

TRAINING

IT NEVER FAILED to give her a thrill when she saw the moonscape rush by underneath her ship, and the blue curve of Earth rise above it. Aisha smiled at its beauty.

Down there, girls her age were wondering about homecoming dances, and what dress they'd wear, or which boy would ask them out. She was much happier *here*, piloting her ship, zipping at breakneck speeds across the Moon, and getting ready to break into deep space.

"I think I see them," said David, her navigator and co-pilot, sitting in one of the wing pods to her right. "Two-seven-zero karem one-nine-eight."

"Confirmed," came the clipped voice of Soo-Kyung, her gunner. Aisha glanced to the pod on her left and her eyes met Soo-Kyung's. The Korean girl smiled and nodded.

Aisha always wanted a visual confirmation. Comm lines could be hacked and voices faked. Soo-Kyung knew this instinctively. That's what made them a great team.

"Okay," said Aisha. "Weapons hot. Let's check them out."

She punched in the coordinates, and the ship turned towards their target.

"Visual range in five seconds," said David.

"I see them," Aisha replied. Her heads up display started to light up with targets. Squares projected on her canopy, wrapping tiny dots that could easily be mistaken for stars to the naked eye.

"That's a lot of ships," she said, awe sneaking into her voice.

"That's a bloody awful lot of ships," said David.

Soo-Kyung was business as always. "Orders?"

"Can you confirm ship type?"

"They are mostly type-three fighters. About eighty of them."

"What else?"

"A single mothership. That's the target."

"No other fighters?"

"A couple of type-ones, but hard to tell with all the movement."

The fighters were moving around the mothership, following what looked like random patterns, making it hard to get a radar lock.

"Are they moving to intercept?"

"No, sir."

"David, probe the edge of their defense shield."

His gentle voice sounded in her earpiece. "Yes, Sir."

David took the ship forward slowly, while Soo-Kyung watched the behavior of the enemy fighters. They knew from experience that these ships could turn from defense to offense in the blink of an eye. If they didn't react, they could find themselves surrounded and destroyed in seconds.

"We are at the edge of previous attack ranges," said Soo-Kyung. "Recommend that we hold at this position."

"Do it."

The ship halted, and they floated in space, watching the enemy.

"Any update on ship types, David?"

"The best I got is maybe two or three type-ones, the rest are definitely type-three."

She wished she had read the spec books more closely, but was glad David was there. "Turning radius of type-threes?"

"Two hundred degrees," he answered, almost in reflex.

"Distance of fighters from the mothership?"

"Average about three hundred clicks."

Soo-Kyung raised an eyebrow. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yes," said Aisha. "Full frontal assault, all shields on front."

"If we leave our back exposed--"

"Hopefully they won't get a chance. Maximum throttle, straight at the mothership, direct all energy to front shields."

"Including lasers?"

"Including lasers. We're on bullets and torpedoes. Can you do it?"

She heard the smile in Soo-Kyung's voice. "Done."

"Good. And fire at will."

"Roger."

"David. Punch course in."

"Course, aye."

"Manual control to me."

"Roger."

"Here goes nothing!"

Aisha punched the program, and she felt the craft lurch as they accelerated forward. She continued its burn, getting faster and faster as they approached the enemy ships.

"Ships turning to intercept."

"Acknowledged."

She saw the enemy ships swarming to intercept. Suddenly their random patterns stopped, and they turned, almost as one, bearing down on her. They opened fire, but the forward shields held.

"Intercept in five seconds," said Soo-Kyung. Aisha marveled at her ability to stay calm, and it seemed the more stressful the situation, the calmer she was.

And just like that they flew through the squadrons of enemy fighters, on a course straight for the mothership.

"They're turning to intercept."

Time seemed to slow down in her mind. The mothership approached weapons range at a painful crawl. The enemy fighters, now behind her, were slowly turning to follow them, with a clear shot at Aisha's tail. She'd turned off their lasers, directing their energy to the shields, so they'd need to be close for ballistic weapons to be effective.

