not to mention 150 years of my life."

"Well," Leo began, "you don't have a heart. Just look at what you've been doing to poor Bodhi for the past year. And second, **souls don't even exist**. So I guess there's really nothing holding you back."

"Actually, there is one other pretty significant obstacle," I stated. I didn't continue by saying what that obstacle was, as I knew it would eat Leo up inside not knowing my response. I could see his lips slightly pursing, as he internally debated what this obstacle could be, and if it would pose any threat to this mental victory he was pursuing.

Confident of his skills and what he thought was my bluff, Leo decided to move forward. "So what is this obstacle, Jada?"

"Well, Bodhi's dad is the head of the police force, and he could easily cover up a murder. My death and Bodhi's fortune could end up being realized a little prematurely."

We all laughed. Leo did like to make things awkward, and he did like to pick at people, but he also appreciated a good sense of humor. I would have never been able to back him into a corner, and even if I had, that would have only caused him to persist more and dig deeper until I was defeated. We had arrived at a win-win scenario, which is all I could have hoped for. It was just another great day at high school, with all of my friends.

I loved my group of friends. We were a very small faction within the school, but we had all been friends since first grade. You can make strange friendships like that only when you're young, because when you're young, the whole world is a strange land of exploration and discovery. Because the three of us were a bit different, the strangeness of the world remained strange to us, while the rest of the world seemed to fall into its rut of certainty and familiarity. That our strange friendship lasted so long is amazing, because we really were pretty different from each other.

Bodhi's dad was the head of the police force in the affluent sector of the Western metropolis. While some of the other sectors had to deal with higher crime rates, the police force in the Western sector dealt more with issues such as drug supplying and trafficking, as well as upholding commercial and urban codes. These were the sorts of things good entrepreneurial-minded people could take advantage of, if they had access and authority. Bodhi's dad had all three. Bodhi's dad was an entrepreneur with access and authority.

Leo's dad was more of the overt type. He came from humble beginnings in the more impoverished sector of the metropolis. But he was able to make his way to affluence through his savvy personality. A very smooth talking extrovert, Leo's dad made friends in high places very quickly, and used his connections to help those who could help him. But while the wealthy wanted to be friends with Leo's dad, they had little respect for him. He was a convenient friend, but not the kind one is keen to show off.

My dad followed a more conventional path to wealth by becoming a business man. I mean, I guess he was actually born a businessman. When your grandpa started what has now become the largest company in the galaxy, one doesn't have too much of a choice in terms of what they become. But my dad didn't just inherit the title of businessman. He was a businessman in his own right. He was very well educated, he was very well connected, and he was very perspicacious and astute when it came to hiring staff, making business deals, and developing relationships. It certainly didn't hurt that his more secretive associates were Bodhi's dad and Leo's dad, but his wealth was much more legitimate and respectable on the surface.

I loved Bodhi and Leo, but I just couldn't help but feel a much more earned sense of pride from my lineage. My dad had worked hard to get where he was, and we came from a very well educated, very prestigious line of people. We earned our position in society, and society was right to recognize and protect that kind of thing. But even though Bodhi and Leo may not have had the same sort of pedigree,

I wasn't about to lose them as friends. They couldn't help who their parents were, and regardless of how they got there, they were still considered to be in the same social sphere I was, even if they were at the bottom of the top of society. They were useful, they were enjoyable, and I needed them.

Maybe "needed" is a strong word for someone like me – a girl who didn't need anything she couldn't get if she asked. But I really did feel as though I needed Bodhi and Leo. They seemed like the only others in our sphere who weren't completely caught up in the same rat race everyone else was. While everyone else was fake, they were so very real. In a world where almost everything was now artificial – including much of the intelligence – that which was real seemed precious.

After we finished up our joking we headed off to fourth period where the dreaded history class awaited us. We walked into class and shuffled our way to our seats, where we noticed an image of a huge explosion portrayed via a hologram in the middle of the room. "Maybe class will actually be interesting today," Bodhi said.

"Why? What's in your lunch to daydream about today?" Leo said jokingly.

"Funny. But seriously, whatever it looks like we're talking about has got to be better than having to read a thousand year old constitution or learn about the Intergalactic

Treaty,” responded Bodhi, with a tone of hopeful, yet doubtful anticipation.

“I guess you’re right,” I said, “but I’m still skeptical. Somehow Mr. Jamison always ends up making class boring.”

“Take your seats. Take your seats,” shouted a stout, balding, spectacled Mr. Jamison. “I am particularly excited about today’s lesson, and I can see most of you are as well. But I can assure you that by the end of this class, this explosive image which has kindled and stoked the fires of your imagination will pale in comparison to the fracturous and epiphanatic events of what was really the first intergalactic war.”

“Why does he always talk like that?” I asked.

“Maybe he expects high schoolers to have a vocabulary that consists of more than every four-letter word known to the universe?” replied Leo.

Here we go again. Now Leo was on Mr. Jamison’s side, which I couldn’t let go uncontested. Leo knew that too, which is why he did it. “Well, I’m pretty sure half of the words he uses aren’t even real.”

“And what, may I ask, makes a word ‘real?’” inquired Leo.

“Shut up, Leo,” I said bluntly. There comes a time, especially with smart asses, when you just have to resort to

brute force. That seemed to be a daily occurrence for me when it came to Leo and his antics. Today, that moment just so happened to come during fourth period. But without back and forth jabs and parries between Leo and I, that meant the excitement of history class would rely solely on Mr. Jamison's delivery. I was banking on that big explosion in the middle of the room.

Leo turned to me to say something, but as he did, Mr. Jamison cut him short.

“Excuse me!” Mr. Jameson exclaimed. “This is important stuff here. What could you possibly be talking about that's more important than learning about the history which could prevent us from being doomed to repeat nearly complete annihilation?” He waited for a second. “That's what I thought.”

Mr. Jamison continued on his diatribe. “So why do I refer to this moment of history as the first intergalactic war? As you can tell from the image, the society depicted is far too primitive to be considered intergalactic.”

The people on the screen looked a lot like the ones from the cosmetic surgery documentary I had watched. Mr. Jamison continued, “But this is the moment in history that led to the final barbarism we saw in the great war. What can you tell from this image?”

One of the students who didn't find Mr. Jamison's class so boring spoke up. “This culture has obviously found nuclear

fusion, which was the big leap needed to provide enough energy for space travel. Obviously for an intergalactic war, there needed to first be space travel.”

Mr. Jamison looked pleased at the response. Having been in his class for a quarter already, I realized that this pleasure did not come from receiving a correct response. Mr. Jamison seemed the type who would love a good sycophant. And in a sense, he did enjoy them, but not for their worship of him. He instead loved them because they were the only ones who ever spoke up and gave him an opportunity to make himself look smart. Mr. Jamison took joy in being the arbiter of truth and insight. Since no student was capable of or willing to answer the profound question, Mr. Jamison enthusiastically enlightened his class. “Close, Mr. Richards, but not quite. First, this is nuclear fission, not fusion. They called it the ‘Atomic Bomb.’ But yes, this event was the one that jump started space travel. But, there’s an even more important aspect you should notice. Take a closer look at what you see in the flames.”

Most of the class remained unengaged, until a series of gasps and shrieks began to spread across the classroom. Bodhi, Leo, and I then leaned forward and began to search for the cause of all the commotion. What we saw was horrifying. In the midst of this huge fireball, men, women, and children appeared to be shielding themselves from the explosion. Mothers were grasping for their children, men had flesh hanging from their bones, and appendages were

strewn all over the place. There was so much devastation captured in that moment.

For the first time in my entire high school career, a teacher had my full attention. I actually wanted to have this story unfold for me rather than just download it into my memory.

Apparently Mr. Jamison had all our attention. Nobody spoke for what seemed like minutes. But while the whole class looked on in horrified silence, when I looked to Mr. Jamison for an explanation of the scene, I noticed that his look was different. He had obviously seen this image a hundred times before. There was no awe on his face. But neither was there a glimmer of sympathy. Instead, I saw what appeared to be self-righteous pleasure. Mr. Jamison continued to scan the class and their faces rather than stare on in wonder at the scene he had displayed. It was as if he was taking joy in this horrible revelation. It was as if he was happy this actual moment was his to share. Regardless of the satisfaction I knew my inquisitiveness would elicit in Mr. Jamison, I just had to know what this was all about. And he wasn't going to answer that until someone gave him the satisfaction of asking for it.

"Mr. Jamison," I said, as I softly broke the silence in the classroom. "What happened here?"

"The same thing that always happens, my dear," replied Mr. Jamison. "History." What you see here is no different than all the wars and atrocities which preceded it, other than the fact that it was on a larger scale than any of the

wars before it. And what you see depicted here is no different than what occurred during the Great War. It's easy to overlook the smaller tragedies because time does not see them as worthy of immortalizing. So when we see atrocities on such a large scale, we see them with no context - no understanding of what led to them. And thus we go on believing that the future is incapable of the same, because we are so far removed from all but the worst of the past."

"But Mr. Jamison," one of the other students spoke up. "You're not saying that we could ever come to this again, are you?"

"Oh, no, no, no, Mr. Sims. Not at all," replied Mr. Jamison, repulsed at the notion. "Of course we are not capable of such things. The Great War was the last stand for true evil in our world. I am not referencing the past because we are doomed to repeat it, but because the realization of history's importance is what has delivered us from continuing the cycle. It is abhorrence of such atrocities and inhumanity that have made us what we are today. Today we have more pleasures than could have ever been imagined. Most people don't have to work menial jobs, but are fulfilled in working meaningful ones. Poverty is largely non-existent and crime is becoming uncommon and unnecessary in many a metropolis. And even when I use that word, "crime," it means something very different in our world than in the world of the past. The worst our world has to deal with is theft and insubordination. That is a far cry from murder. We will never come to evil again because we will have acquired everything we want and need, and because we,

through history, will never forget the barbarism of our forbears. Where need is abolished, so is war, and so is evil.”

Mr. Jamison went on to tell our class about the horrors brought on by a technological renaissance in the 20th century. Primitive creatures with advanced technology who had a shallow grasp of history made for a tumult of atrocities. Ignorance wielding power and motivated by greed is all the mix needed to create devastation and despair. It made me so thankful to be living when I was. In one sense, a millennium didn't seem like that long ago. That's only a few lifetimes. But today – and I can't believe I'm saying this, but, Mr. Jamison helped me to see it wasn't time that separated cultures, but ideals. While we were relatively close in time to the horrible explosion we saw today, we couldn't be much farther apart in our advancement.

Sure, some crime and violence still existed, but they were largely contained to the few remaining poor districts of earth, or to marauding pirates who robbed space travelers. As far as wars, there hadn't been anything even close to resembling conflict since the Intergalactic War. The horror of that event seemed to be the lesson everyone needed, and after that, there was only peace and unity. We still had armies and soldiers, as it was humanity's expectation to soon begin finding the abundance of life the universe must hold, and there was no telling how intelligent or how friendly that life was. Therefore our armies remained well trained and well-armed.

I couldn't help but dwell on this topic for the rest of the day. I just couldn't imagine living in a world where life was so devalued. On our shuttle ride home, I debated bringing up the topic with Leo and Bodhi, but I wasn't in the mood for stupid or sarcastic, so I just stared out the window and contemplated life, until Leo interrupted my thoughts.

“So Jada,” he said, “have you made up your mind?”

I knew I should have known what he was referring to, but it just didn't come to me in the moment. “Made up my mind about what?” I asked.

“About what? About where you're going for your birthday!” exclaimed Leo. “I mean, not too many people get a chance to go *anywhere* in the galaxy they want. Ever! But you get to do it by the time you're seventeen.”

Mr. Jamison's lesson must have been really good. Or maybe a mediocre lesson just caught me off guard, since his lesson's were always terrible. But whatever it was, it got me. I had completely forgotten about the birthday present that awaited me this weekend. For my seventeenth birthday, my dad had offered to send me anywhere in the galaxy I wanted to go. Anywhere. That sounds pretty awesome, but the list of earthbound destinations was mindboggling enough, let alone throwing the whole galaxy into the mix. So I had been thinking about it for quite some time now, and my friends were dying to know what I had picked.

“Well,” I said, “I have narrowed it down to non-Earth locations. I figure I might as well go big, right?”

“Definitely,” replied Bodhi. “If I could choose anywhere in the galaxy to go, I’d go really big too. I’d pick the craziest place I could think of. Farklane.”

“Farklane!” Leo and I both exclaimed.

“Why on earth would you choose Farklane?” Leo inquired, genuinely shocked. Even this selection seemed a bit too insane for Bodhi. “Not only is Farklane a nearly inhospitable place to live, it’s colonized by the worst criminals in the galaxy,” Leo reasoned.

Bodhi answered without hesitation. “Because how many people can say they’ve been there?”

“None who have survived,” Leo shot back.

“Well, it just seems like the closest thing to another world you can come to. It would be an awesome adventure,” Bodhi defended.

“This is all moot,” I said. “Farklane is definitely out of the picture for me. I was actually thinking more along the lines of Ardua.”

Bodhi and Leo both gave a fairly long pause. Then Bodhi spoke up first. “It’s not exactly Farklane, but Ardua is a

respectable choice. Its off the beaten path, yet still relatively safe.

“I could see you going to Ardua,” Leo responded. “But if you’re considering Ardua, you should just go one better and head to Pleiades 7. It has the same sort of atmosphere and look, but the facilities on Pleiades 7 are much more luxurious since it was built after Ardua.”

“I already thought of that,” I said, “but I decided to trade luxury for distance. Pleiades 7 is two light years farther, which means that out and back would tack on four extra years for just a little bit of luxury.”

“But nobody goes to Ardua anymore.” Bodhi protested. “It’s filled with a bunch of old people.”

“I’m not going there for the people. I’m going there for the beauty and the scenery. I don’t know why everyone today wants to forget everything and just live for parties and luxury. I think nature offers so much more. And sure, I know Pleiades 7 offers a somewhat similar atmosphere, but it lacks the flare that Ardua has. Ardua is never the same. You could visit it a hundred times and it would be different each time because the habitable zone is always shifting. It’s never the same experience that anyone else has.”

Leo and Bodhi nodded as if they understood what I was talking about. But as I could tell from their conversation with each other, they continued to play out other options besides Ardua in their heads.

I wished my present could have included companion travel, but it didn't. Even daddy's favorite daughter begging and pleading with him couldn't change his mind. Oh well. Leo and Bodhi could just live vicariously through me.

Reminded of my trip and affirmed in my decision, I pulled up Ardua on my specs. The images were stunning. Like Leo said, the accommodations certainly weren't as nice as Pleiades 7's, but that's almost what made it more attractive. It was more natural. There wasn't much of an encroachment of civilization into the virgin landscape.

The scenery of Ardua looked like a mixture of the tropics and the poles on earth. It sounds like a weird combination, since the two are such polar opposites – no pun intended. But with the genetic engineering of the 31st century, some amazing things had been done for Ardua. The planet was very cold on one side, as it rotated in such a way, there was a near perpetual line between the cold and warm side. While this would have in previous centuries meant the inability to propagate plant life on Ardua's harsher environments, plant life now existed on the planet. It was sparse, but it existed.

As I focused in on my destination-to-be, I saw right there in the middle, where the thick ice glaciers that had been created over hundreds of years in the dark were beginning to melt, lay the outpost. While it was not as luxurious as Pleiades 7's outpost, Ardua's outpost, Cuernavaca, was lacking nothing. The outpost hovered over the melting

glaciers in the temperate zone, where there was eternal spring, eternal sunrise, eternal bliss. And I had to jam pack all of that into a week. I was working on getting a head start via images, but I was already missing this place that I had never been to or left.

Three more days. That's all I had left until I was off to the place of eternal spring. And who knows what I'd find there, or how my experiences there would change me? I was sure it could only be for the good, and I eagerly awaited the future to unfold.

I could tell the shuttle was nearing our homes when the familiar vision of my dad's enormous factories brought my attention back from my internal world. The windowless buildings hid the inner workings of the factory from view. These magnificent structures housed a huge portion of what made the thirty-first century so wonderful. Inside, an army of workers went about their daily tasks, like ants scurrying around in an seemingly hectic manner, yet every motion of theirs was so structured and purposeful.

Today's technology allowed for the creation of a workforce which was self-sufficient, intelligent, self-replicating, and expendable. While some past generations had attempted to program robots to do society's work, they just couldn't compete with organics. Sure, robots could be made from resilient materials and they could run for an eternity, they didn't have the intelligence and versatility to adjust to changes or envision outcomes. They simply gathered data

and responded to it within the parameters programmed in their circuitry.

Organics, on the other hand, functioned at a much higher level in many ways. While they were much less physically resilient, meaning they were unable to withstand the most extreme conditions for long periods of time, their ingenuity and ability to self-replicate made up for that one detriment. Organics were a brilliant solution to what used to be the long-standing problem of producing a workforce and supplying the world with the basics of energy and food. Now, society could live worry free of the monotony that was simple survival, to focus on the larger issues and the fuller pleasures of life – like exploring, colonizing, and enjoying the galaxy.

When the shuttle docked at my home, I stepped into my living room and waved goodbye to Leo and Bodhi. Revived in my excitement, I took the chute up to the second floor of the house to talk to daddy. I wanted to finalize all the details and let him know about my decision to go to Ardua. When I couldn't find him after a minute of searching the house, I enlisted the aid of Atticus, the artificial personality living just outside my head, in my specs. "Atticus, where's daddy?"

Atticus was at attention in the blink of an eye, indicating a location on a transparent map on my specs where my father could be found. He followed up his visual assistance on my lenses with a verbal, "your father is currently at the skywire factory."

I loved Atticus. It was almost as if he were a good friend, or even a part of our family. While he was *my* personalized artificial intelligence, the rest of the family liked him too. Likeability an important thing when it came to AI. Since each AI had access to everyone with permissions on a user's network, a family had to deal with other AIs at some point. They could be the source of warmth and humor that brought a family closer, or they could be a thorn in one's side which made one want to avoid them, and their user, if at all possible.

Everyone in the family had an AI: me, mom, and dad. But Atticus was by far the best of the AIs. On the other end of the spectrum from Atticus was Daddy's AI. Daddy's AI was named Margret. Margret was as old fashioned and stingy as her name may lead one to believe. Don't get me wrong, I'm sure there have been plenty of wonderful Margrets throughout history who deviated from the burden of their name. But this Margaret was not one of them. Unfortunately for me, I was about to have to interact with her.

"Atticus, I have a job for eww." Why did I ask Atticus like that, with a clear mispronunciation? I did tell you about Margret, right? Well, the problem with bad AI isn't the artificial part, it's the intelligent part. Margret may have been a pain to deal with, but she was awfully intelligent. And since I was living under the care of my parents, their AIs had unfettered access to my communication stream. They would alert my parents if I said or looked at anything

out of place, or if I went anywhere questionable. However, I was pretty intelligent myself, and I had devised a system for working around this.

The problem AI run into is the same problem non-organic robots run into. They have very little foresight. All of their decisions are made for them prior to them being brought online. They can and will only act within the parameter's that have been programmed into their circuitry. Sure, there is still an intelligence factor, and they can indeed learn to a certain extent. But there are still simple ways to exploit AIs just because they are artificial. These exploitations could be a problem for users, at times, but I had been using them to my advantage for years. While Margret was always tapped into my data stream, I had a particular phrase, that when said in a particular way, keyed Atticus in to briefly cutting Margaret out of the loop long enough to give him his instructions, but short enough that it wouldn't appear anomalous enough for Margaret to report to Daddy.

After speaking my secret phrase (and really, it was a secret pronunciation, not a whole phrase), Atticus was immediately on call. "At your service, my dear." Atticus's specific response with, "dear," let me know that the plan had worked, and Margaret was cut out of my stream.

"Thanks, Atticus. I really need to get to the factory to see Daddy," I said.

“Your father was very clear that he did not want you to seek him out. He is on very important business and wishes that you remain at your residence until he returns.”

“Atticus, you know that I’m not going to do that, right?”

“I’m afraid you don’t have much of a choice, my dear. All shuttle transportation is grounded, even to me.”

“Even to you!” I exclaimed. “What in the world is going on, Atticus?”

“I have received no information or command beyond what I have given you. All I know is that your father is at the factory.”

“Well, I guess I don’t have much of a choice then.”

“I’m sorry I cannot be of any more assistance.”

“When did I say you couldn’t be of any more assistance? I meant that I don’t have a choice but to use the streets.”

Atticus took a fraction of a second longer to respond than normal. It wasn’t something anyone else would have picked up on, but I did. “I don’t believe that is the wisest decision. The streets are dangerous.”

“Dangerous? Ha! There is no crime in this area, Atticus!”

“Perhaps not,” he replied, “but statistically speaking, more harm comes to people on the streets than anywhere else. Accidents are more likely to occur outside of buildings and vehicles that are guided by intelligence.”

“And what exactly do you think I’m guided by?” I asked.

“Regardless of my abilities, the streets are not only prone to more accidents, but they also produce statistically longer response times for aid workers when accidents do occur.”

“I wasn’t talking about your intelligence, Atticus. I’ve got my own, you know.” I paused for a few seconds, then continued. “Fine, I promise I’ll be careful. I’m willing to take the miniscule chance that something will happen to me.” I grabbed my hoverboard and headed to the chute which led to the street.

The streets were deserted as usual. People rarely used this antiquated infrastructure. All the vehicles we had now never touched the ground. On top of that, nobody ever walked on the streets, as everything we needed was always temperature controlled, safe, and available indoors. In fact, it was easy to go months at a time without ever really concerning oneself with the outdoors. Just another reason I couldn’t wait to go to Ardua.

I hit the streets, mounted my board, and started cruising towards the factory where my dad was supposed to be. It was an uneventful trip, as expected, until I was slowing down only a few hundred yards from the factory entrance.

All of a sudden, I felt a tremendous impact on the left side of my body, I found myself in mid-air, and I saw my board continue flying ahead of me. A moment later, the right side of my body made impact with the pavement below.