It was going to be tight. Once the enemy fighters had turned around, the back of Aisha's fighter was exposed. The lead ones had almost turned, and were ready to open fire.

But then Soo-Kyung had her target locked and opened up with everything she had on the mothership. Direct hits, but the ship stayed intact.

A hit on their right wing made the ship lurch.

"Now would be a good time, Soo-Kyung."

Aisha looked to her left, seeing her friends' face deep in concentration. Another torpedo launched, hitting a module to the

rear of the mothership's bridge. A small explosion was followed by several large ones, but before the ship was destroyed, Aisha's ship was hit again. This time right in the engines.

Aisha felt her ship lurch. Red lights all over her console. The reactor had taken a direct hit. It was about to go critical. Her heart was beating hard. She reached for the eject buttons, hesitating long enough to see the mothership go up in a ball of flame.

The moment's hesitation was enough. She felt the ship lurch as the reactor gave out. Her mind slowed as the white flash enveloped them. She had enough time to realize, with resignation, that she was dead. Both co-pilots too.

The simulator door opened, and Captain Simms' craggy face looked in at her.

"You're *dead*. All of you. Again," he said. Disapproval in his voice. "I thought you guys were better than that."

PART ONE:
A Letter From My Father

CHAPTER 1

Departures

My Dearest Aisha:

I don't even know how to begin writing this letter. I look at you now, sleeping in your crib, so small and so helpless, and I wish I could be there with you when you take your first steps. I wish I could see it when you get on the bus for your first day of school. I wish I could hold you when you come home crying for the first time, realizing that the world is a bigger and badder place than you could have ever imagined.

But I won't be. The disease that is tearing through my body will take me away from you soon. And I'm so very sorry. But, so that I won't be a distant and mysterious memory, I'm writing you this letter.

For you have a destiny. A bright and wonderful destiny...

THE TRANSPORT PLANE was older and more rickety than she would have expected for one headed to the spaceport. Aisha peered out the window of the plane intently, waiting for her first glimpse of the great cable veering skyward from Kiritimati into the depths of space.

It even had the old-school seats facing each other across a small table. A man sat there, and he was watching her closely.

"It's nothing really special," he said. "You don't really see anything. It's only interesting when a launch happens."

"How often?" she asked, knowing the answer already. She always knew the answer already, but she asked anyway.

"It depends," he said, looking at his watch. "We build the shuttle onsite and then launch it. It's not worth bringing it back to Earth, where it would burn up in the atmosphere, so it's designed to be launched once, and then disassembled into various different things to be used up there."

He pointed at the sky.

"I'm going up tomorrow," she said.

He nodded, smiling. "I figured. We get a lot of kids your age coming through here, heading for the Academy."

He smiled and went back to reading the news from his tablet. He hadn't said anything about her color. Mother had insisted on telling everyone within earshot that Aisha was the first African-American to go to the Academy. And not only was she African-American, she was a *girl*.

Aisha groaned inwardly. She wished mother would just *stop*. It had been a couple of hours since they had left Hawaii. The plane flew south to the tiny atoll that Aisha couldn't take her eyes off of. Upon arrival, they would take the short trip out to the bottom of the cable, and the fleet of ships imaginatively called *Terminus*. That would be the last stop before she launched into orbit, leaving Earth behind.

The man lowered his tablet and pointed to a silver dot on the horizon.

"That's a shuttle right there," he said. "And if you look closely you can see the cable that makes up the Space Elevator."

Even the words sounded amazing to her. The *Space Elevator*. Since the invention of materials with the requisite strength in low-enough density to make the concept buildable, many nations had gathered together to build this one. The idea was simple. Tether a cable on the Earth near the equator, and extend it out into space for about 35,000 kilometers. The object on the far end of the cable would then be in geostationary orbit, always above the same position on the Earth, much like communications or TV satellites.

She peered, trying to make out the cable, but it was just too skinny to be seen from this distance -- except the occasional glint as the tropical sun reflected off it.