I was dazed for a moment, but I vaguely began to notice that not only was the side of my body that impacted the ground in pain, I also felt a great pressure on the other side of my torso. I realized that whatever had knocked me off my board must still be laying on top of me right now. As I looked up to see what could have hit me, I found myself staring into a pair of terrified eyes – but only for a moment.

All at once, I felt warmth on my face, a release of pressure from on top of me, and separation from the other's gaze, as the pair of eyes in front of me appeared to be sucked into the black hole of a new orifice which had just been created near the bridge of his nose. Still dazed by my crash landing, I didn't even know where to begin processing what had just happened.

I heard the clicking of boots on the pavement. The sound grew louder as I was approached, and I slowly turned my head to look. Two soldiers were running from the direction of my father's factory, towards me. One of them spoke up. "Are you alright, ma'am."

"I...I'm fine," I stammered. I really was fine. I didn't feel seriously injured, just a bit sore on my right side and a little shocked. Since my right side was in pain, I reached my left hand up to my face to scratch an itch that had begun to

make its way down my face. As I reached up, I felt something wet. I pulled my hand down to take a look, and upon closer inspection I saw that I was bleeding. Badly.

While my mind was still attempting to process everything, the soldiers' tone changed and one of them drew a gun on me and yelled, "I'm going to need to see your credentials. Now!"

The change of the soldiers' posture flustered me, and I hesitated longer than the soldiers would have liked. Atticus, who had access to the neural feeds of these soldiers, since they were employed by my father, recognized that I was in danger and quickly spoke up for me.

"This is Jada Lacks, the daughter of your employer."

When the soldiers heard an AI speaking, and when they discovered who I was, they recognized very quickly that I was not a threat to them. Well, I wasn't a threat to them if they treated me well.

The hostility of the soldiers turned into concern, as one of the soldiers who had been looking me over saw the blood on my hand. With a relieved tone he said, "It looks like you're ok. I don't think that's your blood."

I looked down at my hand, then wiped my face again. So it was blood? Yes, but it wasn't mine. Wait a second. Blood! Whose blood was on me? I looked back to where I had landed and saw a body lying in the street. Whose body was

it? Had I just been a witness to something that wasn't supposed to exist any more where I lived – crime? I was finally able to utter a soft, but coherent sentence. “What happened? Who...was he?” I asked.

Seeing the compassion on my face and hearing the concern in my voice, the soldier's face softened. “He' wasn't anyone. Just an organic. We're just glad you're ok.”

“An organic?” I asked, with shock evident in both my face and my voice.

“Never you mind, ma'am. Let's just get you cleaned up and back home to safety. What were you doing down here on the streets anyway?”

“I was just coming to see my father,” I said, with a little more confidence. These soldiers were planning on taking me back home, but I didn't come all the way down here for nothing.

“Your father?” one of the soldiers asked “I'm afraid you can't do that. I'm sorry, but we're going to have to escort you home.”

“But you know my father. He's Gerald Lacks, the owner of the factory over there.” I pointed to the gigantic building in front of us.

“Yes, ma’am. We know who you are and who your father is, which is exactly why we can’t allow you to stay here. It’s too dangerous right now.”

“Hold on one second,” the other soldier said, as he had apparently brought up information on his specs, using only his mind and his eyes. You could always tell who the soldiers were because they were so used to using silent communication that they never actually talked to their AIs.

“Your father will be down in a moment, miss Lacks,” the soldier finally commented.

“I don’t want my father to come down. I want to go up,” I said, with obvious agitation in my voice.

I didn’t hear how the soldier responded, because as he began his retort, I noticed something awful by the entrance to my father’s factory. The organic lying dead in the street behind me was not the only dead organic. There appeared to be at least a dozen more strewn around the entrance to the factory.

“... alright, miss?” I heard the tail end of the soldier’s response.

“Alright,” I responded, with a quiet and humble submission. Whatever the soldier’s wanted from me, it was theirs now, because I realized that this situation was beyond anything I could have ever imagined.

Submission has a funny way of dissipating when one has strong emotions come into play, however. Right as the soldiers were relaxing their stance due to my genuine response of submission, I remembered that Atticus had located my father inside of the very factory that had dead organics covering the premises. Fearing for his safety, and with no regard for my own, I bolted for the factory entrance.

The soldiers were completely taken off guard, but my jump on them was too quick to allow them to catch up. I made it to the automatic doors, continued to sprint to the threshold, then was firmly rejected by the glass polymer that failed to open. Had my mind been as fast as my legs, I would have probably realized before hitting the glass that the building was probably on lockdown. I was on my back in a split second. I turned my head to the side, and for the second time within minutes, I was staring into the eyes of a terrorized face. But whereas the other's expression had been wiped clean by a plasma bolt, this one was frozen in time. Its last registered moment was captured for all to see.

As I looked at the organic's face, I noticed how much it reminded me of Leo. Had I run into it in a corridor at school I may have easily mistaken it for Leo from the back. Imagining the organic with a plain look, as opposed to its current grimace of what, in a human, would have been fear, there was nothing too dissimilar from Leo. It had longer hair, a slightly lighter complexion, and a very plain, but likeable face. Like Leo, it had no distinguishing characteristics which caused it to stand out either way –

good or bad. The only major difference I saw was the look of a tedious existence in the organic. The organic looked better built than Leo, but its hair was unkempt and clothes disheveled and tattered.

Before my mind had time to notice any more connections or compute what my next move was, I heard the familiar clicking of a soldier's boots on the pavement. They were much more casual sounding than the first time I heard them when they had run towards me. A few seconds later, I saw one of the soldiers standing over me. "You alright, miss?" he asked, in a tone that sounded more obligated than concerned.

"Just fine," I responded with unambiguous disdain. As one of the soldiers reached down to pick me up, I heard the wooshing of the automatic doors opening. My father stepped out into the light.

"Jada!" he exclaimed with relief. "What on Earth are you doing here?" he asked, his tone shifting from relief to frustration in one breath.

I ignored my father's question, as my being here seemed to be trumped by whatever had just occurred. "What happened here?" I asked.

"It's not a big deal, Jada. It's much worse than it looks. Some of the organics simply malfunctioned."

“Some of them? It sure looks like a lot of them malfunctioned. How many would you say is ‘some?’”

“About half of the organics decided to quit working on the lines and attempted to leave the factory.”

“Leave the factory? Why would they want to do that?”

“I don’t know, Jada, but it’s over now.”

The soldiers escorted us to an awaiting shuttlecraft. I took one last look back over the urban battlefield, and climbed in. We all took our seats, and the craft lifted off the ground. But as I ruminated on the imprinted images of the gruesome scene in my head, I just couldn’t get the thought of those organics out of my mind. I had grown up knowing how factories were run, and we talked about organics all the time. But this was the first time I had ever been up close to one. “Daddy,” I said.

“Yes, dear?”

“It’s really amazing how much the organics resemble humans.”

My father chuckled. “It certainly is.”

Chapter 3

Daddy briefed me about the whole incident at the factory as we rode the shuttle home. Apparently, some of the organics decided to use their trademark foresight and ingenuity to devise a plan which would get them out of the factory. Why in the world they would choose to do that, I had no idea. But I suppose that's the Achilles heel of organics. Sometimes they seem to have a mind of their own.

When I asked my dad about the rarity of such an incident, he opened up and told me that it was much more commonplace than I may have realized. Nobody ever heard about the malfunctions because they were typically small and contained. Today's incident was the largest and most successful on the organic's part to date. When these larger incidents occurred, father said it was protocol to wipe out the whole colony of them. Even though only half of the organics appeared infected today, infection was insidious. It could lie in wait, residing in the neurons of the remaining organics for years before it reared its ugly head again. And due to their amazing intelligence, such a large-scale malfunction could not be risked.

When we arrived at home I immediately headed for the shower. I couldn't wait to wash off the grime from my tumble in the streets, and I especially couldn't wait to scrub off the ooze that had been splattered all over my face. But possibly even more than this, I wanted to escape the plethora of questions I knew my mother would have for me. I loved my mother, and I knew she meant well, but

there were moments when I just didn't want to talk. Unfortunately, the same could not be said of my mother. She always wanted to have a conversation.

I knew I couldn't escape the questions forever. How long did I have, exactly? "Atticus, how long until dinner?"

"The time is 5:47 and 36 seconds."

Not even close to forever. I had exactly twelve minutes and twenty-four seconds until the inquisition would begin. It was a family tradition that we would sit down at the dinner table every evening at 6:00 sharp. You would think that exceptions would be made on such an occasion as today, but you'd be wrong. I learned my lesson the hard way, twice, and I wasn't about to do it again. You skip dinner, you lose everything: transportation rights, entertainment, hanging out with friends, and Atticus. Even for missing dinner because you broke up with your boyfriend, or because you were studying for a test? Yep. Maybe I'm exaggerating a little. There may be an allowance given for a near death experience. I probably had until about 6:05.

I don't consider myself one of those teenage girls who bemoans everything. I also don't think I'm rebellious for the sake of rebellion. I've been relatively introspective over this whole dinner issue, and I legitimately think I'm right here. My parents are crazy! I can understand wanting to set up a general agreement that we'll attempt to eat dinner together whenever possible, but to mandate it unless someone is extremely sick, away on business, or in the

hospital? Absolutely crazy. But as crazy as it was, it would be crazier for me to test the waters again and risk a loss of everything but my life.

“Atticus! Dinner! You know the drill!” I could hear the shower turn on in the bathroom behind me, as my wardrobe opened in front of me. “Coordinate with mom tonight. I’ll need as much help as I can get.”

They say that “imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,” so I was hoping that my mother would subconsciously realize I was emulating her. If I didn’t feel like answering her inordinate barrage of questions, hopefully my little psychology trick would prevent a complete fallout.

In microseconds, Atticus surveyed my mother’s attire - accouterments and all. He then cross referenced her outfit with my wardrobe. Almost instantly, an ensemble was pieced together and extended towards me. “Thanks, Atticus.”

I quickly began to undress while I stepped into the bathroom. A fine mist was just starting to become evident, as it emanated from the shower area. I stepped onto the huge square tile section of the bathroom, entering the three streams of water that were being projected towards the center of the area from around the perimeter. But what should have been a comforting and releasing warmth felt more like a stinging pain all over the right side of my body.

I faltered backwards a little, but then forced myself back into the stream of water. The stinging reached a climax, then leveled out and became hardly unnoticeable. I looked down to survey my right arm and leg – the two main sources of my discomfort – and found that I had been scraped up pretty good. I hadn't realized that the impact of the street had really done some work on my body. It was nothing serious or worrisome, but it sure did hurt now that all the adrenaline was out of my system. Fortunately it would be inconspicuous under my more formal dinner attire. I did not need visual injuries to supply any more conversation material for my mother. Temporary pain was fine with me if it didn't lead to incessant torture at dinner.

“Five minutes!” I heard Atticus's warning voice shout. The water cut off. Soon afterwards, the platform below me started to oscillate noticeably, and the plentiful droplets of water that coursed down my body began to dissipate. I leaned my head forward, allowing my long hair to fall down to my waist. Simultaneously, the shower heads extended from their perch, made their way towards my head, and began to dry my hair. While one of the showerheads was blowing air, another was oscillating like the floor, and the third was conducting heat to the air around my hair. Everything was dry in under thirty seconds. That meant I had four minutes to dress and make my way to dinner.

I quickly put on the outfit Atticus had selected for me, shoved my face in the make-up dispenser for application, then made my way to the chute in my room. I stepped in

and the doors closed. My eyes slowly began to lose sight of my room as I began my descent. The top of the chute just cleared the floor of my room, which now appeared to be the ceiling, then paused for a moment. As soon as the chute switched to the desired set of tracks, it began to make its way horizontally, towards what I knew to be our dining room.

The chute centered itself over the dining room track, switched to the vertical tracks, then began to lower. I began my descent and saw both my mom and dad seated in their respective chairs. I knew I wasn't late, because there was no way it had taken me four minutes to get from the shower to dinner. My parents were just always early, unlike me. I was a bit more carefree and less proper than they were. I could certainly play any social game I needed to, but my personality didn't naturally gravitate towards the same things theirs seemed to – I mean towards the same things which theirs did. The game was on, and it always began with syntax.

As the chute opened, I saw a look of excitement spread across my mother's face. Am I good, or am I good? It had to be the outfit. "Hello, mother. How are you doing this evening?" I directed my first sign of attention towards my mom intentionally.

"Very well, thank you. Come and join us for dinner."

What else was I there for? The company? I made my way to my usual seat and sat down to an already perfectly set

and well supplied table. It looked and smelled like a normal meal, so there would be no delectable dishes to make the next hour more bearable. “So dear...” Absolutely nothing. “I hear you and your father were participants in an unexpected adventure today. I trust you are feeling as well as you look.”

“Yes, mother. I feel magnificent, though I am a bit parched from today’s excitement.”

“I am sorry to hear that you are lacking in any pleasure. Please, have some wine.”

I wasn’t nearly as parched as I had implied, but I had successfully changed the focus of the conversation momentarily and bought myself a good thirty seconds or so. Even though I wasn’t extremely thirsty, the wine was a good way to spend those newly acquired thirty seconds. The ingredients used for wines today were genetically modified to produce the flavors and smells that would be more characteristic of wines that were very well aged. So every new bottle of wine, whether vintage 2950 or a newer 3015, all tasted about the same. They were also infused with chemicals which counteracted the deleterious effects that alcohol produced, such as dehydration, liver damage, etcetera. This meant that wine was good for you, quenched thirst, yet still produced the desired effect of enjoyment.

My mother had apparently been hit pretty hard by today’s events, because she didn’t even let me get in two sips of my

wine before she was back on the war path for answers. “I would love to hear about your day, Jada,” she said.

I could have gone down the route of stonewalling mother by talking about the mundane happenings of the day. But we both knew that wasn’t what she was looking for, and we both knew she would persist until I opened up or blew up. Blowing up would have been the typical me. The atypical me could have chosen to open up to her, telling her all the minutia of what transpired, and everything which led up to the incident with the organics. I was certainly not going to do that. Instead, I decided to take the middle ground in an attempt to appease my mother’s curiosity yet maintain some semblance of my dignity and privacy.

“My day was largely uneventful.” I paused after this statement just long enough to elicit the beginnings of a frustrated response in my mother’s face before I continued. I may have chosen the middle road, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t live vicariously through an alternate version of this scenario. Seeing that micro-expression of frustration in my mother’s face supplied me energy enough to move on with my plan. “Well, it was uneventful, until I went to see daddy at the factory.”

“Please tell me more, dear,” my mother said, as she attempted to look sincerely interested without letting on as to how interested she actually was.

“When I arrived home from school today, I could not find daddy at all. I asked Atticus where he was and I discovered

that daddy was at his factory. I attempted to travel to the factory via a shuttle, but the shuttles were on lockdown. Since I could not travel via shuttle, I decided to take the streets.”

“Excuse me for interrupting, dear, but did you say that the shuttles were on lockdown?”

“Yes, mother” I said confidently. I had already played this potential line of questioning in my head, so I knew the exact course of action I needed to take. Wavering at this point would be suicidal.

“Why would you circumvent a safety feature that your father put into action?”

I knew my mother was pretty upset by what had happened today, but she was good at the social propriety game too. While most mothers would have asked the previous question with a tone of bewilderment and accusation, my mother’s tone made her sound as if she was legitimately questioning me and giving me the benefit of the doubt. Fortunately for me, I knew my mother.

“I can assure you, mother, my intention was not to bypass any safety protocol father had initiated. My assumption was that the shuttles were locked due to shuttle safety issues, not due to traveling restrictions in general. This belief was solidified when I checked the chute to the streets. Since it wasn’t locked, I thought I was clear to travel.”

I saw my mom's eyes slightly look up towards the ceiling. I knew she was doing something on her specs. My guess was that she was conferring with Margret as to the validity of my story. If I was lying, Margret would surely know. But Margret only knew what I wanted her to know, fortunately. "Of course, dear. We will have to make sure we don't overlook that in the future, won't we, Gerald?" It was amazing how well my mother could turn a question into a command with her eyes and her voice inflections, yet remain so seemingly calm and amiable to the untrained eye.

"Of course. Of course." My father replied. "It is just that nobody uses the streets any more, so that precaution was not even something I had thought about."

"Of course, of course." Said my mother. "Please continue, Jada," my mother insisted.

"After I discovered that the shuttles were locked, I decided to take the chute down to the streets. My trip was rather uneventful until I was knocked off my hoverboard by an organic who had left the factory. But there were two soldiers who found me and made sure I was safe until daddy arrived. I cannot say I experienced no fear at the time, but it is not anything to worry about. I was perfectly safe then, and I am perfectly fine now. It is daddy that I am more worried about. Are you alright, dad?" I was finally able to segue the conversation to put the burden onto someone else.

“I am just fine, love. But there is this one nagging question that has been on my mind since the ordeal at the factory.” My father’s somber look and tone drew both me and my mother in. But I should have known from his pause, which was just begging to be addressed, that we were being set up.

“What question?” my mother and I both asked simultaneously, effectively baited as we waited with bated breath.

“Well, what do Jada and organics have in common?” he asked seriously.

“I don’t know,” I said, with a clear note of concern evidencing itself in my voice.

My father’s expression exploded from one of utter sobriety to one of absolute elation and hyperbole. “They both got burned today!” he exclaimed.

I laughed pretty hard, both because my father completely sold the joke to me and mom, but also because it was pretty funny. I certainly did get burned, to which the right side of my body continued to testify. The organics were certainly burned as well, to which their ashes could now testify. My mother, however, wasn’t nearly as amused with the joke.

“Gerald Lacks! What did you do that for?”

“Please don’t end sentences with a preposition, dear.” My father responded.

My mother was fuming now. So offended was she, that she stood up, placed her napkin on the table, and stormed over to the chute, disappearing only seconds later into the ceiling. Needless to say, I was speechless. This sort of thing had only happened twice before, and both were clearly my doing. While my father could be quite the jokester within the walls of our house, he generally avoided offending mother so brashly, especially at dinner.

“Jada, would you like to go for a walk?” my father asked.

“Sure,” I said, uncertain, almost as if I were asking a question instead of making a statement.

“Margret, dinner for two on me, please.”

My father got up from the table and extended his hand towards me. I accepted and rose from the table. As we began walking, I became confused. “Daddy? Isn’t the recreational plaza the other way?”

“We’re not going to the plaza.” He said, as we stopped in front of the chute which led to the street level.

“The streets?” I questioned. My father was full of surprises tonight.

“There couldn’t possibly be a safer time to walk them. The organic force is being built back up and transported in, soldiers are still patrolling from this afternoon’s incident, and I know a thing or two about survival. Plus, it’s probably best we leave your mother to sort things out herself. She needs some time to herself to process. The streets may indeed be safer than at home with her. We’ll have a nice little father-daughter excursion.”

“OK,” I said, without any begrudging, as I entered the chute ahead of my father’s courteously outstretched arm. My father entered the chute with me and we descended to the streets. Until today, I had forgotten how much I loved the streets. Most people viewed them as an inconvenience, or a desolate and useless space. But I saw them as an opportunity for solace. They were filled with natural beauty, as nature’s environment was distinguishably clearer to all the senses down here, as compared to behind an artificial façade of glass. You could feel the wind in your face and the sun on your skin in the streets. You could smell flowers and hear the sounds of insects buzzing and birds chirping. You didn’t get any of that within the artificial world we had built which now housed almost all of our life’s experiences.

Beyond my love for the natural element, a good portion of my love for the streets was probably due to nostalgia. The few times in my life I had been seriously grounded, the streets were my place of respite from the mundane. Today wasn’t the first day that my father had failed to lock the chute to the streets, or the first time I had taken advantage

of his misstep. Today was just the first time they caught me.

“Jada, I’m very happy you’re safe. Today reminded me of how precious you are to me.”

“Dad, it wasn’t that big of a deal. I just got a little scraped up.”

“I know, I know” my dad said hastily. “What was so important that you used the streets to come and see me at the factory? You never come to the factory.” My father paused as he continued looking at me straight in the eyes, then added, “and you never use the streets either, right?” with a wink.

“Right,” I said innocent like, then turning serious. “I guess I was just so excited about my trip this weekend. I finally decided where I want to go.”

“That explains everything then. I’m so sorry today’s events got in the way of such big news.”

“That’s ok,” I said.

I was expecting to go outside to get talked to, not to do the talking. So I didn’t realize my father was waiting for a response until he broke the silence. “Well?”

“Oh, yah! My trip. I can’t believe it took me so long to figure out where I wanted to go, because now that I’ve

decided, it just seems so obvious. Why don't you try to guess?"

"You know I hate that game, Jada."

"Come on, daddy. Just one. Please!"

"Fine," my dad said, acting as though he was reluctant. But I knew better. He thought I was cute. I was his baby, and he loved spending time with me and playing my games. "Let me think for a little. I have it narrowed down to two options, but I'm just not sure which is the right one."

"What are the two you're considering?" I asked.

"Why don't you try to guess which two I'm thinking of guessing?" My father teased.

"No, that's ok. I don't need to know your guesses. I'll just keep my decision to myself." I retorted.

"You win," my father laughed. "Well, if I had to pick, I guess I would say...Ardua."

I was surprised. My dad was usually terrible at this game, but not this time. Today was just filled with a bunch of unusual happenings. "Atticus, did Margret access my information and give it to daddy?"

"It does not appear so," Atticus replied.

“How did you do it, daddy?”

“What do you mean, Jada? I know my baby. How wouldn't I have gotten it?” my dad said with a triumphant grin.

“Why do you think I always left the chute to the streets open when your mother grounded you? I've always known the affinity you had for nature.”

“You left the chute open on purpose?” I was stunned. I had always thought I was stealthily breaking my groundings.

“Well, most of the time. Today I did not leave the chute open on purpose. The lockdown protocol I have keeps that exit open because I have never changed it, and I didn't even think about changing it today. That's a mistake I won't make again.”

“Well, a few scrapes and bruises today was certainly worth the price for the little freedom I had when I was grounded.”

“You may feel that way,” my father said, “but even the thought that something could have happened to you makes me regret ever doing it. Your mother may worry far too much, but today made me realize that I don't worry nearly enough.”

My father had never been a worrier. He was too rational for that. My mother, on the other hand, worried perpetually. Observing the two of them over the course of my life, I had come to the realization that my father's way was the best way for several reasons. First, even though my mother and

father lived practically the same life, my mother's life was defined far more by stress and anxiety. It seemed a miserable way to live.

Second, filling one's life up with fear made any moment indistinguishable from the next. How do you treat people who are always sad when you see them? You treat them with indifference because that's just them. It's who they are. Life's not sad. They are. When a guy who has a reputation of being sweet and nice to everyone holds a door for you or picks up your books after you drop them, how do you interpret his actions? They're nothing more than the outworking of who he is. Sure, he might be nice to you because he likes you, but his kindness is indistinguishable from who he is. It's the same with a perpetually fearful or sad person. How do you know when the sad person is *really* sad for good reason? You don't. It's just who they are. Each moment is indistinguishable from the next, all enveloped in fear and sadness.

That's why I took after my father. I assessed each situation on its own merits and made my decision from the facts. So when I or my father showed an emotion of fear, everyone around us knew that there truly was a reason to be scared. That's exactly why my father's response at this moment caught me by surprise. While today's events had been out of the ordinary, and I suppose a little danger was present in my fall, why would these happenings make my father realize that he didn't worry enough?

That made me replay the events at the factory over again in my mind. The shuttle ride home seemed normal. I didn't sense fear in my father then. So why now? But then one of my memories stuck out to me. I hadn't dwelt on it much before, as everything had happened so quickly, but the memory of my father rushing out of the factory to see me all of a sudden stuck out blatantly. My father's face had been filled with fear, and his voice was filled with quivering fear when he saw me among the pile of organics. There was more to what happened today than I had been led to believe. This ambiguity and legerdemain was intentional on my father's part, so I couldn't come straight out and ask him. I'd have to attempt to get my information piece by piece, over time. Until then, I just had to live with the tension and plan my moves well.

“After all these years, you're deciding to worry now? This is not a good time to start worrying more. You're about to send me off on a long trip. How do you feel about that?”

“I was feeling fine. I know in my head that it's not a big deal, but I think your mother is getting to me.”

“Well, by the look on her face at dinner tonight, it seems like you got to her too.” We both laughed. To the casual observer, it probably appeared at times that my father and I disliked my mother. That wasn't the case at all. We both loved her with all our being. But my father and I just got each other, and sometimes my mother was just too uptight. She'd get over tonight's incident at dinner and life would move on.

My father and I continued to walk and talk for a while, laughing and joking most of the time, but interspersing some more serious moments into the conversation as well. Throughout our conversation, my mind wandered off to the nature that surrounded me. I gazed up into the evening sky. I couldn't see any stars due to all the light pollution my species had produced, but I knew they were up there. And somewhere out there, orbiting one of those stars, was the planet Ardua. In about four years and three days, I would be up there, looking down here. I couldn't wait.

The next three weekdays passed without incident. That was great in the sense that it brought me no headaches before embarking on my trip, and it meant I had nothing to worry about while I was enjoying my time on Ardua. However, it also meant that those days leading up to my embarkation passed at an aching crawl. It didn't help that as the countdown waned smaller my anticipation waxed larger. Fortunately, Bodhi and Leo had no reservations in helping me plan out their vacations on Ardua through me. But that was ok. It was the least I could do for them since I couldn't actually take them with me. I'd want them to do the same for me if the situation were reversed.

The eve of my trip finally arrived. Unfortunately, I had already packed all of my things days before. I was ready to go. That meant that I had absolutely nothing to do. Sure, I had dinner plans at 6:00, which I'm sure would be the perfect last memory of earth to take with me to Ardua, but

that was only an hour. After dinner, I'd have fourteen more hours to wait.

Dinner came and went. It was surprisingly more pleasant than I had expected. I don't know if that's because my mom asked less questions, or if it's because I was so lost in thought that I didn't notice. Either way, I survived my last meal. With a full stomach and an early schedule the next day, I decided to go to bed early. The best way to pass time quickly was to sleep. I knew that very well. Thanks Mr. Jamison! I did learn something in your class!

However, my plan hit a major setback when, after lying in bed for a full hour, I was still wide awake. This was not good. It was obvious that lying there any longer would do nothing but leave my mind to its own hectic thoughts about what lay ahead. I got up. "Atticus! Dictation."

Atticus was immediately online. "As you wish."

I had decided that with all the thoughts rolling around in my head about my future, I would never be able to get back to today. If you've ever tried to think about what your thought process was like before you had your current experiences, it's nearly impossible. Why did I pee my pants in second grade instead of bug the teacher to go to the bathroom until she let me? Why did I tell my parents I hated them when they grounded me for something I deserved? You can never get back to where you were and get inside your own head, even though it was your own head which produced your actions. Once you act, the "you"

changes, and the new you can't get inside the old you's head.

I began to think about the fact that this upcoming act of traveling to Ardua was an act which would change me into someone new. There would be no getting back to who I was today. I would never be able to come back to this moment and change who I was. However, by immortalizing who I am now, I might one day be able to understand who I became, and how.

Right now I was moving towards something I wanted badly. And in less than thirteen hours, I'd be well on my way. But I would never get back to now. I decided that before I left on my trip, I wanted to record whatever thoughts came to mind. I talked to Atticus about my early life, my favorite memories, recent happenings, and who I felt I was right now. I told him all the things I wanted to work on in life, as well as all the things I never wanted to change. I hoped that the woman who returned from Ardua would be well on her way towards completing those things, and I hoped that the woman she looked back on was the catalyst for all that.

Dictating my deepest thoughts to Atticus seemed to be the release I needed. All of my spontaneous emotion from being so excited dropped away, and a calm came over me. It was one in the morning, so I wouldn't get much sleep. But it was much better than pulling an all-nighter. Plus, I was glad I was able to get all my thoughts down before

heading out. Free from my own mind at last, I drifted off to sleep.

Voices. No, just one voice. “Don’t,” the voice started to yell at me, but the sentence that followed was inaudibly spoken, until the last word came in as loud as the first, “her.”

“Don’t...her.” Don’t what? Don’t follow her? Don’t trust her? Don’t help her? What did these voices want me to do? But even if they were clear on what they wanted me to do, who was “her?” I didn’t have time to find out, because the next thing I knew, I was awake and staring at myself in the mirror, getting ready for my big day. But for some reason, I just didn’t like the way I looked. I put my face into the makeup dispenser, then looked in the mirror again. Much better.

Chapter 4

“Don’t you just look gorgeous!” my father exclaimed, as I arrived in the living room via the chute. “Is my baby girl ready for her big day?”

“Very.” I said, without a hint of doubt. I wasn’t more sure about anything in my life right now. But my father’s wavering last night made me wonder if he was ready. “Are you ready?” I asked him.

“Now don’t you go making me think twice about this whole endeavor. You’re not on Ardua yet, you know.”

“I know. But I also know you, and I’m sure you wouldn’t go back on your word. You’ve been promising me this trip since I can remember.”

“Me and my big mouth, right? There’s nothing I can do about it now. But in all seriousness, I would appreciate it if you took it easy. My new tendency to worry mixed with my aging heart don’t make for a good combination. You wouldn’t want to give your father a heart attack, would you? Anyway, enough chitchat. Let’s get your mother and get going. Elaine! Are you ready?”

There was no response. “Margret, where’s Elaine?” my father asked.

“I have located her upstairs, crying. Should I send her a message to hurry up?” Margaret responded curtly.

“I’ll get her, dad.” Though I certainly wasn’t looking forward to interacting with my mother, I had this desire to go up and have what would probably be my last time with her for nearly a decade. I figured I could do one nice thing for her and end on a positive note before my trip.

Margret’s information was all I needed to find my mother. I headed up to my parent’s bathroom and knocked on the door. “May I come in?” There was no verbal response, but I heard the muffled sound of sniffing. I walked in slowly, peering around the corner before I completely entered. I saw my mom sitting on the edge of the shower platform, her head down, with a pile of tissues next to her. “Mom,” I said, in a sweet and gentle tone. “Are you ok?”

“Just fine, dear.” she replied in the affirmative, though both her tone and demeanor betrayed her.

“Mom, you know I’m coming back, right? It’s not like I’m going to colonize or anything like that. I’m just going to experience the galaxy. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“I know that in my head. But you know that I have problems connecting my head and my heart sometimes.”

“I understand.” I wrapped my arms around my mom and just held her. It wasn’t something I would have typically enjoyed doing, but these were the moments that helped to align my heart and head as well. While I liked to pride myself on my ability to be rational above emotional,

sometimes I was irrational and emotional without even realizing it. Experiencing my mother's tears for the daughter she loved reminded me that my disdain for my mother's personality and methods got in the way of my realization and understanding of how deep her love truly was for me. I needed this moment with her just as much as she needed it with me. "I love you, mom."

We sat in the bathroom for a few minutes, sitting in silence. Then, in an instant, my mother shook off her sadness, stood straight up, and declared, "Now, we had better get you to your appointment!"

By the time we got to the shuttle, we were fifteen minutes behind schedule. There wasn't really anything we could do to make up time, as the shuttles were automated and traveled at the same speeds all the time. Fortunately, those who served my dad didn't worry about any inconveniences he may cause. He was too important. For anyone else, being late to such an appointment as space travel could have created a massive inconvenience. But for us, there was no doubt that everything would run smoothly regardless of being late.

When we arrived at the space dock, we were greeted by a team of workers. Several of the workers came around with hors d'oeuvres, while a few others were fluffing pillows and setting a table, and yet another was there to show us around. The guide introduced himself to us as "Michael," and he seemed very nice. He took us over to the couches that sat on the other side of the table, and we sat down.

“I’m glad you all could make it,” Michael said. “I know you have to be absolutely excited about this Jada.”

“Very,” I said, as I politely smiled and nodded my head.

“I heard you just finalized your decision the other day. Well, I shouldn’t say finalized. I do want you to know that there is no pressure today at all. We can easily change your destination or hold off on your trip altogether if you’re feeling nervous about it.”

“Oh, no. Not at all.” I said. “I know exactly where I want to go, and I am very sure that I do want to go.”

“Great. Then Ardua it is,” smiled Michael. “I’m sure you have all done your research, and our focus at this moment is more about the traveling than it is about the destination. You’ll be fully briefed on Ardua once you arrive on site. However, if you do have any particular questions before you leave, we can answer those here.”

My parents and I all looked at each other, then back at Michael, and shook our heads. “I do not believe we have any questions,” my father stated.

“Great. Then let’s get on to discussing the process of getting Jada ready to ship out. The absolute most important thing you can be doing right now, Jada, is to relax. You have a long trip ahead of you, and you want your mind cleared of anything that might hinder the process. We’re in

no rush at all. In fact, we've even set up a dinner here that you and your family will share before you head out."

"That sounds great," I replied, and meant it.

"Fantastic. Now, the part that I do want to talk about is the part that most travelers find rather discomfoting. Because you are going on such a long journey, we have to do some things to prepare you that will fell very uncomfortable, even painful. I'm not telling you this to scare you, but rather to prepare you. I want you to know that we have everything under control, and there is absolutely nothing to worry about. We have had thousands of people use our services, and every one of them has said they'd go through it all again. Trust me, and them – the memories you make will be worth it."

I liked Michael. He seemed to be a reasonable guy. I particularly liked his avoidance of empty rigmarole. I hated being talked down to, and I hated being left in the dark. I was intelligent enough to handle any information he had for me, and I couldn't prepare myself for what was to come if I didn't know about it. I really appreciated Michael's straightforwardness.

"After you are hooked up to the machinery, we'll have you get as relaxed as possible. As I mentioned earlier, this is the most important part. Whatever state you leave here in will significantly affect you when you come to on Ardua, and therefore your experience and memories. We can supply you with the transportation, but you have a significant role

to play in how good that experience is. OK? Do you have any questions?”

“No sir. I cannot say that I do.”

“Great! Then my associates and I will leave you all alone to your meal. It will be served momentarily.”

“Thank you,” we all said in unison, as Michael got up from his seat and exited the room. We all got up and went over to the table. A minute later, six servers entered the room, each carrying a large, covered tray. Three servers surrounded each of us, then revealed their mystery dishes. The smell that wafted through the air was amazing, and each dish looked as if it had been hand crafted with the utmost precision and forethought.

[Details need polishing] But not only did the dishes look and smell amazing, upon closer inspection I realized that they indeed were amazing. Before each of us lay three of our favorite dishes. I saw that my mother had a choice between gazpacho soup, cranberry glazed salmon, and charbroiled coconut shrimp. My father had sitting before him a medium-rare New York strip steak, honey glazed and smoked ham, and crab legs. And I – I had before me the most wonderful dishes conceivable.

The first dish appeared to be my favorite soup, crab chowder. But instead of serving it in a regular bowl, it appeared as though the soup was in a bowl that had been carved out of a round loaf of bread. The second dish was

roasted chicken with a cream sauce. But the chefs here had added a brilliant touch by adding shaved almonds into the sauce, which must have added a fantastic texture to match the taste. And finally, there was a delectable dish of macaroni and cheese. But as with all the other dishes, there was something different about this one. It appeared as though this macaroni had been baked, as a crust had formed on the top. There also appeared to be chunks of ham and peas throughout. Interesting!

We all stared at our dishes for a moment. “Well,” my father said, “when I was asked for several favorite dishes from each person, I wasn’t expecting that we’d each be having every one of those dishes made. This is quite a pleasant surprise, but I’m not sure which one I want.”

“You don’t have to choose, sir,” one of the servers spoke up. “You can eat as much or as little of any dish you’d like. Or if you’d prefer something else, we can have our chefs come up with a new concoction.”

“Goodness, that won’t be necessary. We have everything we need right here. You can just leave the dishes here with us and we’ll sort through them. Thank you.”

“As you wish, sir,” the server said, as he set the plates down in front of us. The servers exited the room, and my family was left to ourselves for our meal. It was absolutely magnificent. We each ate our fill, with none of us reserving ourselves to only one dish. We even broke our typical dining form and passed our plates around to each other to

try. Michael had emphasized the idea of relaxation before the trip, and he knew how to make that easy. I was having such a great time that I forgot about why I was there at all.

About two hours after we were first served, we had made it through our dessert and salad courses and were left entertained only by each other's presence and conversation. I saw the door behind daddy open, as Michael walked into the room. "How is everyone doing?" he asked. "Is there anything else I can get you?" We all replied with a resounding, but thankful "no."

"Great." He paused. "Well, I hate to break up your family time, but we should start getting you set up for your trip, Jada, unless anyone has any objections." Michael looked around at each of my parents, then myself. There was silence. "Alright. If you are ready, please follow me."

We all stood up from our seats, somewhat reluctant to leave the marvelous food and experience behind. But a new excitement for what was to come was enough to motivate us onward. We walked into the next room and stopped. The room was huge. It was filled with all kinds of monitors, flashing lights, buttons, cords, and everything else technological. It was rather overwhelming, but Michael was a good host. He stuck close to us and guided us to the center of the room, where a lone chair sat empty. It appeared we had arrived at our destination. I had thought we'd be traveling a good deal farther, but I was wrong. I suppose it made sense, though. If you're going to get your customers comfortable, it's probably good to keep them

close to where their last source of familiarity was. It was also probably a good thing to get to work quickly before that comfort evaporated. Now that I was surrounded by lights, confusion, and sterility, Michael didn't have too large of a window in which to work in order to maintain my comfort.

“Jada, would you please take a seat?” Michael held out his hand, I accepted, and he guided me down to the lone chair. “Jada, I'd like you to just lean back, close your eyes, and relax. Everything will be just fine. I'm going to explain a few things to you, then we'll get underway.”

Michael explained to me that due to the vast distances of space, it was impossible to travel while conscious for various reasons. So what I was about to go through was the most important part of the trip, because I was determining my mental state upon arrival on Ardua. I was also potentially determining my physical state. If I went into an unconscious stasis in an unstable state, there was a chance that there could be physical damage or loss of function on the other end. But Michael assured me that was nothing to worry about. Ironically, I only needed to worry about it if I worried about it. But that's like trying to ignore the elephant in the room or imagine a color you've never seen before. You just can't do it. Nevertheless, I felt like I remained relatively relaxed. Enough so that I wouldn't have to worry, anyway. I laid back in the chair and closed my eyes.

“Jada,” I heard Michael’s voice gently say to me, “I want you to think back to your earliest memory. Tell me what it’s about.”

My earliest memory? I hated questions like that. You could be riding the shuttle home one day from school and randomly remember something you hadn’t thought about since you were five, but when someone asked you a question, you couldn’t force your mind to recall it. “I, I don’t know,” I responded.

“Don’t worry about whether or not it’s really your earliest memory. I just want you to think back to the earliest important memory that comes to mind.”

That made things a lot easier. The first event that came to mind when Michael asked me for an important memory when I was younger was Julie. I was just old enough to make coherent memories, but young enough that the memories made weren’t strong enough to where I could really feel as though they happened to me. “Well,” I said, “I guess my earliest important memory would be Julie.”

“Who is Julie?”

“Julie is – was my sister.”

“What memory do you have of her?”

“She was having a birthday party in the garden. It was just her and her friends, but I wanted to go too. But she

wouldn't let me come. I told her I hated her and ran back home and locked myself in my room.”

“So this was the first time you remember feeling such a strong emotion. Rejection?”

“No.” I thought for a moment. What would be the feeling that best described the tangle of emotions that surrounded my first memory? “Betrayal.”

“So you think your sister betrayed you because she didn't include you in her celebration?”

“Sort of. But it's more that I felt like I betrayed her, because I never saw Julie again after I told her I hated her. What kind of a sister does that make me?”

Michael was silent. I could still hear the beeping of machinery around me, and the shuffle of feet and labcoats as they moved to and fro around the room. After a few seconds, Michael responded. “I guess that makes you the human kind.”

Michael continued to dialogue with me for a while. At times it felt much more like a psychological evaluation than event planning. But it was refreshing to dig up old memories, even if some of those memories were hard. It also didn't take too long for me to relax again. I had to admit, Michael was the perfect fit for his job. He was so sociable and eclectic, he could probably strike up conversation with anyone and make them feel comfortable.

But as good as Michael was, he couldn't have possibly prepared me for the bombshell he dropped next.

“You have such an interesting life, Jada. I can't imagine how much more you'll have to talk about when you return from Ardua. However, we do have one last step to take before we can get you there. Unfortunately, this is the part that you may not like too much. Now I don't want you to worry about what's going on out here on my end. I just want you to think over your life and the important events you were just discussing with me. But while you do that, we are going to hook you up to the machine that's going to take care of you on your trip.”

“Hook me up? What do you mean?”

“It's a bit complicated. Don't worry about it at all. You will feel a significant pain at the base of your neck, but I'll warn you before that occurs.”

Michael was about to lose every ounce of respect he had garnered from me today. He was one of the most personable people I'd ever met, but that was due to his honesty and straightforwardness. His decision to remain ambiguous at the most crucial and frightening part of the process scared me a bit. Did I just say scared? That wasn't a good sign. I'm only scared when it's rational to be so, and now was not a time where fear should be rational. I needed more.

I sat up in my chair and looked directly at Michael.
“Michael, I need to know what’s going to happen to me.”

“I don’t think that –“

I cut him off. “I understand your position, but you need to understand how I work. If I don’t know exactly what’s going to happen, I’ll be very anxious. But if you tell me exactly what you’re going to do, I can deal with it.”

Michael looked hesitantly at my parents. My mother was of no use to him, as she was more scared than me or my father. But when Michael and my father’s eyes met, my father gave a nod of approval. Michael signed, his shoulders rising, then falling again. “Linda. Please prepare the equipment and bring me the plunger.”

“Yes, sir,” the woman who must have been Linda, replied.

Michael looked at me gravely. “I’ve got some good news, and some bad news,” he said. “Which would you like first?”

I thought for a moment. I usually like to hear the bad news first to get it over with, but I had a feeling I was in for some of the worst news I’d ever heard. Maybe I needed to hear the good news to temper the bad. “Let me hear the good news first,” I responded to Michael.

“OK. The reason we have been talking about so much of your past is because we need to make sure you are mentally

stable and sharp as we send you off. We want you to remain who you are in your travels. When we were first testing out long space flights, space pioneers would return with gaps in their memories. We want to ensure that doesn't happen with you."

"What kind of gaps are we talking about?"

"They're typically not permanent gaps. If people do come up missing memories, they're never the absolute core memories that make them who they are. So yes, there is risk, but even without precautions, it's a low risk. But the good news is that with as relaxed and cogent as you have been, I have no doubt you'll be perfectly fine."

"I guess that all makes sense," I said, as the information began to sink in. It was strange how finding out I could lose my memories, and perhaps myself, was exactly what I needed to feel comfortable. My father was right about me. I was a strange one.

"Yes, it does make sense. It has taken us quite a number of years to make it all make sense, but we're at a safe and exciting time in the history of space travel. That being said, there is another piece of information you need to know."

"So that wasn't the bad news?" If losing your memory and personality was the good news, what could the bad news possibly be?

“Unfortunately, Jada, the way we ensure that your memories are kept safe seems, well, rather barbaric by today’s standards. While a loss of your memory would typically go unnoticed by your family, and certainly by you, this next part you’ll remember forever.” Linda apparently knew that this was her cue and handed Michael a large metallic object. “This,” Michael said, “is the bad news.”

Michael held a large, silver cylinder in his hand. As he held it up, the multitude of lights in the control room reflected off the object, almost as if it were a mirror, or a multifaceted prism. It was extremely shiny and looked very hi-tech. But while the cylinder itself looked important, the aspect my eyes were naturally transfixed on lay at the end of the cylinder. It appeared as though they had decided to attach the longest, thickest needle possible on to the end of the cylinder. That couldn’t possibly be going into me, could it?