Because the cable was tethered to the surface of the Earth, the rotation of the planet would send any object attached to the cable

flying out from the center of gravity, propelling it into space. Once it reached the top of the cable, it could then launch itself outward, using a tiny fraction of the fuel that a traditional rocket launch would use up.

Almost overnight, it had revolutionized space travel. One of the first things the international community had agreed upon was to build an academy. Its goal: To teach a new generation of humans what it would be like to have a single, coherent community, not hindered by the tropes of the past. Ultimately, such a community would be the future of mankind, its backers had argued, and would put an end to the wars that nearly destroyed us all.

Aisha opened her locket and looked at his face, trying to remember him. Ravaged by cancers from radiation suffered in war, her father died before she reached her first birthday. He smiled back at her from the tiny picture, and she could see the pride in his smile.

I did it, Dad. I made it into space, and I made sure that you would never be forgotten. That the next phase of humanity will have a little part of you in it. That was worth fighting for. I just wish you didn't have to die for it.

The plane jolted as it began to descend, waking Mother.

"Are we there yet?"

Aisha smiled to herself. "We're almost at the Terminus."

Mother smiled and looked at the man sitting across from Aisha. "She's going to the Space Academy, you know," she said, smiling.

The man nodded. "You must be so proud."

"Oh, I am," said Mother. "She'll always be my little girl, but to be the first African-American, and one of the first girls up there, it's so exciting."

"I'm sure," said the man. "I think she'll do amazing things."

"Aww, you're so nice," said Mother, milking the compliment for all it was worth.

He said nothing and went back to reading.

Irk, mother looked around for someone else to impress. The plane lurched again, so she closed her eyes instead, fighting back airsickness. Mother was never good at flying.

Aisha turned back to the window, catching the man's eye with his small smile. He nodded at her, and she returned the gesture.

The ground rushed at them, and with a jolt they landed on the small airstrip. Since the construction of the Space Elevator had begun, this tiny island had changed from being a rock in the middle of the ocean to a thriving miniature city. But land was at a premium, so all passenger transport still came through the tiny airstrip on the western side. Aisha had read that a new floating airport was under construction. When it opened, the island would be connected directly to the mainland of the USA and other countries, instead of needing a transport plane like this one flown out of Hawaii.

As she got out of the plane, Aisha could feel the warm breeze and hear the crash of the surf. A rocky beach lay just to her right, within walking distance of the airstrip. Mother emerged, blinking in the bright light. A representative of the Academy greeted them, and led them towards a small set of prefabricated buildings that served as the registration center.

A tiny look of disappointment crossed Mother's face. Aisha rolled her eyes. Mother was probably expecting more press to meet them here, presumably not having enough of them in Hawaii.

The only cadet on the arriving flight, Aisha strolled after the greeter, calling for Mother to keep up. The warm humid air felt good in her lungs. For the next few years she would be breathing processed air in the space station, so she wanted to make the most of it.

She wondered if there would be time for the beach.

The administrative center was as plain on the inside as it was on the outside. A threadbare box, it housed several desks at which sat tired-looking administrators swiping through computer terminals.

The greeter read Mother's disappointed gaze. "Here's where we just make sure you are who you say you are before taking the boat across to the Elevator. It helps us make sure that people don't sneak aboard."

Mother raised her eyebrows. "What kind of people sneak aboard? Terrorists? It doesn't look like *you* could stop them!"

The greeter smiled a little, and to Aisha it looked practiced. "No terrorist could get within a thousand miles of this place. No, we're more concerned about curious onlookers, too many relatives of cadets, that type of thing."

His words confused Aisha. How could a terrorist be stopped from getting here, when just about anybody could fly here, including

too many family members? Was it all a front, or were they profiling everything about every person who even tried to come to this place?

She held her tongue. If Mother thought there was any profiling going on, she'd launch into one of her rants.

"I hear the hotel is very nice," Aisha said, changing the subject.

"Yes," said the greeter. "We want your last night on planet Earth to be special."

"But she'll be coming back, for vacations and the like," said Mother. "So it's hardly her *last* night."