My eyes must have screamed all my questions and fears to Michael, because he immediately put his arm around me and began to answer my unspoken inquiries. “Yes, Jada, this is meant for you. We may be able to live wirelessly with every other form of technology, but humans haven’t been taken to that level yet - with a few exceptions, of course. We need to access your DNA, your neurons, your muscular system, your cardiovascular system, and everything else you can imagine. This is the only way we can do that.”

I knew that made perfect sense. Really, I did. And like I told you earlier, knowing, for me, tended to supersede my emotions. But when it came to needles – especially needles of titanic proportions – that otherwise distinguishable line became *very, very* fuzzy. Fortunately, my personality provided me with a backup plan for those moments where my mind failed to suppress my emotions. My mother and father knew of this ability well, because I tended to use it with them the most. I called it determination and indomitability. My parents called it stubbornness. But whatever it was, I had it. There was no way I planned and hoped for so long to make it to Ardua only to turn back because of a six inch needle.

“I understand.” I said, quietly but surely. It’s all I could say.

“Just so you understand the whole process, let me walk you through it. I don’t want you to have any doubt or confusion in your mind during this process.”

Michael continued to tell me how the four-inch needle would be pushed down into my spinal column around the base of my neck. They would be unable to put me out for this procedure, as they not only needed me awake to monitor my vital signs, but it was also important for them to make sure none of my systems were damaged. With me being fully conscious, I could provide more feedback and control. In summary, I had to remain calm and coherent while they jammed a four-inch needle into my spine and asked me questions.

The whole time they were explaining this to me, my parents sat and listened. Periodically, I would take nonchalant glances towards my mother to see how she was holding up. Surprisingly, she was doing very well. Had I observed this more than twelve hours ago, before the sweet moment we had this morning, and the enjoyable time we had at lunch today, I would have said her demeanor was a result of my impending pain – comeuppance for my attitude towards her.

I could figure out what my mother's look was not, but it took me awhile to figure out what it was. At first I thought it may be joy, but that had a different tinge than what I saw. It wasn't happiness either. I'm sure she was happy because I was happy, but that's not what showed on her face at the moment.

I finally figured it out. I think it took me so long because I don't remember ever seeing that look in my mother's onlooking gaze before. It was pride. For some reason, she was proud of me. Had you asked me how much my mother's pride would mean to me, I would have assessed it at a pittance. But having now experienced it, I felt invigorated. Just as I only feared when fear was warranted, my mother only showed pride when pride was earned. My mother was proud of me.

Though still fearful, I took my determination and my mother's confidence to the chair with me, as I awaited the

plunger's insertion into my spine. Michael guided me to my seat, and I awaited further instructions.

“Are you ready, Jada?” he asked.

“I'm ready,” I replied truthfully. Well, I was as ready as I'd ever be.

“Linda – Jalen, are you all ready?”

“Ready, sir,” I heard two strong replies echo out behind me, as I stared straight ahead at both of my parents.

“Jada, please sit up as straight as possible. The chair is going to maneuver around you to secure you in place.”

I sat up as straight as I could. I heard the grinding of gears and felt the vibration of their mechanical effort beneath me. I saw to my left, what looked like a masseuse's table on a hinge, coming up from beneath me and making its way over top of me. As the table was coming over me, the curved back and legs of my chair began to straighten. The two pieces came together until I was sandwiched tightly, but comfortably between the two.

“How would you prefer to lie, Jada?” Michael asked me.

Wow. I had options? Could I also get a one inch needle instead of a four inch? Or maybe I could get a shot in the arm instead of the spine. I guess I had better take what they

give me. “I’d like to be upright, facing my parents, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Michael replied, as the table swiveled to grant my request.

“OK, Jada, this is it. After this, there’s no turning back. Are you sure you’re ready.”

“Ready.” I said, with great assurance and force.

“Great. Get ready for a very sharp pain in 3...2...”

Did I just say I was ready? I mean, I know I said it, but I didn’t realize that it was going to come this quickly. This was the time at the pool when I’d step up on the diving board, not the moment I jumped in. It’s the time I rolled up my sleeve for the shot, not the time I got the –

SHOT!

The pain was so severe that my mind was in confusion. It was as though there were so many synapses firing that my brain couldn’t process them all, and there was silence. But this was only a silence of my thoughts, not a silence of the pain that exuded into every pore in my body. My mind was not without thoughts, but rather filled only with the one, supreme thought. PAIN! It was as if someone had shot a harpoon through my spine, and was now pulling me from that point. My body naturally fought against this feeling, as my legs and back tried to arch and wriggle, but couldn’t. I

now understood the tight encasing around me. It wasn't for comfort, it was for protection against my own reactions.

After a few seconds, the pain wasn't even beginning to go away. Now, my mind not only felt the pain, but it was able to hone in and dwell on it. This seemed to make the pain even worse. All I could think about was the pressure on my spine and the fire that coursed through me. How could I hold out? I guess I didn't have a choice.

Somehow, a part of my brain must not have been put to use processing pain, because I realized that I was being talked to.

“Jada, how are you doing?” I saw Michael standing in front of me, looking at me. “Good, Jada. Eye contact means you're coming around and your pain should start to subside soon. It won't completely go away - not by any stretch of the imagination – but it will be more bearable.”

Anything would have felt better than how I feel now. But Michael was right. Within thirty seconds or so, the pain began to diminish. In nearly perfect harmony with the reduction of my pain I heard a female voice from behind me call out.

“We're ready, Dr. Malloy.”

“Great.” replied Michael. “Begin the synchronization.”

Most of the control room was behind me, but I was able to see a few monitors come online and start showing all sorts of data. But it meant nothing to me. I remained hooked up to that awful machine for what felt like hours. I reached a point to where the data flashing on the screens and the commotion dying behind me caused me to think I was almost done with the torturous process. Then, without warning, everything went black.

Voices. No. A voice. I knew that voice. Well, I didn't know who the voice belonged to, but I had heard it before – last night in my dreams. But I didn't know if this really constituted as a dream. I didn't remember anything else happening last night. There was just the voice. And even now, I didn't feel as though I was really in a dream. It felt more like reality, albeit a very dark one.

“Don't,” the voice started to yell at me. Unlike the previous time, the voice filled in the rest of the words. “Don't trust her!” the voice yelled imperatively.

This time, the voice sounded much more distinguishable than the whispers I heard last time. I was able to tell it was the voice of a male, but I couldn't tell any more than that. And due to this voice's cryptic use of pronouns, the crux of the message seemed to be lost. But the voice was so compelling, I wanted to find out.

“Don't trust who?” I asked.

“Don’t trust her!” was the only response I got. For something that seemed so important to this voice, it sure didn’t offer me much help. I decided to try one more time.

“Don’t trust who!” I yelled at the voice.

In a clearer and more imperative tone than I’d heard the voice use before, he responded.

“Jada!”

Chapter 5

“Jada. Jada.”

I heard a soft voice calling through the heavy fog that seemed to envelope me and my surroundings. I attempted to lift my eyelids, but only got them to flutter halfway up before they decided to fall again without my permission. I tried again, but the light which greeted my naked eyes was just too much. I was eventually able to get my eyes open, but my body still felt extremely subdued. “Is this Ardua?” I asked with a bit of a slur.

“It most certainly is, dear.” the woman who had first greeted me responded. “Well, I actually don’t like to think of *this* as Ardua. This is just the last stopping point before you really get there.”

I looked around the room, finally able to take in my surroundings. I was in what appeared to be a very sterile room. Everything seemed shiny. There were also all kinds of lights everywhere, making the room seem artificially bright. I mean, of course indoor lighting is artificial, but this was beyond what seemed natural. It’s no wonder I couldn’t open my eyes at first. It only took me a few seconds to realize that this woman was right. Or at least I hoped she was right. This indeed was not Ardua, or at least not the part I came to see.

The woman watched me as I inspected everything. “You must be starving.” she said. “Why don’t we go get you

something to eat. We can answer any questions you have over lunch.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

We headed out of the room and down a large corridor. I was expecting to see a huge cafeteria where all the employees and new arrivals ate, but instead I was pulled into a very quaint room constructed out of what appeared to be all glass. All the walls, except for the one that adjoined the hallway, were made of what I assumed was tinted glass. Even the ceiling was made of tinted glass.

Beyond the oddity of the glass structure I also noticed that the few tables in the room had no chairs facing towards the entrance. They only had sofa seating up against the back wall which we had entered. When we sat down at the table, that seemed to put us in the awkward position of both sitting next to each other while conversing. In that awkwardness, I realized that I didn’t even know the name of the woman who was guiding me.

“Excuse me, but in all of this confusion, it seems I didn’t catch your name. I’m Jada, as you know. What is your name?”

“I am so sorry. I always forget that part. We have so many new tourists coming in and out, I forget to introduce myself. I suppose I just want to get everyone on to the good part. My name is Kallie.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Kallie.”

“The pleasure is all mine, and I mean it. I feel like my job is like an obstetrician’s, minus all the nasty blood and mess. I get to help all these fresh eyes to see the world anew. Speaking of which, are you ready to really see Ardua?”

“Of course.” I said, not all that convincingly. You can’t imagine how hard it is to be overwhelmingly excited when you’ve just woken up from a four-year slumber. And on top of that, the sterility of my surroundings left much to be excited about. But I really was excited deep down, and I knew it had to get better than this.

I was right. Within moments, I was in Ardua. Literally. The glass that was tinted all around me vanished, and Ardua was encompassing me. In front of me was the most beautiful scene I had ever seen in my life. It didn’t even compare to the images artists could create on their computers, with their outlandish scenery and elaborate color palate. The outlandishness wasn’t outlandish enough. The beauty I was seeing couldn’t possibly have been reproduced. Part of this was because of the scenery itself, but another reason this couldn’t be recreated was simply the scale. Ardua’s complex was surrounded almost completely by glass – including much of the floor, so one felt as though they were completely encompassed by the planet.

The most captivating part of the scenery was the sunset that dominated the horizon. The very tip of the sun could be seen just above the horizon, while most of it fell below. The dispersion of the light rays that now had to travel through more of the atmosphere created magnificent hues across the landscape. The reds and yellows that are normally seen on earth were there, but there seemed to be something that caused there to be purples, blues, and greens as well. These lights painted the sky and the surroundings so that everything looked like it was taken out of a child's storybook. It was as if I was in some fairytale land.

“I told you you were starving, didn't I? ”

I snapped out of my trance. “Excuse me?”

“Your food is getting cold. It seems your eyes have been starved more than your stomach. You haven't eaten in quite some time, you know.”

I hadn't even realized that food had been brought to our table. Kallie was right about the food getting cold. Was I really out of it for that long? “How long have we been watching the sunset?”

“It's been about twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes? How is that possible?”

“This is Ardua. There's not another habitable place that's as beautiful. And for those who are used to living with the

boring scenery on earth, Ardua's beauty is even more magnified. It could also have something to do with the fact that the perception of time is not really existent here. Time doesn't seem to pass at its normal rate on Ardua. It either moves painfully slow, or extremely fast."

"I guess I never thought of that before. I only thought about the scenery. I didn't think about all the things that would be effected just to provide a beautiful, perpetual sunset."

Kallie laughed. "Well, not many people do think of that. It's something you have to experience. Which is exactly why you're here, right? You want to get the experience of Ardua to take back with you. Since your time here is probably going to pass much too quickly, let's hurry along so we can get started on the good stuff. Finish your food and then we'll move on to orientation."

Kallie was right. I was starving. While my eyes may have made me forget about my hunger for a short while, as soon as I started on my food, I couldn't get enough. I ate as quickly as I could, then left with Kallie for orientation.

We walked into a small room which looked much less metallic and bright than the other rooms and corridors. It was filled with plush, vibrant accommodations. I felt more like I was going to an upscale café than a meeting. But I wouldn't complain about that. Kallie took me over to an empty sofa and had me sit down.

“Your orientation will begin pretty soon. This is the end of the line for you and me, at least until you get to the real end of the line when it’s time for me to send you back. I’m passing you on to the guides now, and you’ll be in very good hands. But if you need anything from me before it’s time to leave, just call me with your specs.”

“Thank you so much, Kallie.” I said, as she left. I wondered how these interactions felt to her. She had compared her job to an obstetrician’s, bringing life into the world anew, in a sense. But it also seemed to me that her job involved then sending that new, fragile life off into the harsh environment. I wondered if it could really feel that good knowing you were giving up your oversight and protection of a fragile and inexperienced creature to the elements. I guess you’d either really have to have a compartmentalized view of things, or you must really trust the people who you’re entrusting this life to. I don’t think enough people are sociopathic enough to fit the first category, so I hoped for the second.

I hate those awkward times when you go somewhere new and don’t know anyone. As Kallie left, this realization that I was alone – not only in this room, but on this planet – sunk in. Bodhi, Leo, and my parents were all lightyears away from me. And for as much beauty as I had just been exposed to, it made me realize that even the most amazing sights, sounds, or smells couldn’t replace relationships. I was just starting to think about how horrible it was that I wasn’t sharing this experience with anyone when another “obstetrician” brought her newcomer over to my sofa.

“Hello,” said the young newcomer. “is this seat taken?”

“Not at all.” I said, as I scooted over to make room for him.

“I’m Cruz.”

Cruz. I kind of liked that name. But by the looks of this guy, I could like just about any name attached to him.

“I’m Jada.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Jada. You here for the orientation?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Awesome. Mind if I join you?”

“Not at all.”

Cruz sat down and we started to talk. In the five minutes before the orientation started, he became the first non-obligatory acquaintance I made on Ardua. We didn’t really get to know each other much in that time, but I felt like everything went pretty well. He was definitely someone I wanted to continue talking to for the next week of my vacation.

As we were finishing up our conversation, a tall, well-dressed woman made her way to the center of the room.

She wasn't well dressed in an overly formal way, but more in a stylish, yet businessy attire. It was enough to make you realize that she was in charge, but not so much that you felt as though she was overdoing it.

She called for everyone's attention, and the room began to quiet down. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Ardua. My name is Monica, and I will be leading you in a vital part of your stay here on the planet. As you all know, this is your time for orientation. While you may have all been through orientation at high school, college, or camp at some point in your life, I can assure you that this is not a massive waste of time as many of those probably were for you. The information we're going to discuss today will help you to make the most out of Ardua, as well as ensure you survive. So please, pay attention and ask as many questions as you need to."

Immediately, a hand shot up. I hate those people. They're the ones who make meetings inefficient by asking questions that are either pointless, applicable only to them and not the whole group, repetitious, or redundant. There was no possible way there could be a legitimate question already. Fortunately, it seemed Monica knew this type of person well, likely from all the experience she had gained from the countless orientations she must have done over the years.

"If we don't answer your question during the presentation, sir, we'll take your questions at the end. Shall we begin? I assume most of you are here because you are familiar with

the absolute beauty and serenity of Ardua. That's why most people come here. However, most travelers fail to gain an understanding of the dangers inherent to Ardua as a direct result of the beauty she holds. For example, how many of you think the temperature would be comfortable outside right now?"

Nobody raised their hands, myself included. I could have sworn that Ardua's station was located in a very comfortable region, but it seemed like it was a trick question.

"Of course it's comfortable!" Monica said with enthusiasm. "Why do you think it's such a hot spot for tourists and nature lovers? The temperature is wonderful!"

We all chuckled because we were duped.

"But," Monica added, "the hot white star that produces enough heat to warm this far away planet is bombarding us with constant, high intensity, ultra violet radiation. It would be suicide to spend your week out on the surface of Ardua without protective gear."

Monica made a good point. Earth was only ninety-three million miles away from the sun, or one astronomical unit. That provided the perfect temperature for earth. Ardua was the equivalent of four astronomical units from the star she orbited. That's closer to Jupiter's distance from the sun as compared to earth's. I had never thought about the

consequences of this before. Ardua should have been frigid like Jupiter, but it was actually very hot at parts.

“While all that radiation isn’t good for your fragile bodies, it does make for some gorgeous ‘sunsets,’ as you all call them. Technically, the star Ardua orbits isn’t the sun. But you’re only here for a week, so we won’t hold that against you. Anyway, due to the white light and all the different waves of light mixed in with the starlight, Ardua’s atmosphere is able to break the starlight down into many more colors than you have experienced on earth. So instead of only seeing the fiery oranges and yellows, you get the greens and the violets as well. This makes Ardua a magnificent place, so long as you treat her with respect.”

Monica went on to tell us of all the beauties and dangers we could expect on Ardua. Since most of us already knew about the beauties, she spent a majority of the time discussing the dangers. The only other major danger that really stuck out to me, besides the UV radiation, was the weather on Ardua. Since weather is largely created by the heating and cooling of a planet, this could make Ardua a very extreme place.

Ardua’s rotation was extremely slow in relation to the star it orbited, kind of like the moon’s relationship to Earth. Observers on earth never see the “dark side” of the moon because the moon rotates on its axis with the proportion it orbits earth. Therefore, we only ever see one side of the moon. Likewise, Ardua rotates and orbits in such a way

that a single spot on the planet won't reach the same position again for nearly seven hundred earth years.

Since Ardua's southern hemisphere was largely in the dark, it tended to get very cold there. On the other end of the planet, Ardua was deathly hot. Both places were inhospitable to any life, even life engineered in a lab. However, the temperature was just right between the two extremes. Unfortunately, the density of air at the two poles frequently caused very violent storms, unfathomably strong winds, and a fierce beauty that had to be experienced to believe, just like the rest of the planet. However, one was not advised to experience this outside of the safety of the station, which was the only thing on the planet that was built to protect humans from such violence.

By the end of the orientation, Monica's description of the harshness of Ardua made me respect and appreciate this place even more. I think I would have found it intimidating and frightening had I heard all these things prior to coming. But now that I saw the beauty of Ardua, even her violent side sounded beautiful too. Such power and such ferocity displayed a nature that was to be respected, and was one of the few things which remained unconquered by humanity in the universe. That was beautiful.

"Wow. Did you know all that stuff about this place?" I heard a warm voice ask from beside me. I had been so caught up in listening to Monica, I had completely forgotten about Cruz.

“Uhhh, no. No, I didn’t. It’s pretty amazing, huh?”

“You’re not kidding. I just wanted to go somewhere that was different than all my friends, which is why I chose Ardua. It seems like this used to be the popular place, but at least in my group, nobody goes here any more. Any kids our age whose parents can afford to send them across the galaxy seem to all want to live it up by forgetting about things, which is why they go places like Pleiades 7.”

“I can relate to that. I can REALLY relate to that,” I laughed. “So if you’re not here to forget, what are you here for?”

“I was actually hoping to come here to pick up women. I’ve got a thing for women who are forty years older than me. You know what I mean?”

I belly laughed. “Yeah, I know what you mean. I gauge that the average age of the tourists here is probably 100, so you’re completely out of luck if you don’t have a higher upper limit than forty years difference.”

“I guess you’re right,” Cruz chuckled. “Seriously, though, I wanted something less artificial. I wanted something beautiful and off the beaten path. That’s why I chose Ardua.”

What are the chances that this guy – quite possibly the only other person here my age – would come to Ardua at the exact time I did? And what are the chances that this guy

would have practically the same overarching outlook on life as I did?

“That’s awesome. I’m sort of here for the same reasons.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I’m obviously from money, just like everyone else here. But it seems like everyone I know defines their lives by that. I have some close friends who are different when it comes to how they view their money, but they still seem to be more focused on living it up and forgetting rather than creating memories. Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad we’re rich, but I don’t understand why most rich people feel like they can only enjoy life through manipulating it rather than basking in it.”

“I know exactly what you mean.” Cruz responded, as his eyes lit up and a smile grew across his face. “Do you want to get a cappuccino something?”

“I’d love to!” I said, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. But even if my voice wouldn’t have betrayed me, I’m sure my face would have anyway. I was a little taken by surprise because everything had happened so quickly, but I couldn’t complain at all. I only hoped that Ardua’s tight chokehold on time would cause my next week to pass slowly, like the sunset, so I could enjoy every moment.

Cruz had apparently done his research and took me to the lower decks of Ardua’s station. I was a bit skeptical at first,

as the lower decks were where the older parts of the station lay. As time went on, new decks were added to the top of a station. But when we arrived at the lower café, I realized that Cruz was very right.

While the higher decks were further off the ground and seemed like they'd provide a better vantage point of Ardua, the lower decks had been positioned as they were for very good reasons. They were placed in the exact right spots to provide the most wonderful views of Ardua. The café that we were in may have been smaller and older, but it was quaint and provided a spectacular view. Plus it was less crowded. Unlike the upper decks, the lower positioning of this café allowed us to see more of the landscape below us, as well as out in front of us. Directly in front of us was Ardua's sunset. But offset to the left, right outside of the window, was a huge waterfall that lay only about a hundred feet ahead. The mist which came off the waterfall brought out the amazing colors of the sunset even more.

We spent the rest of the evening talking over beautiful scenery and cups of cappuccino. I also learned more about Cruz's background. He was from a very well-to-do metropolis as well, but on the other side of the Earth as me. He didn't really have to tell me that part, as anyone who was here was probably from a well-off metropolis, and his geographic roots showed pretty clearly in his skin tone and other physical features. Of all the things I learned about Cruz, what really interested me was his family background.

Like me, Cruz had done the whole private school thing. But instead of having the tiny group of friends like I had, Cruz seemed to be a pretty popular guy where he was from. He didn't seem to let this affect him the way most popular kids I knew did. He remained his own person, made his own decisions, and seemed to have a level head. He seemed a lot more mature than most of the guys I knew. He was the first person in a long time with whom I felt I had a deep, meaningful conversation.

“Well, I guess we'd better head off to bed. I don't know about you, but I'm pretty tired. Don't get me wrong, this is certainly worth missing out on some sleep. But I was thinking we could hang out again tomorrow. “

I pulled up the time on my specs. “Four am! I'm so sorry I kept you up so late.”