"Of course," said the greeter, smiling, before ushering them to a desk where the clerk had finally booted up his screen.

"You're our last flight of the day today," he said cheerfully. "But don't worry - you aren't the only launchie. The others are at the Terminus ahead of you, so you'll have plenty of friends for the ride up."

Aisha smiled. She didn't really need friends, but it was best not to argue.

"Ah Miss Parks," he continued, checking her credentials. "I heard you were coming today, it's very nice to have you aboard."

"Thanks," said Aisha. "But I just want to be like any other student."

"Yes," he continued. "The media have made a big deal about it down here, but once you get up there, all that will be forgotten."

Mother piqued up. "What?"

"We try to keep the kids insulated from political and social matters down on Earth," he said in a trained voice. "That way they can focus on their work."

"But she is the first African-American to be accepted since open enrollment. Not only that, she's one of the first girls. That makes her very important."

"Ma'am," said the receptionist. "Your daughter is extremely important, and in time you'll find it's not for *those* reasons, but for who she is and what she's capable of doing. Her race, her gender, those things don't matter."

"But she is the *first* African-American--"

The man interrupted, albeit politely. "Of course," he said. "And the press at Terminus will want to ask you all about that."

CHAPTER 2

Press

There are so many things I've learned since I broke away from the cocoon that we call our country. It's a great place, a safe place, but perhaps it's because of that safety that we look inward.

And in the case of too many people, we look backward.

Future dreams will never last if we always focus on the past. On the terrible things that were done to our ancestors. If we are to look forward, we should remember them, but not dwell on them...

TERMINUS, THE MASSIVE flotilla that surrounded the Space Elevator, was too mobile to be called a city in its purest sense. But for all intents and purposes, it was one. Their hotel was the finest Aisha had ever slept in, with big, comfortable beds and a wonderful breakfast. The slight rocking of their room caused by the waves only further lulled her to sleep.

So it was in fine cheer that she greeted the press conference, the crankiness of travel a distant memory.

Before long, she was biting her lip, trying not to snap at the monotony and repetition of the questions that were largely irrelevant to her future as a space cadet.

"What's it like being the first African-American to qualify through open enrollment?"

"It's great, but I can't really answer what it's like until I go up there. But I'm looking forward to it, and hoping I can be an effective student."

She watched as the reporters took notes, unhappy with such a straightforward statement. There was no *story* there.

"How do you think you are going to cope with the pressure?"

"Until I know what the pressure is, it's hard to answer that question. I'm sure I will handle it the same way as any other student."

One of the reporters, a white man whose hair was whiter than his skin, interrupted. "But you aren't like the other students, are you?"

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you are the first African-American student to qualify through open enrollment."

Aisha could feel her anger rising. She tried to keep her calm as she answered evenly, "How does that make me different from the other students?"

"Please," said the man. "We all see how politically *correct* this situation is. There has been so much pressure on the board of governors to open enroll from amongst the general population so that we can meet political needs of diversity. So, of course, the first thing we need to do is to have some African-Americans amongst the student body. And while we're at it, why don't we get a *girl*, so we kill two proverbial birds with one proverbial stone. Let's also find one who lost a father in the second Korean War! Isn't it obvious to you that you have been picked for all of these reasons and that you are going into orbit to be in a place where you are likely to be out of your depth, but will probably be handled by kid gloves, so as to satisfy those who are bearing political pressures?"

Aisha felt her jaw drop. Even Mother was stunned into silence. The worst part, though, was that in a room full of people, many of whom were African-American, nobody leapt to her defense. Instead the press turned to her, recorders pointed in her direction, awaiting her answer.

What a bunch of sharks!

She could feel herself begin to sweat as all eyes turned her way. Time slowed to a crawl as they awaited an answer. With every passing tick, and nothing to say in response, she began to wonder if the man was right. If she really was out of her depth. If she really didn't belong here, and she was just fooling herself. Maybe she wasn't as smart or as capable as she thought she was.

What would Father do in these circumstances? She had always learned of how great and how wise he was. Mother tried to pass down his teachings, but they were often through her filters, and Aisha was left to parse what the man had really been like, and what he would really do.

She remembered one phrase: Never start the fight, but always finish it.

The path was clear. There was a simple way to finish this fight. Composing herself as best she could, she smiled, and stood. It still felt like everything was moving in slow motion. Instead of exiting through the back, she took the steps down from the stage towards the waiting press, walking towards them.

Some began to get upset at her not answering the question. That was the *news* they had come for, and they smelled blood in the water. But she maintained her composure, looking straight ahead and walking slowly, step-by-step, as they parted before her.

Her path took her straight towards the reporter that had asked the question. His skin was turning redder now. Was it anger? Embarrassment? It didn't matter. She met his gaze, held it for a moment. She watched him prepare for whatever she was going to say, saw his eyes dilate, his pallor flush.

She gave him a little half-smile, and left the room to ever-increasing volume and shouting.

She finished the fight.

* * *

Her insides burning, she wanted to get as far away from the press room as possible. She had maintained a calm composure, but the man's words bounced around her head, making her angrier with each passing step.

But what if he was right? What if she really was chosen for the reasons he had said? She had to admit to herself that she had taken pride at being the first of her race to be chosen. And with there being so many qualified boys, that the first was a girl. Maybe she shouldn't have felt so proud. Maybe she shouldn't have let mother's braggadocios attitude wear off on her.

The truth of the matter was that she *was* selected. That she *was* going to be a space cadet. In a few hours, she would be in orbit: Working with the best and brightest people in the world, learning how to fly spaceships, and being part of the research team that was building ships that would go to the stars.

This small-mindedness would be left behind. Whether or not he was right, she was still going to be part of that, and still going to have an opportunity to excel. Not as an African-American. Not as a girl. But as *herself*.

* * *

Mother was unhappy at dinner. Aisha wasn't sure if it was because she had cut the press conference short or if it was because of what the man said. Not knowing her mother's feelings disturbed her even more. Finally, Mother spoke.

"What you did," she said. "Reminded me of your father. It was like he was back there in the room with me. I've never been more proud of you."

Aisha looked in her mother's eyes. They were reddening. "It made me miss him all the more, and tonight you are leaving me too. I just realized how much I'll miss you. It'll be just me and your little brother now."

She stood up and walked round to Mother's side of the table, embracing her warmly. She could feel Mother's face on her shoulder, and the heat of her tears. Holding ever tighter, she felt the tears flow from her own face down Mother's shoulder.

"I don't have to go," she said. "I can stay with you."

Mother pushed her back. "No," she said. "You can't deny yourself this. You know your father fought hard so that we can enjoy our freedom, and some day that will be impossible on this planet. I think that day is coming sooner than we think. You are going to that station. You are going to excel. And you are going to the stars, and taking memories of me, and your father, and your brother with you."

She held Aisha tightly. "I just wish I could be with you, so that *they* won't attack you again."

"They won't, Mother. And you'll always be with me."

CHAPTER 3

Launch

We should always reach for the sky.

From the very beginning of history, our ancestors were looking up and wondering what was beyond their reach. The stars were calling them. They weaved stories of gods and angels, but behind them all was the intense desire to be out there. A desire born of an instinct for survival.

It's something we've forgotten as we've become civilized. We've become comfortable in our homes, our cities and our countries. We've defeated nature and haven't had the same worries that they had. But we lost something in that complacency, I fear. And now, as our world gets overcrowded, as our environment collapses under us, we need to rediscover it. We need to look up, and not worry about tripping as we race towards a new destiny. We will be those gods and angels if we want to. And you can be one of them, if you just keep trying, and never give up...

THE SPACE ELEVATOR. Its relatively simple name belied the sheer scale of it. Craning her neck, Aisha looked up as it disappeared impossibly into the deep blue sky. The 'shuttle' was a box-like structure that could easily pass for another building, but for the rocket boosters placed on its corners. These boosters would provide the initial 'launch' to get the craft moving out of its gravitational inertia. After that, the rotation of the Earth would take over and drive the shuttle up the cable into orbit.