“Kept me up so late? I believe I was the one who asked you to come out with me. I believe that I'm the one responsible for keeping you up so late. May I walk you to your room? That way I'll know where to pick you up tomorrow, if you're up for exploring Ardua together.”

“Of course!” I said, probably a bit too excitedly for four in the morning.

Cruz walked me back to my room and we said goodnight. When I entered the room, there were videos and pictures of my family and friends running across the displays in the room. They were the only familiar things that were there to

greet me in my room. All of the physical items I owned had to be left behind. Traveling through space required a lot of energy, and any baggage that could be left behind helped.

But leaving behind all my earthly possessions didn't mean I wasn't well supplied once I got to Ardua. Everything I needed was supplied for me: clothes, toiletries, and all other accouterments. On top of the basic necessities, my room was also endowed with a stunning, unadulterated view of the landscape. I guess this shouldn't have surprised, me, as I had yet to see a place in the station without an amazing view. The engineers who built Ardua's station really knew what they were doing. It's as though they planned all tourist locations and rooms on the outer perimeter of the station, while the functional rooms and staff that ran the station must have been placed in the interior.

As I got ready for bed and lay down to sleep, I thought about the day's events. It was strange feeling as though I had just left Earth, but knowing that it had actually been years since I'd left. As I drifted off to sleep, something began to play through my mind. Was it a nursery rhyme my parents used to sing to me? Or was it a song that was popular when I was younger? It didn't feel like it was either of those, yet it was so vivid. Regardless of where I knew it from, I it was beautiful. And to the rhythm of its verse I drifted into peaceful rest.

*On winds of summer butterflies do soar,
With wings that help them see the world anew.*

*By intuition drawn to nectar's store,
To taste the sweetness ne'er before they knew.*

*And I, as they, do fly on winds so warm.
Advanced by you above a world unknown.
From humble beginnings was I transformed,
Due not to mind, but what to me you've shown.*

*And if likened to butterflies I be,
And you the one who makes this ever real,
Then stands explained these butterflies in me,
Which serve to further truth in me reveal:*

*That I am but a one who seeks her rose.
And I, my rose, the one for whom you grow.*

Chapter 6

Bzzzzzz!

“Jada? You in there?”

You'd think that after four years of slumber I'd have had enough rest to last me for a while. But apparently in my tired haste to get to bed last night, I completely forgot to set any kind of wake-up alarm.

“One second!” I shouted, as I threw off the covers and jumped out of bed.

Well, Cruz was about to have his character and commitment tested. If he still wanted to hang out with me today after seeing my unkempt hair and sleepy, not dreamy self, he was truly a great guy. I opened the door and saw a suavely dressed Cruz standing in front of me. I could only imagine what he saw.

“Is Jada here?” Cruz asked, a smirk appearing across his face.

So that’s the way he wanted to play.

“She said she was waiting for the *gentleman* she met last night, and I should let her know when he arrived.”

“Touche! Well, that gentleman is here, and he’d love to wait on Jada, because he’s excited to spend the day with her.”

“Then come on in. I’ll go get Jada, but it might be a while.”

“Not a problem. I’ll play some videogames until she’s ready.”

I debated at first about whether or not I wanted to make Cruz suffer for his transgression at the door. You know, rub it in a little and make him really think I was upset. But I only had a week on this planet, and I wanted to get the most

out of that time as possible, not play some stupid game like so many other girls would. I showered quickly, got dressed, and did my hair all in under thirty minutes. I think that's pretty good, if I do say so myself.

“So what's on the agenda for today?” I asked Cruz, as I stepped out of the bathroom.

“Well, that depends. Are you the prissy sort of girl, or the adventurous sort?”

“That seems like a loaded question, don't you think? It seems 'prissy' carries negative connotations. I'm guessing you want me to be the adventurous type, right?”

“I couldn't care less. I just want to hang out and have a good time, whatever that looks like to you.”

“Then why don't we just stay in and watch a play or go dancing?”

Cruz's face fell ever so slightly. I could tell he really wanted to do something exciting. I'm sure salsa and Shakespeare are thrilling enough for some people, but that just didn't seem to cut it for Cruz – at least not here on Ardua. We only had a week, and one could Salsa anywhere in the galaxy, with the exception of perhaps Farklane, where gravity was almost three times as much as that on Earth.

“Sure. Sounds great.” he said, fairly convincingly.

“I’m completely joking! Do you think I would have traveled lightyears from my home to a planet that is known more for its natural scenery than its plush accommodations and not be adventurous?”

“Good point.” Cruz said, looking relieved and much more ready for the day now. “Shall we head off on our adventure?” he asked, as he held out his hand for mine.

“Certainly.” I took his hand, and we exited the room.

We made our way up to the top floor, where the two of us ate a breakfast that was to die for. The breakfast included one of the dishes I had most wanted to try on Ardua. It was crafted from one of the few organisms that thrived on the planet. The organism was a fungus called Lucretia’s Tears. This mushroom thrived very well around Ardua’s station, Cuernavaca, as the melting glaciers and damp soil provided a very habitable environment for the fungus to grow. It also was one of the few living things that could weather the horrendous storms on Ardua, since it grew mostly below the surface. Now, just like Earth, Ardua’s largest organism was an underground fungus.

While that may not sound like one of the best selling points when trying to convince travelers to come to Ardua, it did provide the planet’s visitors with a very unique delicacy. What made a fungus such a delicacy? It is for similar reasons that fugu is considered a delicacy in the central sector on Earth. Lucretia’s Tears is a fungus, which, if

harvested normally, would prove very dangerous for those who consumed it. However, if harvested during or immediately after one of Ardua's violent and frigid windstorms, the top layer of fungus would have been neutralized and stripped free of the dangerous toxins.

The story goes that two diplomats from earth had traveled to Ardua to celebrate and seal a treaty. One of the diplomats had sent a group of scientists ahead to attempt to engineer some sort of food that could grow on Ardua to be eaten by its inhabitants. The scientists had perfected such a fungus, and there were no known dangers to it when grown in the lab. However, the scientists did not realize what sort of cellular damage and mutations the high UV radiation would cause in the fungus. When the first diplomat offered this newly grown and cultivated dish to the other diplomat, the results were disastrous. The diplomat died and a war nearly started between the two nations.

Interesting story, but relatively inconsequential to us. It had been hundreds of years since the properties of Lucretia's Tears had been discovered, and there was no danger in eating it now. Not only did the harvesters know what they were doing, but all the mushrooms were screened for toxins. Despite the relative safety, it was still a novelty and a delicacy on Ardua.

Eating a fungus for breakfast may not sound like the most appetizing thing to most people, but it really was delicious. Most mushrooms people are used to are very earthy and dull, which doesn't make for the brightest of breakfast

foods. But Lucretia's Tears were quite a bit lighter and tastier than other mushrooms. It went rather well served with an egg sandwich on a bagel.

Cruz and I discussed our day's plans over breakfast. Since we both concluded we were the adventurous types, we decided to go straight for the good stuff and head to the outdoors. It looked like the weather forecast was nice for the whole week, but we didn't want to chance any freak storms ruining our once in a lifetime experience here.

As soon as we were finished in the café, we headed to the lower-level interior. It was here that we were able to get equipment and shuttles down to the surface. Unlike most structures, Cuernavaca required some unique design features to make it a feasible interplanetary station. Even though the planet moved very slowly, only rotating fully every seven hundred years, a single spot only remained in the habitable zone for about seventy years at a time. It would then either be in the freezing cold or blistering heat for about 280 years, until it was in a habitable zone again on the other side of the planet.

Due to the unique circumstances of Ardua, it didn't make sense to build a permanent structure on the surface. Instead, the station used the latest technology to make it a hovering station. With the use of very advanced technology that harnessed gravitational waves, Ardua's station remained perpetually afloat in the atmosphere, always in the habitable zone. But that also meant that making it to the

surface was a bit more of a hassle than simply walking out of the building.

Cruz and I decided to use our first day of exploration to hit the famous caves which weaved in and out of the huge cliffs on the surface. This was particularly adventurous because the caves at our location had only been explorable for about thirty years, which meant that there were probably multitudes of places that had yet to be discovered. Earth had long lost any luster of exploratory glory or opportunity for discovery. Everything about Earth was known. But Ardua offered us a chance to experience virgin landscape and experiences.

We arrived in the shuttle bay and stood in what appeared to be the line for those who were surface bound. When we got up to the front, we were greeted by a man who definitely looked like he belonged here, right in the bowels of the station.

“You a first timer here?” said the gruff voice from behind its podium.

Cruz stepped up. “Yes, sir, we are.”

“Step left and follow the glowing green footprints.”

“Thank you. Have a wonderful day.” Cruz said politely.

The man kept looking straight ahead and yelled, “Next!”

I was appalled that someone would have such a crude demeanor, especially someone who was supposed to be working to make our experience good. “Can you believe that guy?” I said.

“I think I’m starting to.” said Cruz, as he stopped and stared straight ahead.

I followed his gaze to what lay in front of us. Somehow I hadn’t noticed until now, but there seemed to be a common theme between everyone who was planning on traveling down to the surface. They were practically all the exact opposite of us. Cruz wasn’t at all scrawny, but he was absolutely tiny compared to most of the soldiers who littered the shuttle bay. That made me seem miniscule.

“I guess the centenarians don’t make it down here too often,” I said to Cruz.

“I guess not,” Cruz replied.

We pressed on and continued to follow the glowing green footsteps on the ground until we arrived at what appeared to be a small locker room that was sitting out in the open. As we approached the area, Cruz and I were eyed up by all the huge soldiers who were standing around conversing.

“You guys new recruits too?” asked one of the men, who then looked at his buddies around him. They all started to laugh, of course.

It ended up that Ardua was prime training ground for special forces. This week there seemed to be a training exercise coordinated between several planets. Ardua's extreme terrain and lethal consequences made it the perfect place to drop off the best of the best and test their wits. If they could survive and maneuver here, they could do it anywhere.

Needless to say, I was beginning to feel a bit more intimidated. I now understood why the man at the podium was so gruff. It was probably a defense mechanism, as I doubt he dealt with teenage girls nearly as much as hulking military men. But my waning comfort and security came rushing back to me when a feeble looking man came up to us and introduced himself as our trainer.

"Hello, gentlemen." the squeaky voiced man said, as he surveyed his audience. "Oh, excuse me. It appears we are lady and gentleman. Please forgive me, as I'm not accustomed to that sort of thing happening around here. Anyway, *lady* and gentlemen, welcome to your training."

One of the soldiers huffed, apparently frustrated that he had to participate in such a pointless waste of time. It didn't help that he had to go through the same orientation as two young civilians. He seemed ready for the action and wanted to get this pointless formality out of the way.

"Thank you, sir, for being my first volunteer." The scrawny instructor looked at the huffy soldier and motioned him to come up front. "How many of you know what 'upwelling'

is? Nobody raised their hands. “Of course you don’t, of course. Upwelling is a phenomenon in the ocean whereby nutrients are pulled up from the bottom of the ocean towards the surface. It has absolutely nothing to do with Ardua, as Ardua doesn’t have any seas to speak of.”

All the soldiers in the group rolled their eyes and looked frustrated at this not very profound idea. The instructor fumbled around in his pockets pulled what looked like an asthma inhaler out. The “volunteer” was looking out at the crowd, making eye contact with some of his companions, and smirking at this absentminded instructor who thought that he could actually teach them something. The professor then took the inhaler and squeezed one aerosol burst right in front of the “volunteer’s” face. The soldier’s expression changed instantly from one of disdain to one of complete panic and fear.

The soldier opened his mouth as if he was trying to scream, but no sound came out. After a few seconds, as he put his hands on his throat, I realized that he wasn’t trying to let anything out, he was trying to take air in. The soldier couldn’t breathe. As the soldier struggled and struggled, the instructor continued to talk.

“Now, as you see in front of me, this big, *tough* man has been brought to his knees by one spray of this vap’rous substance. As you can see, the effects are quite dramatic, and quite instantaneous. Now, if this happened out on the surface of Ardua, what would you do?”

Nobody raised their hands. “By the way, you have about ninety seconds to solve this dilemma and start fixing the problem or your friend will risk suffering brain damage.”

Still, nobody raised their hands. Everyone just looked as though they were in complete shock. “Thirty seconds left. Any takers?” There was still no response. “Very well then.” The instructor pulled a small object that looked like a pen out of his pocket. In no particular hurry, he pulled something out of the top of the object that resembled a straw, then clicked the “pen.” He knelt down over the soldier, who had now assumed a position of writhing on the ground. The instructor knelt on top of the large man’s chest, jammed the tip of the pen a few inches below the man’s adam’s apple, then inserted the straw into the newly created hole. At that point, we could all here the hollow, gasping breaths echoing from inside the straw. It sounded almost as if someone was slurping the very last drops from an icy drink. The soldier continued to catch his breath from his back.

The scrawny man looked pleased and scanned the room from left to right. “Now, why would I do such a thing? Because year after year, hotshot marines and army personnel come to Ardua thinking that muscle mass is all they need to survive. Men have been blessed in many ways, strong men in even more, but men are certain proof that two heads are not better than one. Testosterone and arrogance will get you killed on Ardua, and nothing gets that point across faster than the demonstration I just gave you.”

The instructor seemed to have garnered the respect of the soldiers. There were no more smirks, no more chuckles, and no more disdainful looks. Amazingly, the soldiers were attentive and looked as though they had a good deal of respect for the instructor. The instructor was right, testosterone did make men a very different breed. I couldn't possibly understand how it was possible to gain respect by nearly killing someone.

The instructor went on to explain how Ardua's winds were a lot like the upwelling in the ocean, though sort of the opposite. Sometimes, extremely cold air would meet with the extremely warm air, which not only created tremendous thunderstorms, but fast winds. Since the cold air was more dense than the warm air, the winds that blew across the surface tended to be frigid beyond belief. An ancient air that hadn't seen the light of day for over 250 years could bring air that was below 350 degrees Fahrenheit. If someone was able to hunker down out of the winds, but somehow breathed in this frigid air, the moist windpipe would freeze instantly at its opening, sealing it off. The only solution was to perform a tracheotomy with a specially insulated tube, which involved cutting a hole into the windpipe at the base of the neck and inserting a breathing tube into that hole so air could make it to the lungs. While there was a very slim chance anyone would survive the bitter cold to need this procedure, our instructor said his goal was to prepare us for anything that was possible.

Throughout the training class, we learned about several other medical emergencies and environmental disasters that we may encounter on the surface. There was the chance of a flash flood due to all the melting glaciers, a risk of paralysis or death from eating Lucretia's Tears, losing track of time, or falling into a giant earthworm tunnel. That last one definitely caught me off guard. I'm not a bug or slimy creature person, so the thought of giant earthworms was pretty gross. But I understand their usefulness and necessity up here, so I guess I'm ok with it.

It seemed that the worms were created in an attempt to solve two problems Ardua has. First, what do you do with all the trash you create? You don't want to desecrate a beautiful planet by just dumping all sorts of trash there, but you also don't want to burn everything because the gasses could change the composition of the atmosphere, and thus affect other aspects of nature. So, the station on Ardua instituted a rule which ensured everything that was brought to Ardua had to be organic. This meant that all trash could be thrown onto the planet and expected to decay in a reasonable amount of time.

The second problem Ardua had was that the only thing that could be grown on the planet at first was a genetically engineered fungus. That may be good for travelers who want to try something new, but for the people that worked and lived on Ardua, a single food could get pretty monotonous. While the weather was a big factor to growing food outside the station, the lack of humus in the soil was

another huge factor. Nothing could grow if it didn't have nutrients.

Enter the earthworms. Some brilliant scientists had the idea to solve both the trash and food problems with one solution. If organic trash was dumped on Ardua, the worms could help to make sure that trash was broken down and spread out into the surrounding soil. On top of cutting down on the eyesore a garbage dump would be to Ardua, the worms would also be creating nutrient rich soil which could help to grow new plants.

The problem now seemed to be that explorers on the surface would periodically find themselves standing atop an old earthworm burrowing hole. This had led to several disasters, including the death of a younger couple a few years back. Again, while the chances of standing on top of a dilapidated earthworm burrow was slim, it was something we needed to know about.

I'm sure to most people, this sort of information would prevent them from moving forward with the adventure. But it really excited me. I wasn't born to be Earthbound my whole life. I wanted to explore and I wanted to live a full and exciting life. To me, that meant escaping the confines of technology to enter the arms of nature's luxury.

While this outlook made me a bit different than most of the people and the spirit of the age, I didn't completely throw off technology. Tech could be a wonderful thing that accentuated the beauty of nature and allowed one to

experience it fully. For instance, Cruz and I would only be able to travel down to the surface and explore safely because of technology. They were going to give us suits that would protect us from the intense UV radiation as well as most of the temperature extremes we might face, save for a polar storm. The suits also included warning systems to alert us of any last-minute weather changes, warnings, dangers, and so forth. There were certainly dangerous situations we could get ourselves into, but overall, we were safe because of our technology.

After we put our suits on, Cruz and I boarded the shuttle. Cruz had apparently done his research and knew exactly where he wanted us to get dropped off. This was yet another reason I did love technology at times. Because all the maps, videos, and other information we could need about the planet were stored on a database and accessible through our specs or our suits, we could basically explore the planet on our own. We didn't need anyone to guide us and we didn't have too much to fear in regard to unforeseen danger. Through our orientation, surface training, and smart suits, we felt comfortable and secure. I wouldn't be saying the same if I were one of the elite soldiers who had to rough it without most of the technology we had, but I felt good.

The shuttle took us out of the docking bay and headed away from the station. After about forty minutes, we landed on top of a large tabletop waterfall. Cruz told me that this was our spot.

“You sure you guys want out here?” the pilot asked.

“You’re not going to be able to get a good look at this waterfall if you’re on top of it.”

“I’m sure.” Cruz said confidently. “Let’s go.” he motioned to me, as he exited the shuttle.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” I asked Cruz.

“I think the pilot made a good point about the view here. I mean, it’s beautiful, but we’ll never see this waterfall.”

“Trust me.”

Cruz reached out and took my hand and started walking away from the waterfall. Trust him. OK, I could do that. I did want to see all the beauty Ardua had, but I remembered my realization the other day at the orientation. I had traveled to Ardua alone for experiences, but experiences alone were empty. Without being able to share an experience, the experience didn’t really mean all that much.

It’s strange how that works, isn’t it? You could do the most amazing thing in the universe or see the most breathtaking sight in the galaxy, but if you never got to share that with someone else, it would leave you unfulfilled. It would be like taking a bite of the most wonderful dessert in the world while never being able to swallow it - like a culinary Sisyphus. We all think it’s beauty or taste that we’re after, but that’s only a part of the process of fulfillment. To always taste and never swallow would be to forever push a boulder up a hill without completion. It’s masticating

without digesting. It's feeding our taste buds while failing to nourish and fulfill our beings.

So regardless of how this day turned out in terms of the sights I had seen, it would not only be memorable, but fulfilling, because I got to share that with someone else.

We walked for about ten minutes, until we arrived at a small outcropping of rocks about a hundred yards off the river. Cruz stopped. "We're here!"

"Where?" I asked in disbelief.

"We're at the cave I was looking for."

"I don't see any cave."

"It's right in front of you, silly."

I followed the line of Cruz's finger to the small pile of rocks in front of me. I still didn't see a cave. All I saw was a small hole that looked hardly big enough for one of the soldier's we met earlier to squeeze through. "I still don't see any cave."

"Fine. I'll show you. Just hand me my stuff when I get in."

I watched in fear as Cruz proceeded to disappear through the tiny hole in front of me. "Alright, hand me the stuff, please." I heard an echoey voice call out.

“Hold on a second. You don’t expect me to crawl through that tiny hole, do you?”

“I asked you if you wanted to go on an adventure and you said ‘yes.’ You didn’t lie to me, did you?”

“I am perfectly fine with adventure, but this is different. I can do caves, but this is a hole. I’m not the biggest fan of tight spaces.”

“It gets much bigger in here. The hole is the only tight space. Trust me.”

I’m not one who easily gives in to peer pressure. If there’s something I don’t want to do, I absolutely won’t do it. But this was one of those times where I realized that embracing my fear was not something I really wanted. Why would I want to coddle fear more than spend the day seeing Ardua, or spending time with Cruz? Fear wasn’t worth it, so I chose to do what I really wanted.

“Fine.” I said curtly. This was by no means directed at Cruz, but rather a result of me being determined and mission oriented. I was going into that hole – I mean cave.

I pushed our things in and handed them to Cruz, then stuck my feet in and felt around for a foothold. In less than ten seconds I was in. Cruz was right. That hole was very deceiving. The chamber we were in would have been large enough for a nice sized family to have a sit-down dinner.

There were even some stones that looked as though they could serve as benches or tables.

“Come on. We have to get to the good part.” Cruz said, as he motioned me to follow him.

We descended down a ramp and doubled back under the hole we had entered. It seemed as though Cruz knew where he was going, almost as if he had done this before. We wound our way in and out of different chambers, often having to decide between two or three different routes to take. It would be very easy to get lost down here. Not only did everything look the same, but there were no maps on our heads-up display or specs. But Cruz was confident, and I trusted him, so I pressed on.

After about twenty minutes, we stopped. “Listen. Do you hear that?” Cruz asked.

I listened anxiously but heard nothing. “Hear what?” I asked.

“We’re almost there.”

Almost where? I had no idea. But as we rounded another turn and I saw a light in the distance, I began to hear a faint hissing noise. As we walked closer and closer to the light, the hiss turned into a hushed rumble, then a spectacular roar. Cruz had found a path that took us right behind the immense waterfall we had landed on! I could see that he was trying to say something to me, but I couldn’t hear him

at all. He reached over to my helmet and pressed the external mute button, which immediately cut off all outside noise, allowing me to only hear what came across the communications line.

“So, was it worth it?”