She was so glad for last night's dinner with Mother. Beforehand, it had felt like there was a tension building between them. Mother's basking in her status had gotten under Aisha's skin, and she had been worried that she might blow up at her before leaving. She was worried that she might end up regretting it, but there was only so long she could bite her tongue.

She almost thanked the reporter for his rude question. It had brought them closer together. She felt a pang of pride again at Mother's words that she had done exactly what Father would have done.

Of course, the same reporter had wrestled his way to the front of the audience, and was barking out questions to the cadets as they boarded the shuttle. She was happy she knew where he was, so she could actively ignore him as she passed.

She gave Mother one final hug, and turned and walked along the long ramp up to the shuttle. With every step away from her, Aisha felt more and more alone. As the entrance loomed toward her, she felt the urge to turn and run back to Mother's welcoming arms. Mother would hold her and protect her, and to heck with anyone who would criticize her for not going through with it. But she didn't. She continued step-by-step. At the top of the ramp, she turned for one more look back at the Earth. She caught Mother's eye as she waved frantically, blowing kisses and smiling. "That's my little girl!"

She raised her hand to wave, hearing cameras popping, and returned the smile before turning to enter the shuttle. Her feet suddenly felt heavy. She was really going through with this. She was really leaving home and going into space. Each step seemed to be a chore, doubt and indecision weighing on her more heavily than gravity ever could.

Step-by-step she continued forward. The entrance lobby curved away from the door, and in a few moments, the daylight was lost.

Words she had learned from history came back to her. *Alea iacta est*. She smiled, thinking that her Classics teacher would be proud of her. *The die is cast*.

The interior of the shuttle was clearly designed to impress and soothe its occupants. Instead of the functional ships of yesteryear, it was all polished chrome and intricately-designed surfaces. In the days of rocket travel to the stars, every ounce of payload had to be

carefully measured, with no room for luxury, as propelling something into orbit required enormous amounts of energy. The Space Elevator changed all that, so designers of spacecraft were free to allow their occupants to be comfortable with traveling into space. This was also an important factor as many more people would leave the surface of the Earth -- and a good, comfortable experience made it more tolerable, and thus less training was necessary. Indeed, Aisha had little more training than a couple of video tutorials explaining how to deal with weightlessness, and what to eat or not to eat prior to boarding. It was also good advice to use the bathroom before getting on the ship, for while facilities were available, using them in weightless conditions wasn't optimal.

She climbed stairs to the observation deck where she would spend most of the journey. The deck was a wide circle with multi-story windows, and acceleration couches arranged facing outwards.

"As we rise up the cable, the shuttle will spin slowly," she had remembered the tutorial video telling her. "So pick any seat, and you'll still be able to see everything."

The deck was terraced, so that seats near the back would still have a great view, and their occupants may not have the feeling of vertigo that those closer to the front would encounter. She picked one in the back row, next to an Asian girl who looked about Aisha's age. The girl was intensely reading a book on her tablet, and didn't look up as Aisha sat.

She suddenly spoke. "Aisha Parks, celebrity."

Aisha looked at her. "I'm not sure about *that*."

The girl looked up, and her intense eyes searched Aisha's. "Good to know," she said finally, reaching a hand out. "Soo-Kyung Kim," she said.

"I don't need to tell you my name, I guess."

Soo-Kyung smiled. Her plain face lit up when she smiled. She was beautiful.

"So where are you from?"

Soo-Kyung smiled again. "You haven't heard of me? Good. I guess I am not a celebrity, either."

Such an odd answer, and from Soo-Kyung's reaction, it was clear that Aisha's confusion was written on her face.

"I think we are going to be good friends," said Soo-Kyung. "I like how you are straightforward. I am too, but that intimidates some people."

"So where are you from?"

"I am from a small village called Sijungho," continued Soo-Kyung. "There's not much to see there."

"Sounds Korean," said Aisha. "You from South Korea?"