“Absolutely.” I admitted happily, as I peered out through the falling water and mist. The waterfall looked like a rainbow curtain filled with the most vibrant and beautiful colors. The light shimmered through the water and made the mouth of the cave look like a kaleidoscope. It was so natural and wonderful, I wanted to enjoy it with all my senses. And the rarity of this event – knowing that I was standing in a place accessible only a hundred years out of every thousand – added to the beauty. From the safety of the cave, I took my helmet off. I breathed in the fresh, crisp, misty air.

Cruz followed suit, taking his helmet off as well. We sat down and put our backs against the wall, looking out towards the horizon. We couldn't hear each other over the deafening roar of the waterfall, but we didn't need to talk. We both sat there and soaked in the scene, along with some waterfall mist. And as I reveled in the beauty of this moment, a beauty I was experiencing, yet still found hard to believe, I laid my head on Cruz's chest. He wrapped his arms around me, and we just were.

I thought about the limited but full experiences I'd had on Ardua so far. I thought about how amazingly perfect Cruz's

personality fit with mine. I also thought about what the end of the week was going to look like when it came time for saying goodbye. I thought about the beauty of the waterfall that lay directly out in front of me.

But most of all, I thought of the thing that made this place most what it was – the brilliant, perpetual sunset. As I contemplated this sunset for the millionth time since arriving on Ardua, I wondered if it would be more aptly named a sunrise. Because rather than being in the process of eternally setting, human invention had caused Ardua's sun to be forever rising on the station – prolonging the beauty that had only previously been possible to enjoy in moments, to something enjoyable for eons on end. For as rare and beautiful as this sunset was to me, I wondered if in seeking to harness beauty and experience we had actually cheapened it. The sunset wasn't novel to those who lived on Ardua, so did they find that it held the same beauty, or were they only able to see mundane reality? Could beauty ever be perpetual, or was beauty always fleeting? For while my eyes could see a hundred colors in the new sunsets of Ardua, a native Arduan could likely find a hundred flaws, for they had had the time to find the imperfections.

Like I said before, I don't think technology is bad at all. In fact, it's only because of technology that we're able to enjoy some of the things we do. But as the old adage warns, I began to fear that familiarity would in fact breed contempt. It was quite possible that the sunset and beauty of Ardua would become mundane over time because it was something we had control over. I mean, just look at how

many people left the uncontested beauty of this planet for the luxury, comfort, and sights of others.

It is a scary thing, knowing that the human mind is able to lose sight of that which is beautiful and good. And for what? It's not generally replaced with something almost as beautiful and almost as good, but something that numbs the mind and prevents one from looking for beauty at all. There is nothing to find if there's nothing of substance being sought. The whole thing made me wonder what beautiful and good things I had missed in life. What would an observer from the past or the future glory in if they traveled to my time?

My thoughts could have gone on forever, and they attempted to. But just as my mind had filtered out the overload of constant noise from the waterfall, so it did the same with my thoughts. I found myself just being. Just Cruz and me. And as my mind drifted into what felt like a numb, but good nothingness, I was greeted by a thought which had been waiting for me there.

*Enveloped in monotony's employ
All things being equal, all things the same
No taste, no sight, no sound I could enjoy
My greatest pleasure ne'er distinct from pain*

*These traits that seemed embedded in my soul
Began to dissipate as new ones formed
Songs brought upon wind's tendrils first took hold
As desert, broken through, saw new life born*

*My soul awakened to heart's quickened beat
Life's hum transformed to harmon'ous delight
Once languished soul crescendoed from defeat
Life's chorus echoed forth as I took flight*

*Whose song, on wind, has found and captured me?
It's yours, my love – It's yours, my muse, I see.*

Chapter 7

I usually hate those times when I wake up, and I have no clue where I'm at or how I got there. But when I woke up from my nap with Cruz, it wasn't unenjoyable at all. I got to re-realize that I was in one of the most gorgeous places in the universe with one of the most amazing guys I had ever met. That's not a bad thing to wake up to.

Cruz was already awake but was waiting patiently for me to wake as well, since I had been using him as my pillow.

“Good morning.” he said. “Or whatever the appropriate greeting would be at whatever time of day it is right now.”

“How long was I asleep?” I asked.

“Oh, it hasn't been that long. Just a couple of hours.”

“Well, I don't want to waste any more time sleeping. What's next on the agenda?”

“I'm offended.” Cruz remarked jokingly. “You think the last two hours spent with me was a waste?”

“I don't really consider doing something that creates no memories a useful utilization of time.”

“Really? But you have to sleep, don't you? I mean, sleeping is useful because it allows you to make memories by providing you with energy and, at least in most cases,”

Cruz then muttered jokingly, “though perhaps not in yours,” he continued, “an amiable disposition.”

“However you want to look at it, I’d rather spend the rest of our time doing something more productive.”

“It sounds like someone needs some more sleep. You’re awfully grumpy when you wake up, you know it?” Cruz laughed.

I got up and walked towards the mouth of the cave. The cool mist hit my face and helped to revitalize me. Even though it had to be late afternoon, it really did feel like it was a brand-new morning.

Cruz and I made our way back towards where we entered the caves. After crawling through that horrendously undersized hole again, we were finally free of the dark and dinginess, and back out in the beauty of the day.

“Well, what do you want to do next?” Cruz inquired.

For the first time on Ardua, I looked around. I mean, I looked out of the windows on the station, and I explored the caves today, but this was the first time I really looked around at Ardua itself. Not the light shimmering in the atmosphere, not the station offset by the sun, but Ardua itself. It was actually a very desolate and dull place for the most part.

I looked off the tabletop cliff we were standing on and all I saw for miles and miles, was rock. It reminded me of the Grand Canyon, but there was absolutely no sign of life that could be seen. It was just rock. If you take away the atmospheric oddities that made Ardua so beautiful, you'd be left with a barren, worthless piece of rock.

“What else is there to do?” I asked.

“I was thinking we could travel over to the other side of the habitable zone where some of the ice and glaciers are still in tact. I hear there are some pretty awesome frozen waterfalls there.”

Frozen waterfalls. Now that sounded pretty cool. Maybe I was wrong about this place. Maybe Ardua just seemed devoid of its own substance because I didn't know where to look. Cruz had proven that to me with the caves and the waterfall, and it seemed he was going to do it again with the frozen waterfalls.

We called in the shuttle, which arrived about an hour later. We told the pilot where we wanted to go, and were headed that way, when all of a sudden our suits alerted us of an imminent threat. When we pulled up the information, we saw that an ice storm was on its way towards us.

“We sure lucked out.” Cruz noted. “Being on the cold side would be the last place we'd want to be with an ice storm on the way.”

“No joke. I’m not thrilled about cutting our exploration short, but knowing what we avoided definitely provides some perspective.”

About five minutes away from safety, with the huge station looming in the distance, our shuttle veered off course. A few seconds later the pilot’s face and voice transmitted through our specs. “We’ve got some soldiers who need pulled out of their sector before this storm rolls in, so you guys are going to have to tag along. Sorry about that.”

Cruz and I looked at each other. We were young and dumb, so embarking on a rescue mission sounded like a really cool way to spend our day. I’m sure cappuccino over a pristine view and good conversation would have been enjoyable as well, but we seemed to like things that were off the beaten path.

After flying for a good hour, the sun was noticeably darker. The beautiful colors brought out at the station weren’t present here. All that could be seen was a glow on the horizon. It was still beautiful, but much different. Now, the stars could be clearly seen above, and the landscape was interspersed with ice below. It was beautiful, but it felt somber rather than joyful.

The shuttle slowed and began its descent. Looking out the windows, it appeared as though the storm had begun to show the first signs of arriving. There were belongings scattered all across the landscape, being blown around ferociously. The soldiers on the ground were lying

absolutely flat, presumably to prevent themselves from being blown all over the landscape as well.

“Hold on guys.” the pilot said, not a moment too soon.

The shuttle almost immediately started to be jarred back and forth. You could hear the thrusters attempt to compensate for the instability, but the winds were so erratic that the thrusters were having trouble.

“Helmets on!” the pilot yelled to us.

Moments later, I could see the bay in the back of the shuttle opening and some ropes dropping out. There were five figures lying prone about fifty feet behind the shuttle. As the ropes unraveled and made their way towards the men, they grabbed onto the ropes and latched them onto their suits. Once all the men were hooked in, they were pulled towards the shuttle.

Everything appeared to be working until I noticed that one of the men had quit making any progress. He was hanging back on the rope, about five meters from the shuttle. The winds were now blowing with gale force, and the man was hanging horizontally out of the shuttle. The soldier realized his dilemma and began to wrap the rope around his forearm, then attempted to pull himself forward. On his second or third pull forward, the man let go, and flew back into the merciless wind, quite literally at the end of his rope.

“Cruz! We have to do something!”

We both shot up out of our seats and began to pull on the rope, little by little, reeling the soldier in. A few moments later, a couple of the other soldiers had made it into the bay and helped us the rest of the way.

Finally, after a concerted effort of pulling, we were able to get the soldier safely onto the ship.

“All soldiers are accounted for, pilot. Get us out of here.” The man who we had pulled in was apparently the leader of this squad and ordered the pilot back to the station.

“Are you ok, Captain?” one of the other soldiers asked.

The Captain looked down at his forearm. “Damn suit! Holds up against plasma, heat, and cold, but it’s joints can’t stand up to the tension of a rope.”

I could understand the frustration of having nearly been stranded in a storm. I could also understand the frustration with dysfunctional equipment. But I didn’t understand the complete lack of thankfulness for Cruz and I risking our wellbeing to help bring in the Captain. But I wasn’t about to say anything. I just wished I had one of those asthma inhalers so I could put him in his place.

The rest of the ride home just reaffirmed me in my frustration towards the Captain, and towards soldiers in general. During the whole flight, not one word was said to

us from any of the soldiers. They just seemed like a bunch of jerks.

When we arrived back at the shuttle bay, the soldiers made their way off the shuttle first. The last soldier, a very young looking redhead, seemed to be fiddling with his equipment, and when the other soldiers were out of earshot, he looked at me and Cruz and said “Thank you guys. I really appreciate what you did. Don’t let the other guys bother you. We’re not all bad.”

The soldier quickly grabbed his stuff and hurried to catch up with the rest of his squad. I hate those moments when I feel so self-righteous in my indignation, then somebody undercuts me. I wanted to be so angry with these guys, but how could I stay mad when one of them was so nice? Oh well. I suppose I’d just have to avoid creating a stereotype in my mind of soldiers and assess each one on an individual basis. That seemed like a good general rule of thumb.

That wasn’t such an easy thing to do with soldiers, though. While most people looked up to soldiers, they were typically people who were hard for me to trust. They were humanity’s saviors during the Intergalactic War, which is why most people held them in such high esteem.

The Intergalactic War was a terribly bloody and costly civil war between all of humanity. The faction that ended up losing surrendered, but upon their surrender and laying down of arms, every participant and sympathizer on the losing side was executed by the soldiers. The argument was

that war did not have to be a part of human history any longer. Yet as long as there were disparate ideologies, war would inevitably ensue. With the losing faction and their ideologies gone, the world moved on in peace and harmony.

It had now been several hundred years since bloodshed occurred on any but the smallest of scales. And while most people credited the soldiers of the past and present with upholding such a peaceful state, it was hard for me to trust anyone whose oaths to the state were so strong that they'd have no problem destroying family or friends who deviated from mainstream ideology.

Unfortunately my neat compartmentalization of distrust and dislike of soldiers was now being challenged by a simple thank you offered to me by quite possibly one of the only nice soldiers in the universe. Go figure.

Cruz and I exited the shuttle and stored our gear as we were instructed. We were starving after our long day exploring the surface, so we decided to go back to our favorite café for dinner, after we got showers, of course.

Cruz met me back at my room after our showers and we walked down to the café. After the day's experience of seeing the barrenness of Ardua, the food looked, smelled, and tasted better than normal. I guess tasty food was one of those things that I had come to take for granted. But unless you count fungus and earthworms as staples, Ardua didn't really have too much to offer your stomach. After looking

over the menu anew, we made our selections for the evening.

When the waitress left, I decided to ask Cruz about something that had continued to bother me. “Cruz, does it bother you at all that the soldiers we met today were so ungrateful and rude?”

Cruz looked kind of surprised. But it wasn't the surprised sort of look where a person looks completely taken off guard, but rather the look someone gets who feels guilty about something. His slowly and carefully crafted, politically correct response reaffirmed this though.

“Well...uhh...I think soldiers are under a lot of pressure, and they probably have different priorities and thought processes than we do.”

“That wasn't my question. Does it bother you?”

“Sometimes the way that I feel isn't what is rational, so I think my feelings are largely irrelevant.”

“You're impossible. Well I'll tell you that it certainly bothered me.” I said, as my voice started to rise from irritation. “I mean, we could have been sucked out the back of that shuttle, but we put our own safety behind us –“

Cruz interrupted. “Jada, please lower your voice.”

Cruz looked a bit nervous as he said this, and darted his eyes around the café, as if he were making sure we weren't being watched.

“Look,” I said, “I know the soldier class is revered. I'm not saying they're bad, just that they didn't treat us all that well today.”

“I know that. But there are some things you just have to let roll off your back. This is one of those things. I understand where you're coming from, but let's just drop it, ok?”

“Fine.” I said curtly.

“Great. Now let's talk about more enjoyable things.”

After the tense beginnings of conversation, the evening went very smoothly. Cruz and I continued to talk into the wee hours of the morning until our eyes just couldn't support our desire to continue any more.

When I made my way back to my room I made an executive decision not to brush my teeth. I know it's gross, but I was just so tired. Plus, it felt more like I was about to take a nap as opposed to sleeping for the night. I was scheduled to meet Cruz again in five hours, and this time I was going to be ready for him to arrive.

I put my head on my pillow and drowsiness instantly overtook me. And as I drifted off to sleep, for the first time in awhile, my dreams were filled with fear. I didn't have

the mental resources to dwell on the whys or the hows. My mind and body simply embraced the sleep and the message it was brought.

*My darling little angel
My sweet, precious Lucy
For whom the world burns with fire
In zeal forever for thee*

*My darling little angel
My sweet, precious Lucy
For whom the brightest stars would fall
From heavens only for thee*

*My darling little angel
My sweet, precious Lucy
For whom I'd give all of my soul
To hand the world to thee*

*My darling little angel
My sweet, precious Lucy
For whom no wrong could corrupt
Or sink it's tendrils 'round thee*

*My darling little angel
My sweet, precious Lucy
For whom the darkness runs to hide
From radiance exuded from thee*

*My darling little angel?
My sweet, precious Lucy?*

*For how much time have you been lying?
And what are you doing to me?*

*My deceitful angel
My captor, devious Lucy
Fermenter of the grapes of wrath
Of punishment that's due me*

*My deceitful angel
My captor, devious Lucy
Forgetful it seems I've become
That angels not always will be*

Chapter 8

The next few days passed very quickly. The storm that had chased us into the station raged on for several days, and it looked as though it would hang around the rest of the week. Though the storm limited our sightseeing options, watching the storm was an awesome experience in its own right. Whether it was seeing the waterfall outside the café freeze in an instant, or watching the color changes on the horizon, it was beautiful.

It was now officially two days before I had to leave Ardua. It's about the time on any trip where the realization begins to hit you that it's almost over. This knowledge had already seemed to hit Cruz pretty hard. He was starting to act a lot more frustrated and distant. He wasn't his typical gentlemanly and joking self, but rather a quiet and touchy person. I tried not to let this get in the way of our time together, but it was starting to become very difficult to ignore. I realize that everyone handles their emotions differently, but Cruz's actions weren't excusable, and he was going to risk ruining our time together.

As I kept thinking about Cruz, I made up my mind that I needed to confront him about it. It would be absolutely stupid of me to just expect him to read my mind and fix things on his own. He needed to know how I felt so we could make the most of the rest of our time. I closed the book app on my specs and looked over at Cruz. It appeared as though he was enthralled in whatever it was he was

doing on his specs. Without him noticing, I snuck around behind him and pulled off his specs.

“What the hell are you doing, Jada! Damn it! I was right in the middle of something.”

My face instantly fell. I had never heard that kind of anger or language come from Cruz. “S-s-sorry.” I stammered. “I just wanted to talk with you about something.”

Now wait just one second. Why was I acting as though I had done something wrong? Cruz’s reaction had put me back on my feet. But that didn’t mean I was going to stay there.

“Actually, no, I’m not sorry.” I came back with a confident ferocity. “Over the past day you have barely talked to me, and the times you have talked to me you’ve treated me like garbage. What in the world has gotten into you?”

It was now Cruz’s turn to be back on his feet. His face softened, and he looked me in the eyes. “You’re right, Jada. I have been a jerk.” He paused. “Look, there’s something I absolutely have to do, and I won’t be able to give you the respect or attention you need with that on my mind. I have to figure some things out. I’ll meet you for dinner at the usual time tonight. I know you may not feel like eating with me, but please, I need you there.”

Maybe I’m a sucker, but I believed him. I agreed to dinner, and left Cruz to his mission. But what was I going to do

until dinner? I didn't know the station like Cruz did, and we had already seen a lot of the major attractions. So I decided to plop back down in my seat and keep reading through my book, with the storm as my backdrop.

The rest of the day was uneventful. Even though Cruz had been a jerk earlier, I was looking forward to having dinner with him. I think he got the message I sent him earlier about how much of a jerk he had been, and I was glad this had happened with enough time to make the last moments on Ardua memorable.

There was a buzz at my room right on time. I opened the door to find Cruz standing there in sloppy attire. I didn't mind that he didn't dress up, but I was expecting him to look better than he did.

"Aren't we going to dinner?" I asked Cruz.

"Not tonight. Dinner's coming to us."

"Oh." I said, disappointment seeping through my voice.

"Look, tonight isn't about dinner. It's not about us hanging out, it's not about any of that stuff. It's more important than that. I've got the most unbelievable story in the world to tell you, and I have no clue where to start or how to get you to trust me."

"I do trust you, Cruz."

“No. This is different. I’m not asking you to trust me about some sightseeing trip. This is different. I don’t know how I could have possibly built enough trust in one week to warrant the amount of faith I’m asking you to have in me.”

“Try me.”

“That’s the thing, if I ‘try you,’ and you don’t believe me, there could be some serious repercussions. But if I don’t tell you, there will definitely be horrible consequences.” Cruz sighed. “Maybe the best way to tell you is to get you to come to your own conclusion. I just don’t know how to get you there.”

“So you’re going to get me to tell myself the most unbelievable story in the world, and then believe myself?”

“Something like that. Yeah.” Cruz pondered for a few seconds. “OK, I’ve got an idea. Did you ever break any bones in your life?”

“I broke a tail bone when I fell off my hoverboard before.”

“No, no, no.” Cruz was frustrated at his poor questioning and tried again. “I mean, did you ever break any bones in your arms or legs? Something on one side of your body.”

“I broke my wrist when I fell off my hoverboard.”

“You really weren’t good on a hoverboard, were you?”

“I was plenty good, thank you very much. I just rode it a lot more than anyone else, so I had more opportunity to fall.”

“OK. Now this is the important part. Which wrist did you break? You have to be 100% certain.”

I was pretty sure I knew which wrist it was, but I thought on it carefully, just to make sure. “It was my right wrist. I remember because I had trouble eating with my left hand. But what does this have anything to do with an amazing story?”

“Great. Oh, hey, here’s a pen.” Cruz said, as he tossed a pen my way. “Before we move on, we need to order something to eat. Write down your order for the room service.”

“Why don’t I just use my specs?”

“I have this guy who will give us some special treatment, but it can’t be on the records.”

“Awesome.” I took the pen and began to write down what I wanted to eat.

“Stop!” Cruz yelled.

“What?” I was scared for a moment, but then realized that there was nothing going on to be concerned about. “What in the world did you yell for?”

“Which hand did you catch the pen with? What hand are you writing with now?”

I’m right-handed. I just told Cruz that, but he apparently wasn’t listening. I held up my right hand in front of me and looked at it. I was just about to tell Cruz off, when I realized that the pen I was writing with was actually in my left hand. That was strange.

“You’re left handed here on Ardua. You’ve been left handed all week long.”

“Weird. Did the UV radiation do something to me?” Now, I’m not a science nerd, but I was pretty sure that question was stupid. I honestly had no other hypothesis to draw in my mind.

“That would be nice.” Cruz said. “What we have is a bit harder to fix.”

What we have? That did not sound good at all. The only consolation I had was knowing that whatever I had, Cruz sounded like he had it too. I know it sounds a bit selfish, and I really didn’t wish anything bad on Cruz, but it was comforting, in a sense, knowing we were in this together – whatever *this* was.

“How much do you remember about your trip here? I mean, how much do you know about how they send you from Earth to Ardua?”

“Well, they have to do a lot of tests to make sure you’re stable for the long trip. Then they cryogenically freeze you and send you off to your destination.”

“Right. Do you remember how they checked to see if you were stable to travel?”

“How could I forget? They shoved a huge spike in the back of my neck.”

“What if I told you that they weren’t checking how stable you were? What if I told you they were extracting DNA and downloading the data from your brain?”

“That seems reasonable. That way if something happened along the way they’d have all the information they needed to fix me.

“Or they’d have all the information they needed to make another you.”

“Right.”

“OK, you’re obviously not seeing the connection. Excuse my bluntness, Jada, but they didn’t cryogenically freeze you and send you on a spaceship to Ardua. Our ships can’t go even close to the speed of light. The best human ships can do is about ten percent of lightspeed. But information... Information can be sent at the speed of light.”

I heard all the words that Cruz said, and on some level, I comprehended them. Yet I still needed Cruz to say what he was getting at out loud.

Jada, you didn't come here physically from earth. Your information was sent to Ardua and you were made here. You are an organic. You are not the Jada you have memories of from Earth. That's why they extracted your DNA, that's why they downloaded your memories, and that's why you're left-handed. They made a replica of Jada, and they always make replicas opposite handed. That way you can tell the difference from them if you know to look for it."

What do you say at a moment like that? What can you possibly say when your world is bombarded with unwanted truths? What do you say when you realize that your world hasn't really been *your* world?

You apparently don't say anything.

"Jada? Please say something, Jada."

"That doesn't make sense. Why would they do this?"

"They don't have any other choice if they want to see the galaxy. Spaceships don't have the capability to travel at light speeds. They can go pretty fast, but not nearly fast enough to make traveling a few lightyears worth it. So you have a few families and scientists make the sacrifice to travel out to these remote planets, set up a relay station, and

now you really can get to these planets in a few lightyears. All they have to do is beam your information via laser, then recreate you on the planet. It's much faster than traveling physically. What's even better, you don't have to waste your life on board a spaceship. You just send your information away, an organic replica is made, they have the experiences, then their data is streamed back and placed into your memories. The memories are made as if you've had them yourself, since the person making the memories has the same genetics and experiences to draw from when they make decisions."

"But I clearly remember – I mean, I know that I – that Jada thought she was actually going to be physically traveling across the galaxy."

"No, you think that's what Jada thought. She knew she was sending her memories away, and so did the rest of the staff and her parents. But if they're controlling the memories, they have the capability of excluding or tweaking any parts they wouldn't want you to have control of as a replica."

"So all the tourists here are just organics?"

"No. All the tourists and the staff are organics. There are a few security forces who aren't organics, most of whom are descended from the original colonizers. They make sure everything is in order. But other than that, everyone else is an organic."

"Are you the only one who knows?"

“We all know. Well, all the staff knows. The tourists who are sent here for experiences and most of the soldiers sent here for training have no idea.

“So after this week I just become part of the staff? I’m stuck here forever, until I die?”

“That’s why I needed to talk to you. All the staff knows who they are. We’re stuck here forever, but it’s better than being anywhere else. A colony of organics is the only place we could survive since we’d be either executed or enslaved anywhere else. The catch is, we have to play our part and keep our mouths shut. If our cover is blown, our freedom and our lives are put in jeopardy. You are not supposed to know all this.”

“So why are you telling me?”

“While the organic staff are privileged with their freedom, the tourists who are sent here aren’t so fortunate. The station could never accommodate all the organics that would pile up.” Cruz paused and looked at me with a look I didn’t like.

I didn’t think I wanted to know where this was going. A very deep pit opened in my stomach and I felt like I was going to implode. “So…”

“So two mornings from now, I’m supposed to walk you down to the embarkation lounge and say farewell as you go

to your 'sendoff.' They'll tell you that you have nothing to worry about, they're just going to do the same procedure they did to send you here. However, this time when the needle is stuck into your neck, they'll inject a lethal dose of poison instead of extracting information."

There were so many questions flying around in my head, I had no clue where to go next. Should I really believe all this? If Cruz understood this process so well, how many deaths was he responsible for? Why is he risking his life for me? Was I going to try to escape or just walk willingly to my death?

Cruz seemed to sense my confusion. "Look, I know there's a lot to sort out. I'm more than happy to answer any other questions you have. But right now we need to figure out what we're going to do."

"We?" I questioned. "You have nothing to worry about. I'm the one in danger here."

"Do you honestly think that I'm not going to protect you? After this week and getting to know you, I've decided that I'm done with this façade. This isn't freedom, and it isn't right."

"How many other girls did you walk to their deaths before you decided to do the right thing?"

Cruz's head dropped. "I'm not proud of what I've done. I can't justify it. But right now the only two choices I have

are to continue doing the wrong thing, or choose to do the right thing. If you're going to honestly criticize me for doing the right thing now, that's pretty low."

"Well, I think motives are important in judging a decision. Why are you making this decision now? Why save me?"

"My job is to seek out tourists, especially younger women, and show them a good time. They give me a dossier on the women they want me to target, and my job is to show them the time of their life."

I was stunned. "So I was a target for you? I guess that explains how you were so familiar with this place without having ever been here before. You live here."

"That's right." Cruz said ashamedly. He continued, "The demographics here aren't well suited for people our age, and we want to appeal to as many people as possible. If a station becomes unnecessary, there is no longer a need for the organics there. So I've spent a lot of time with girls here, but that's all it was, simply time spent doing a job. But with you, I haven't pursued you out of obligation, but out of desire. With you, it's not just time spent, it's life lived. You made me realize that I haven't really been alive – I haven't really been human. And now that I have tasted life, and I have tasted humanity, I don't want to give that up."

Cruz's answer was painful, but I understood where he was coming from. I couldn't honestly say how I would have

responded had I woken up on a planet and been faced with living a lie or death – and possibly even death for the others like me. I know how organic insubordination was treated, as I had seen it first-hand at my father’s factory. But all this made me think back to what I knew about organics themselves, and there was one huge problem.

“Cruz, we’re not human.”

“Not human?” he responded with a laugh. “You’re joking, right? What do you think we are then?”

“We’re organics.”

“Well, what do you think organics are?”

“I don’t know. They’re just a bunch of material that’s been created in a lab.”

“Jada, organics are human. How does the location of your origin have anything to do with what you are? A pizza is a pizza if it’s made in a deli, a pizzeria, or a kitchen. We have human DNA and human cells. What are we if we aren’t human?”

“OK, but organics aren’t as advanced as humans. They’re not as smart.”

“First of all, I take exception to that. I’m smarter than most of the humans the organics represent. But even if that were the case, organics aren’t given an opportunity to learn and

grow. Of course we don't appear as intelligent in general. We're deprived of the opportunity to do otherwise."

"Just look at the word 'organic.' We're 'organics,' not 'humans.'"

"That's just a word! Do you remember learning about the Intergalactic War? How did the winners justify killing everyone associated with the opposition?"

"They said they were sub-humans. They called them 'Otabengas.'"

"Right. Do you really think all those people executed weren't humans? What else were they? They were alive, weren't they? They came from human parents, didn't they? Like begets like, doesn't it? Don't you see, it's hard to justify murder, but it's easy to justify the extermination of a pest. Dehumanizing a group of people is the first step towards atrocity."

"OK, then what makes us human?"

"Humanity isn't just a physical thing. It's evidenced in love, in joy, in hope. It's something that isn't always tangible and can't always be explained."

Cruz leaned forward, and I closed my eyes. He gave me the most beautiful kiss, filled with so much more than words could express. It wasn't the first kiss I could pull out of my

memories, but it was *my* first kiss – the first memory of a kiss that *I* got to make. And it was wonderful.

“You often find your humanity in the moments after bliss. When only a remnant of the physical, tangible action is gone, and you’re left with so much more than what such a petty symbol of something like two lips converging could convey. That’s humanity.”

“So is that your plan to get us out of here? We’re going to go around kissing everyone so they realize that organics are human?”

“Wow. Maybe you aren’t human. I thought that kiss would do more for you.”

“More kisses might do more for me. We’ll have to try that out.”

Cruz laughed. “We will certainly have to make a point to try, but we do have a lot of other stuff to think about right now.”

Cruz and I spent the rest of the night discussing what our goals were. It seemed as though we had several options, believe it or not. They were limited, but they were options. The first option was to attempt a rebellion of all the organics. If we did it just right, we may be able to take over the station and prevent any distress signals from getting sent out to other human relays or to Earth.

The problem with this plan is that there was a high likelihood that the other organics would not want to participate, and would probably even turn us in. I mean, what was in it for any organics? They had a pretty free life here on Ardua. If they succeeded in taking over the station, what was their option from there? Spend the rest of their lives traveling lightyears through space to another planet where they'd be rejected, killed, or enslaved? Beam their memories into another organic on a different planet, creating and endangering someone else? And would sending your memories somewhere else really make you free anyway? There was a lot of risk for little reward, not to mention that a failed rebellion would mean certain execution for all the organics on Ardua, which is something many wouldn't be willing to risk, since they were currently living the best life they could hope for as organics.

The second option we had was to rough it out on Ardua's surface. Just disappear into the sunrise. Except we'd have to constantly re-appear into the sunrise, moving locations as the planet slowly rotated, not moving too far either way out of the habitable zone. Since the survival suits and specs had tracking capability, we'd literally only be able to take the clothes on our backs.

Since we'd be devoid of survival suits, it would be impossible for us to spend much time at all out in the high intensity rays of the sun. Any choice we made for a home would have to be underground. While there was plenty of water on Ardua, what would we eat? Giant earthworms were hard to find, and even if we could catch them, that

didn't seem like much of an option. Lucretia's tears would also work, except you needed a special suit to harvest them during the cold, or you'd need to harvest them immediately after an ice storm. That wasn't going to happen. Cruz did also suggest scavenging from the garbage pile, but that didn't sound too appetizing. Plus, that would probably be the first place they'd look for us and would require us to reside near the station and increase our chances of being caught.

Our third option, and the one that seemed most reasonable, was to escape. We had to find some way to get off this planet. This plan didn't seem to be any less difficult to accomplish than the other two, but it involved a lot less potential for unforeseen hitches. It only involved Cruz and myself, meaning less chance of betrayal. It was also a simple plan, as there would be only a few steps we'd have to worry about as we attempted to make our way to freedom.

The other thing that attracted us to the plan was the make-or-break aspect. Whereas the other two plans had us wandering about the natural or social elements we were reliant on, if we got caught attempting an escape, we'd likely be shot on sight. I didn't want to die, but I had to admit that the liberty or death approach seemed much better than plans filled with loads of anxiety and anticipation.

After deliberating over all our options, it appeared as though we were decided on our course of action. Now all

we needed was to come up with a plan on how to carry that plan out. Even though we only had about twenty-four hours, neither of us could keep our eyes open any longer. But that was ok. For the first time in my seventeen years of memories, I wasn't taking my humanity for granted.

“I love you, Cruz.”

“I love you too, Jada.”

I understand how fickle a seventeen year old's use of “love” might seem to those looking on from the outside. Admittedly, I, myself have been cynical about the way “love” seems to be thrown around amongst teenagers. It almost seems that the use of the “L” word is directly proportional to one's hormone level.

But you also have to understand that there are some events and experiences which can catalyze love. When two people share similar values, and those values are deep-seated values – that can fast-track love. Cruz and I valued our lives and valued fighting the injustice of subordinating and discarding a whole class of humans. Our deep values bonded us quickly.

We were also bonded quickly because of the situation we found ourselves in. When one is put in a position to trust their very lives and deepest truths and secrets to another, such a situation inherently draws the two together.

So did Cruz and I really love each other after a week? Yes. Now, this may not have been the “I’m going to marry you” kind of love, but it was a distinct, deep connection with another which differentiated it from all other relationships in the universe. It may not have been an erotic or romantic love, but it was genuinely love.

I contemplated this love as I once again fell asleep on Cruz’s chest. This would perhaps be the last time I would dream of love and bliss.

*Every day, many words we say,
But even more are left unspoken.
Some filled with hate, some with love so great,
And some we feel are just too open.
But at the end of the day, when these words go away,
Where is it that they all go?
The words unwise, to Heaven do rise,
The good descend to Hell below*

*The words in our minds from malicious design
Are never intended to be uttered.
And anger that feeds language from hateful seeds
Should never water those of another.
So all of these words that remain unheard
Because of a tame tongue that has left them unspoken,
Rise without blame, escaping the flames,
To live forever, redeemed, unbroken.*

*But all of the words filled with love and concern,
Left unsaid, leave an empty heart.*

*For who can live with the thought of investing in naught
Except temporary pride, that did silence impart?
And at the end of the day when these words go away
And the opportunity for love we did spurn,
We'll think back to our silence, wish for another chance,
And forever the unspoken will burn.*

Chapter 9

When we awoke the next morning it didn't feel as though the weight of the world was on our shoulders. I guess it really wasn't. But two lives hung in the balance, and our actions would determine their outcome. It was weird thinking that all the other tourists here had no clue who they really were, or what was really going to happen to them. I felt burdened with this information, but also with the task of having to act as though I didn't know anything. My feelings and thoughts were utterly imponderable. It was as though I could feel all the pain and fear and hope, but I didn't know how to think about them in my head.

It's sort of the opposite scenario one faces when grappling with the size of the universe. When you truly, intellectually understand the vastness of the cosmos, the result is often that you are left with mouth-gaping awe. You can intellectually know how to calculate the distance of the cosmos and come to logical conclusions, but you don't know how to emotionally process it.

In my situation, it was the opposite. I felt the vastness of every emotion you can imagine and I felt the weight of the greatest joy and the greatest despair lifting and crushing me all at once. But how I was to fit this emotional cosmos into my head and process it, I had no clue.

“Since this is our last day here, we might as well make the best of it, don't you think?” Cruz said, breaking the silence of the empty space between our two cosmoses.

I hadn't realized Cruz was awake. I didn't know what he thought of the blank stare he must have snapped me out of, but oh well. "Good morning." I replied. "I didn't realize you were awake."

"Wide awake and ready to go. We've got a lot to do today, you know. I was thinking we would start the day off with the most fantastic and expensive breakfast you've ever had, courtesy of Jada's dad, of course. What do you think?"

"That sounds great." I replied, but I couldn't get what Cruz said out of my mind. "Jada's dad." That was my dad. Or, at least that was the dad that I had memories of. I remember the time he took me out on our first father-daughter date, or the time he got me my first puppy. I remember all those things so vividly. And as far as I knew, all those things really did happen. But they didn't really happen to me. It was a strange sort of knowledge. It made it hard to know how to refer to oneself, or how to gauge any situation or decision, knowing all your referential experiences weren't really yours.

Cruz and I made our way to our café where Jada's dad treated us to a fabulous breakfast which included the priciest items on the menu. The good food and good company made breakfast as delightful as it could be on one's potential execution day.

After breakfast, we went back to the room to plan our escape. I guess I shouldn't really say that "we" were going

to plan our escape, since I had virtually no knowledge of the station. I also had no military training, martial arts knowledge, weapons training, or anything of that sort which might come in handy later. The only thing I would have going for me was a pretty savvy electronics knowledge. Having the top-of-the-line machinery in school and at the house, and having a father with an engineering background made for a good learning experience in electronics.

“Alright, so what’s the plan?” I asked, as we sat down on the bed.

“The problem with any attempt at escape is that this place can be locked down in an instant. Whatever we do has to be so inconspicuous that we’re not noticed until it’s too late. I can figure out how to get us a spaceship, but how do we get it out of here once they lock down the bay due to an unauthorized flight? I’ve thought through everything, and nothing seems feasible.”

“But even if you could figure that out, how would we get enough food on board to keep us alive long enough to get anywhere?”

“Well, that’s a little bit easier. There is typically a year’s worth of food for all potential passengers packed on board spaceships. Since these small ships can hold about thirty people, that’s fifteen years’ worth of food. And if we ration that out, we might be able to make it twenty years.”

“That sounds wonderful.” I said, with a grimace. “Are there even any other outposts fifteen years away?”

“There’s one that’s about two lightyears away, so about twenty-five years’ worth of travel on these ships. But once we’re within five to ten years of an outpost, we would most likely be able to find some other ships we could trade with. Or we could send out an S.O.S. beacon and play the rescue card.”

“But anyone who found us and ran our ship information would find out who we were. Where could we even go that would be safe? And all that is assuming we don’t get chased down from the beginning by the forces on Ardua.”

“I think we’ve gone into this knowing that our chances are slim no matter what route we take. We just have to pick the route we can live with the most, then give it our best shot. Unless you want to go for the earthworm and fungus option, I think we’re locked in here.”

I thought about it for a moment, but there really wasn’t all that much to think about. “Unfortunately, I think you’re right. Although there is one other option that hasn’t been considered.”

“Really?”

“You could go on living your life here on Ardua, and I could just go to sleep forever. I’d live on in Jada once my thoughts got back to her.”

“That is not an option. Nothing that involves you trying to die is a good option. Plus, do you really think that Jada with your thoughts would be the same person as you?”

“Why wouldn’t she be? If she’s the same DNA and the same experiences, she’d be another me.”

“So do you really think you’re her right now? I mean, you have all her experiences from Earth – or at least the ones they wanted to send here. Are you the type of person who would send off your memories to be created in another human being, only to have that person destroyed at the end? If you would do that, then you’re not the person I thought I knew”

“Of course not. But that’s because I have different experiences and a different perspective than she does.”

“That’s exactly my point. You could never be Jada, and Jada could never be you. You guys may be able to pass as each other more easily than I could pass as either of you, but you are both individuals in your own right.”

I got what Cruz was saying, but it was still all hard to digest. What exactly was humanity? Was it genes? Was it experiences? Or was it some subjective category we made up? As a newly realized organic, I was leaning towards the third option. I wasn’t so sure there was any such thing as humanity or individuality other than the definitions people created and society adhered to. That’s why I could be

treated as worthless in this society, while someone who was nearly identical to me could be so valuable.

“It doesn’t really matter what you think, Cruz. It only matters what they think?”

“Who is ‘they?’ You mean what the ‘humans’ think? Who cares what anyone *thinks*? Your specs don’t function because people *think* something, they function because people know how the world works. Do you think the earth failed to orbit the sun until people discovered that it did? You’ve got things all backwards here. We don’t get to define truth, we observe it and put words to it. People can think or say whatever they want to, but that doesn’t mean they’re right. Truth has to adhere to reality.”

“Your philosophy won’t help us escape from here.”

Cruz paused for a moment. “You’re right. But it will help us to live as humans until we are no more. We’ll have hope and love. And now, we need to add faith to that. I’m not prepared to say that consequences or outcomes determine what is right. I want to fight for what is right.”

I looked down at the ground, somewhat embarrassed at my wavering. “I guess I do too. It just all seems so overwhelming.”

“I know.” Cruz said, as he put his arm around me. “But as soon as we stop fighting for justice, we lose not only our

lives, but our humanity. That's why most of humanity started seeming less human a long time ago."

We spent the next few hours devising the best plan we could. Basically, since Cruz had more access to areas restricted to tourists, he would be able to set up a bunch of diversions: explosions, system malfunctions, etcetera. While he was doing that, all I had to do was acquire a ship. When Cruz first said this, I thought he was crazy, but he actually had it all worked out. He was going to take my specs back with him tonight so he could hack them with the appropriate level security information I'd need to access the docking bay.

Once I was in the bay, I shouldn't have much of a problem. Since we were planning on doing all this at three in the morning, there wouldn't be much, if any security inside the bays. It was assumed that if you were able to make it through all the security measures and into the bay, you were authorized. Furthermore, all the organics seemed to be on the same page here on Ardua, with no previous uprisings or hint of any in the future. Even if anyone did want to escape, and somehow managed, it would practically be suicide by starvation. Once I was in the bay, I should be in the clear.

After I boarded one of the ships, I was to wait for Cruz. If he did not arrive promptly by 3:30, I was to leave without him. Out of all the steps of the plan, this was the one I was the most worried about. Cruz was also going to upload a program to my specs which would assist me in getting one

of the ships started and flying on a pre-programmed course, just in case I had to leave without him. That made me nervous. But even if Cruz did show up, this seemed to be the part of the plan where everything could go wrong.

As soon as one of the ships was started up, the station would go on lockdown. Cruz said he would be able to disable the initial lockdown sequence, but that would most likely only hold the bay doors open for a minute, give or take thirty seconds. So we had to get the ship started and moving out of the doors in at best, ninety seconds, and at worst thirty. And even that was assuming that Cruz could actually bypass the system, which he *thinks* he can.

The plan was not ideal, but it was the best we could do considering our situation. I was nervous about the whole thing, but I also felt a sense of peace that surprised me. I was undoubtedly dead if I did nothing, so as an alternative, going out with a bang wasn't such a bad choice. Cruz and I replayed the scenario over and over in hopes that we could avoid the bang, but our demise was still more likely than not.

After all was said and done, we had completely missed lunch. Rather than eat in and continue to discuss the plan, we decided to have one last extravagant meal on Jada's father. It was magnificent, of course.

As we went back to my room I begged Cruz to stay. He said he had to work on the specs, and while he would love to be distracted with stimulating conversation, he couldn't

afford to be distracted, for my sake. Even though his excuse was reasonable, he knew better than to leave me empty handed. We parted with what was perhaps the sweetest, yet most intentional kiss I have ever experienced. The kiss was filled with gentle respect and love for me, but it was also packed with the intensity of a longing to stay, and a knowing sense of imminent loss. It was as if it was our first kiss, but our last as well, all rolled into one.

As Cruz was walking away, he stopped and turned back towards me. “Jada?”

Had he changed his mind about staying? Because that kiss sure made me want him to stay even more than I had originally desired, which was saying a lot.

“Yes?” I said hopefully.

“I would like you to do me one last favor, please.”

Sure, he could ask me to do something for him, yet he wouldn't do what I asked. “Anything.” I said, with a voice that reflected the lingering daze that still hung over me from our kiss.

“I want you to think back of your memories from this week. Write a poem about all the important stuff that happened. I want you to write now while everything is fresh and clear. I don't want you to forget this week. Please do it, just in case something happens.”

“I will.” I said, my daze now worn off. Nothing could kill that better than a reminder that death is likely awaiting you and your love, to separate both for eternity. Nevertheless, I knew Cruz was going to work hard at his part, and I wanted to contribute as well. Plus, did I really think I was going to be able to sleep well? Writing down my thoughts and feelings would be the perfect way to spend my last evening here on Ardua. A tribute.

I closed the door gently, walked back into the room, and plopped down on the bed. How was I going to write about a whole week in such a short time span? I guess that’s why he told me to use poems. Short. Concise. Packed with imagery and information.

I tried to think back to my first day here on Ardua. I remembered the sense of loneliness I felt as I realized that I was the only one I knew on this planet (and I’ve now come to find out that I don’t even know who I am). But then something miraculous happened. Cruz appeared, and he transformed me. I’m not going to say it was love at first sight. Not at all. He was definitely attractive and I really liked his personality, but I wouldn’t say it was love. Rather, it was a realization of hope and beauty that hadn’t been seen before. It was a new perspective on my situation, which Cruz provided.

*On winds of summer butterflies do soar,
With wings that help them see the world anew.
By intuition drawn to nectar’s store,*

To taste the sweetness ne'er before they knew.

And I, as they, do fly on winds so warm.

Advanced by you above a world unknown.

From humble beginnings was I transformed,

Due not to mind, but what to me you've shown.

And if likened to butterflies I be,

And you the one who makes this ever real,

Then stands explained these butterflies in me,

Which serve to further truth in me reveal:

That I am but a one who seeks her rose.

And I, my rose, the one for whom you grow.

The first time Cruz and I met produced flutters of hope in me. But I had experienced flutters before. There were always moments that tended to get your hopes up, but those hopes always seemed to get smashed. But the second day Cruz and I were together started to make me feel as though this wasn't one of those times. There seemed to be more present than in my previous, bad experiences.

The flutters of my heart turned into beats. Moving much deeper within me, my soul awakened and was joyful in a way I had never been before. No longer was life monotonous and something I observed and merely tried to fit myself into, but rather it was something I now participated and gloried in. Life was no longer a song I

heard other people singing. It was now a song I knew the words to.

*Enveloped in monotony's employ
All things being equal, all things the same
No taste, no sight, no sound I could enjoy
My greatest pleasure ne'er distinct from pain*

*These traits that seemed embedded in my soul
Began to dissipate as new ones formed
Songs brought upon wind's tendrils first took hold
As desert, broken through, saw new life born*

*My soul awakened to heart's quickened beat
Life's hum transformed to harmon'ous delight
Once languished soul crescendoed from defeat
Life's chorus echoed forth as I took flight*

*Whose song, on wind, has found and captured me?
It's yours, my love – It's yours, my muse, I see.*

My third memory stepped off the path from the first two. It wasn't that I didn't have a good day with Cruz, but there were significant moments that overshadowed that. I thought of the safety of Ardua we had been enjoying being quickly taken over by an oppressive storm. I thought of the soldiers we had rescued and their oppressive attitudes and ways. It was a day when I was reminded that nature produces both calm and storms, beauty and chaos, and that human nature, in like fashion, produces both gentleness and violence, love

and hate. And sometimes those two are indistinguishable until it's too late.

*My darling little angel
My sweet, precious Lucy
For whom the world burns with fire
In zeal forever for thee*

*My darling little angel
My sweet, precious Lucy
For whom the brightest stars would fall
From heavens only for thee*

*My darling little angel
My sweet, precious Lucy
For whom I'd give all of my soul
To hand the world to thee*

*My darling little angel
My sweet, precious Lucy
For whom no wrong could corrupt
Or sink it's tendrils 'round thee*

*My darling little angel
My sweet, precious Lucy
For whom the darkness runs to hide
From radiance exuded from thee*

*My darling little angel?
My sweet, precious Lucy?
For how much time have you been lying?*

And what are you doing to me?

*My deceitful angel
My captor, devious Lucy
Fermenter of the grapes of wrath
Of punishment that's due me*

*My deceitful angel
My captor, devious Lucy
Forgetful it seems I've become
That angels not always will be*

My next memory was probably one of my favorites. Even though it came on the tail end of some extremely bad news, that news was a catalyst for my relationship with Cruz, and it was also news that would hopefully save my life. I thought about Cruz's position of having to tell me that I was about to be executed and expecting me to believe that. But I also thought about what would have happened had he chosen not to say anything. It made me shiver just to think that tomorrow I would have unknowingly walked to my death.

But I also viewed this as the day I was able to tell Cruz that I did indeed love him. I realized that was a strong thing to say, and I understand that we hadn't known each other for very long. Maybe my emotions were high and my words were premature. Maybe our situation illegitimately made me feel that I did in fact love Cruz, when in reality, I didn't. But could I take the chance that these words and feelings

were legitimate and not express them? I chose to leave none of my words unspoken.

*Every day, many words we say,
But even more are left unspoken.
Some filled with hate, some with love so great,
And some we feel are just too open.
But at the end of the day, when these words go away,
Where is it that they all go?
The words unwise, to Heaven do rise,
The good descend to Hell below*

*The words in our minds from malicious design
Are never intended to be uttered.
And anger that feeds language from hateful seeds
Should never water those of another.
So all of these words that remain unheard
Because of a tame tongue that has left them unspoken,
Rise without blame, escaping the flames,
To live forever, redeemed, unbroken.*

*But all of the words filled with love and concern,
Left unsaid, leave an empty heart.
For who can live with the thought of investing in naught
Except temporary pride, that did silence impart?
And at the end of the day when these words go away
And the opportunity for love we did spurn,
We'll think back to our silence, wish for another chance,
And forever the unspoken will burn.*

The final poem I wrote, once again broke the romantic mold. I wanted to make it all about Cruz and our love, but there were just so many other emotions and thoughts going on. I couldn't devote everything to him. That wouldn't accurately describe what was going on.

Today's memories seemed to center, at least in my head, around what it meant to be human. I struggled with this tremendously, as I still had memories of feeling no remorse for the organics that were killed outside my father's factory years ago, even though those were the other Jada's memories and not mine. The organics had felt like mere objects. But now that I discovered that I was an organic, and I realized that I wasn't just something that had no feelings or no legitimate life, I felt value and love and hope. The only thing keeping me from humanity was the word "humanity" itself, defined by a group of people who thought it was convenient to define it in the manner they did.

I continued to waver back and forth through the day. Some moments I'd feel worthless, and others I'd feel indignant. But tonight, as I dwelt on my experiences here on Ardua, and on my relationship with Cruz, I realized that this was most certainly an injustice against humanity, not organics. No matter what people said or how they attempted to define things, I was human.

*I couldn't put my finger on it, this query deep in me
What was I looking at, these monstrosities I did see?*

*Why were they here with me? Why tread on same ground
as I?*

*Out of all them in this pen, I was the only ass in nine
I the gray, with flowing mane, the others, not the same
Some had spots, some had stripes, and some seemed far too
tame*

*So what was I to do from here with my aseity?
For I cannot make an ass of you, as the only ass is me.
I decided to gallop gallantly, as far away as I could get
From all the others who seemed the same, but just didn't
seem to fit*

*In my corner of the pen, I decided to sit and write
I wrote down all the vital things that should, my kind,
define.
And when I had it all writ down, I could hardly believe
In all the years I'd ever lived, I was the biggest ass I'd
seen.*

Bzzzz!

That was the door! But it was only 2:30. "Who is it?" I asked through the door, since Cruz had my specs and I couldn't see the identity of the caller through them. There was no answer. "Who is it?" I shouted this time. Still no answer. Had we been found out? Was someone there to take me to my execution?

I suppose I had to leave eventually, so I opened the door.

Chapter 10

I didn't see anyone in front of me. I leaned out of the doorway and looked down the halls, but nobody was there. All I saw was a small envelope in front of me. I picked it up and quickly closed the door behind me.

I sat down and looked at the envelope. It had my name on it, so it was definitely for me. I was also pretty sure that it had to have come from Cruz. He was the only person who knew me on the station, and he was the only one who knew I didn't have my specs to communicate with.

I carefully opened the letter and read it.

Jada,

I'm sorry to be doing things so secretively, but I didn't see any other way. The whole plan I discussed with you yesterday won't work. I may have been able to get you through the security, but even if I did, there was no way we'd be able to escape before the bay was locked down. Even if we could, living on MREs for twenty years and then starving to death didn't seem like the way either of us would want to go out. I have another way – a way which might make our lives mean something in the end.

I did take your specs for a reason, though. Anything we said or did around those things could potentially blow our cover. They have filters that listen for key words and phrases, or look for key actions. Chances are there would

be soldiers waiting for you at the docking bay this morning. I'm writing this letter to you because it will be completely off the record.

I know you're probably thinking this is a catastrophe, but all is not lost. I've intentionally misled the security teams by making our original plan - a fake plan - clear. That means the real plan will already have a built-in diversion. We are not going to the docking bay, and I am not going to cause the same diversions I mentioned to you. Instead, you are going to the embarkation chamber while I help to make sure you get there safely.

The embarkation chamber? Why would he send me there. You can't get off the station from there. Unless...

I'm sure you put two and two together. There's no way for us to get off this place ourselves. The embarkation chamber holds the only way we'll be able to get a remnant of ourselves out of here. There are no arrivals or departures scheduled before 10 tomorrow morning, so it should be a relatively easy place to get into. I've included a physical map along with instructions on what to do and how to do it. You're a smart girl, and I know you'll be fine. Just don't forget to bring those poems with you.

I guess all this means that last night was our "goodbye." I knew it was at the time, and I wish you could have known it then too. But I know you, Jada. You would have protested your obstinate self quite literally to our deaths. If I could have done this any other way, I would have. I do love you. I

hope you realize that. I only did things this way because I love you. Get out, Jada. Get out of here and change the world to what it should be. Do to it what you have done to me. Change it through your humanity.

I love you, and I love wherever this thought of me resides and is cherished.

*Love,
Cruz*

I was speechless. The hope that I had last night, despite our almost certain death, was crushed. Sure, starving to death wasn't appealing, but the fifteen extra years I would have gotten to spend with Cruz before starvation sounded pretty good. Now, there was no more time with him. Cruz seemed to think this plan was easier to accomplish, but was it better? It seemed his definition of success may have been different than mine.

But as I thought more about the new plan, I realized that he was right. This was much bigger than just the two of us getting to spend a few more moments together. This was about justice and goodness. It was about humanity. Everyone else may have forgotten what humanity meant, but that didn't mean we were excused from doing the same.

I opened the other documents Cruz included with the letter. I read his instructions and looked at everything on the map. It looked pretty simple, really. Cruz had somehow managed to ascertain the code for the embarkation chamber, so all I

had to do was make sure nobody suspected anything until I could get in and lock it down. Cruz also included a little asthma inhaler device with a note attached to it that said “just in case.” I was hopeful I wouldn’t need this, but I took Cruz’s advice.

I got dressed and readied myself for my last morning on Ardua. I immediately headed for the embarkation chamber. It didn’t appear that anyone else was awake in the inner corridor. I arrived at the embarkation lounge and made my way back to the “staff only” entrance. I punched in the code and let myself in. To my surprise, there was a woman who was already inside.

“Jada? What are you doing in here?” the woman said as she looked up.

I saw that it was Kallie, the “obstetrician” from my first day here.

“Uhhh...” I had to think quickly, which was kind of hard to do at four in the morning when you ran into something you really weren’t expecting. “I needed to talk with you and the man outside told me you were in here, so he let me in.”

“Oh. I thought I was the only one here. We’re not really supposed to let tourists in here before it’s time for them to leave, but, what can I do for you?”

I watched Kallie polish the tools and machinery as she talked. It gave me a very eerie feeling to know that I was

talking with someone who was preparing the instruments of death for me. And all the while she was doing that, she was talking to me and acting as though she cared about me. She was treating me like a human in one moment and prepared to discard me like garbage in another.

“What can I do for you?”

“Well, you remember how you said I could come to you if I needed something, right?”

“That’s exactly right!.” Kallie said enthusiastically.

My mind was in a strong debate against itself. This woman was demented. She talked about how much she loved life and loved bringing it into the world, but she was the same woman who was going to help bring that life to an end. How did those two things comport? This would be the only chance I had to talk with her and ask her some questions, but it would also put her on guard and potentially blow my cover. But either way, I was going to have to get rid of her to finish my job.

“How could you say you love life so much, then be the one who ends up leading that life to its death?”

“What are you talking about?” Kallie asked, a genuinely shocked expression shot across her face.

“I know what happens here. I’m just an organic, I’m not really Jada. You’re preparing these instruments for me,

because you're going to take my thoughts and memories from here, then kill me. Please don't treat me like I'm dumb."

Kallie's look softened. "Dear, I do love life, and I do love you." She paused. My hand reached inside my pocket and fumbled for the inhaler. Just in case. "You need to understand that love doesn't always look the same. Sometimes parents have to love their children by feeding them and pampering them."

"Buuuut?" I asked.

"But, sometimes, a parent has to understand the circumstances of life and realize what's best and most loving for their child may be painful. Jada, if I were to attempt to let you out into the world, it would be a terrible thing to do. Your life would be miserable because of what you are and the way the world is."

"So you're killing me because you love me? Are you sure it's not because you love yourself? You're an organic just like me, and you're a slave to your masters. You've found a way to live a comfortable and free life, so long as you do your job. You're not loving, you're selfish."

"Now, Jada. Those kinds of things hurt when you say them." Kallie's face looked pained. But anyone who can deceive themselves into thinking that killing innocent life is loving is deluded. Whether it was an act or self-delusion, I didn't know. But I did know that Kallie was meandering

over towards a tray where there were some sharp instruments and syringes. She saw what I saw, and we both lunged towards the tray.

I whipped out my inhaler and attempted to spray it in Kallie's face as the scrawny scientist had done to the soldier days before. I shot just as she was bringing her hand and a blade towards my face. My inhaler shot missed her face, but so did her swing miss mine. Her hand careened past my face and continued on until it hit the wall, and I heard a scream.

Apparently, my cold asthma shot had missed the air around Kallie's face and rather hit her hand directly. When her frozen hand hit the wall, pieces of her hand shattered and fell to the floor. In her pain and confusion, I took the inhaler and put it right up to her face and squeezed again. It was a direct hit.

Kallie's mouth was frozen open, and I could hear her attempt to get air just like the soldier had done at our training. She was suffocating. But what made this scene even more eerie, was that my mist must have also hit her face and her eye. Her right eye looked as though it was stuck open, and crystals formed on the surface and eyelashes. The top of her mouth also looked as though it was stuck, as only the bottom part of her expression changed when she gasped for air. This stuff was obviously more potent than I had thought. Our instructor must have really known what he was doing to only get the right amount of mist into the soldier's throat.

After about thirty seconds Kallie attempted no more gasps. Her expression was now as frozen as her heart. I immediately followed Cruz's plans and locked down the room. That should buy me some time once the security forces figured out what was going on.

I moved on to the next stage in the plan. I pushed a few buttons and flipped a few switches, typed in some commands, and set all the machinery up. I also set up a message to go out with the data I was going to send. It read:

The security forces on Ardua are running a test. Ignore any alert messages sent out from this post for the next twenty-four hours. Authorization code 121709.

Since the military ran a lot of tests from Ardua, this sort of thing was the norm. At least that's what Cruz said. That message should buy me enough time to get a head start once I got to earth.

Now came the fun part. Just like the last time I left a planet, this next step was going to be the hardest. I now had to insert that long, metal spike into the back of my neck. It was hard enough when I was strapped down and allowed someone else to do it, but now I was on my own. The only thing I had going for me was that there was a relatively fresh hole to follow from a week ago when I woke up attached to this machine where I had received Jada's memories.

I lined up the plunger to as close of an angle as I thought was correct, and I started to insert the spike very slowly. As I applied pressure, I moved the spike around ever so slightly, trying to get the tip to catch into the hole. I only hoped the hole hadn't healed very much in the past week. I couldn't afford paralysis until this process was over, and I certainly couldn't afford death.

After a few minutes of trying, I was able to guide the spike all the way into my neck and lock the device in place. Since I wasn't strapped down this time I was able to walk around to the rest of the controls to make sure everything was running smoothly. It was actually easier to remain calm and ignore the pain this time because I had something important to focus on.

I spent my time waiting by reading the poems I had written. Cruz had mentioned in his instructions that it was important I do this. I didn't have a professional who could guide me through the memory process, so I had to make sure I had as strong of a connection as possible to my newly formed memories, to ensure they all made it out of here safely. Attaching those memories to a poem gave them more connections across my brain, but it also allowed them to have deeper roots. It was my way of solidifying and internalizing my memories, training my mind as to what was important, and packaging them for their trip.

At about 75% completion, an image popped up on the screen in front of me.

“Don’t!” someone yelled. “Don’t trust her!”

The familiar voice rang out through my ears, as a translucent image of the speaker appeared in front of me, fixed upon the thin screen. This was both an image and a voice that I thought I would never experience again. It was a moment I wanted to savor. But Cruz’s shouts prevented me from lingering in this moment.

“Do you hear me?” Cruz yelled at me again. “Do not trust her! I didn’t think about it before I wrote the letter, but I know you, and I know you’re going to want to. But don’t trust her.”

“Who? Don’t trust who?” I shouted back.

“Whatever you do, don’t trust –“

A huge explosion erupted in the background. I thought I heard a piece of the name, but I couldn’t quite make it out. The information seemed rather moot at this point anyway. Unless...

A few minutes later, I heard heavy footsteps growing louder outside of the door. I heard the distinct click of a lever as someone on the other side of the door futilely attempted to engage the airlocks to no avail. I realized now that my time was limited. It was something that I knew going into this, but there comes a time when you go beyond knowledge to understanding. This was that time.

I went back to the keyboard and began typing quickly – even quicker than I knew I was capable. Cruz had a brilliant plan, but I wanted to add in a few of my own innovations.

I heard muffled voices through the door, followed a few seconds later by a sharp, crackling sound that reminded me of the sound my specs make during a bad solar flare. Then I saw the sparks, and I knew what was happening. The security forces on the other side of the door were cutting through. I had to do something with the information Cruz gave me, but I just didn't have the time.

I had played this scenario through my head several times since I received the letter this morning. Each time I thought it would be fear that I would experience. I knew myself, and I'm only fearful when it is rational. This situation certainly warranted fear. But though I did feel fear, the strongest emotion I felt was actually loss. I knew that the soldiers arriving at the door meant that Cruz was almost certainly dead. If they had gotten to me, they must have first gone through him. How could I be alive and have fear, knowing that my two greatest fears had already been realized. Cruz was dead and we were separated forever. If Cruz had sacrificed his life for me, then the least I could do was boldly face death for the memories of the one I loved. No, the one I still love. Separation would be far worse than death, so what was there to fear in a death which might purchase me reunion? I could hope for reunion, couldn't I?

Maybe that's the thought which surprised me most. Somehow, I felt hope. I believed I was going to succeed, and that seemed to produce a hope within me. Or was my hope the cause of my confidence? Either way, I knew my mission and I knew the outcome that was needed. I could not fail.

I had done nearly all that I could, and now relied on the computer to do its job. As I looked down at the computer, it seemed to be taking forever.

85...86...87

With each percentage gained, the security forces seemed to cut through another inch of door. Inches and seconds. That's all that now separated me from failure, and all that separated me from forever. Forever with Cruz in death, and forever with Cruz in the mind and ideas of another.

I remembered one last trick Cruz had mentioned in his letter. I began frantically typing on the keypad once more.

93...94...95

I could now see the dark outlines of soldiers appearing through the severed door, as the large chunk which had been cut out was eased out of its newly created frame. It looked as though they had come dressed for another intergalactic war. The Captain was even more heavily armored than the other soldiers, covered from head to toe with scaled, Farklane armor. I had only seen that armor

once before, and its presence here was not at all comforting. The only defense I had left was to engage the plasma field in the doorway, but the Farklane armor would easily resist that.

The soldiers made eye contact with me. They realized that I was only a teenager, and it looked like one of the men had ordered the lowest ranked soldier to step in and get me. I recognized this soldier. He was the red-headed man we met the other day on our excursion to Ardua, and the only one who said “thank you” to Cruz and I after we had rescued them from a storm on the surface.

The Captain barked a command to the soldier, putting his hand on the soldier’s back and giving him a helpful nudge through the hole in the door. I hesitated for just a moment, but I couldn’t let anyone through. I activated the plasma field.

The soldier had just begun to get his torso across the threshold when my plasma field cut him in half. It was a painful sight to watch the mouth of someone who had blessed me with his words earlier this week, now open his mouth in agony, only to say nothing. Would I have made the same decision if I had more time to think? I don’t know. But it was done.

The Captain appeared extremely angered, and pushed the other soldiers out of the way. He secured his helmet around his head and pressed forward.

97...98...99

I was very fortunate the leader hadn't stepped through the plasma field first, as his armor would have brought him through the field and to my demise before the data was finished uploading. But even now, 99% completion might as well be 100% incomplete.

The Captain climbed his way through the hole in the door, getting his head across the threshold without issue. But as he began to maneuver his **left arm** through the door, I heard him yell in pain. She saw the soldier drop his gun. But wait, he didn't drop his gun, but rather his whole hand. It appeared as though his suit had malfunctioned and failed to complete the seal between his glove and his forearm, leaving his wrist exposed

...100

I pressed my last button, "send," as the Captain peeled his still grasping fingers off the trigger guard and handle, and picked up his weapon with his right hand. With more ferocity and bitterness than an Arduan ice storm, he fired.

Nothingness

Epilogue

The strangest dreams seem to happen in the deepest of sleeps. Upon waking up, or trying to wake up, I realized that I must have just had one of the deepest sleeps of my life. I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn't get them to move. I tried again and again, always with the same response.

“Jada? Can you hear me?”

I heard a soft voice beckoning to me. Where was I? My body slowly opened its eyes, and was greeted by sterile, bright lights. I saw a woman standing in front of me. Kallie? It couldn't be Kallie. She was back on Ardua, dead.

Ardua. Was that place even real? I was confused. I needed time to figure out what was going on.

“Jada, take my hand and let me help you up.” the woman in front of me said.

Someone reached up to Kallie with my right hand and grabbed Kallie's hand.

Jada had awoken.

But so had I.

SPEAK TO THE IDEA OF MONO-IDEOLOGIES BEING BAD

Epilogue: Distant place and time, show the original MC going back to the send off place to get her memories back.

Discuss who the clone is. Is she Jada 1, or two, or her own person.

Original Jada died in womb, but Earth Jada was a clone.

Father discusses with clone daughter and says that because he chose to bring her into existence, she's legitimate. Smash a rose or object she treasures and ask her why that combination of molecules was more precious. It's because of the meaning that was inserted into it.

Note written before send off should be included later.

The people who hate organics are people too. You can't forget that.

Farklane filled with replicas who pay justice, while counterparts who committed crime are still on earth being mindwiped

Bodhi enlightenment

Leo lion
Jada he knows, good/beautiful woman