"*North* Korea," corrected Soo-Kyung. "I've never even been to South Korea."

Aisha felt her insides go cold. Against her will, she shuddered a little, and felt a sob begin to escape from her throat. Her father had died as a result of radiation sickness incurred in the second Korean War. And there was a North Korean girl here with her. Going into *space* with her.

She knew there was incredulity in her voice, but she couldn't mask it. "Are you going to the Academy too?"

"Yes," said Soo-Kyung. "And don't worry, I'm as surprised as you are."

"That's what you meant by celebrity?"

"It seems the media made as big a deal about me being the first North Korean as it did about you being the first African-American to go through open enrollment. It's all a sham though, isn't it?"

"I'm beginning to gather that."

"I mean, when the Academy was first built, it was apparent that it was for the Elites, most of whom are from Western society, with a few Russians and Chinese thrown in to get funding. Nobody really knows who the students were, but it was typically those who would be in private elite schools on the surface, so being in space made little difference."

Aisha thought about what Soo-Kyung was saying, and realized that she was right. Amazing that she had never thought of this herself.

The Korean girl continued. "Now that they are all in place and established, it's time to open it up to the rest of the world, so we can get their proverbial 'sloppy seconds', I guess."

"It's an academy," said Aisha. "And we're cadets."

"The cannon fodder, while they are the officers ordering us around."

"So why are you going through with it? Why am I going through with it?"

Soo-Kyung shrugged. "Because it's better than *not* going through with it. Besides, there might be something great waiting for normal people like us."

"My father died in Korea," said Aisha, surprising even herself at the change in subject. "But he always told my mother to tell me that I had a destiny. That the emerging age of space flight was one in which we must be free to explore the universe. He fought so that that freedom would still exist, so that I could do this. I can't turn back."

"Most of my family died in the same war," said Soo-Kyung. "But nothing ever really changed, did it?"

Aisha realized that she must have sounded bitter, and the bitterness was reflected in Soo-Kyung's answer.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No need," said Soo-Kyung. "I'm glad that you are open and honest with me. Most people, particularly outside of my country, are not. They learn about where I'm from and think I need special treatment. I don't. I've learned to stand on my own."

"I wish I had your strength."

"You don't," said Soo-Kyung, suddenly serious. "That kind of strength comes from trying to make a life in a country destroyed by nuclear war. You never want it."

"That's why we're going into space, isn't it? To make sure that wars like those will never put our species' survival at risk."

"That would be nice," said Soo-Kyung. "But if anything I think it will cause more wars and hardship before things get better."

"Why?"

"Because the only thing that stopped the entire world from burning during the war over my country was that it was the *only* world we have. If we discover more planets, livable ones, that will no longer be the case. And I want to be as far away from this world as possible before the next bombs fall."

Before Aisha could answer, the soft tone of the launch warning sounded. The rocket boost would be gentler than a typical aircraft take off, but safety protocols required that they be buckled into their crash seats in case anything went wrong.

She rolled her eyes and smiled, and strapped herself in. When everything was snug, she turned to look at Soo-Kyung. Their eyes met again, and Soo-Kyung bowed slightly.

The engines kicked in, and their seats lurched a little. From all around came the muffled sounds of the rockets roaring. Through the windows, Aisha could see the ground begin to slowly fall away. Within a few seconds the flotilla was no longer visible, and as they began to rise, she could see the entire outline of the nearby Kiritimati, where only yesterday they had landed. It felt like an eternity.

She wondered how Mother felt, watching her shuttle rise slowly to the sky. As suddenly as they had begun, the rockets cut out, and there was another slight lurch as the inertia of the ship was stopped. She remembered the video training -- this was the scariest part of the trip, where the shuttle, under normal gravity, could fall back to Earth and kill everyone aboard.

But it didn't, and the force on the Space Elevator started pushing them skyward, with ever-increasing speed. The horizon began to spin also, and as they rose up, she watched the island recede. Before long they were high enough to see that the horizon was curved.

This was it. This was for real. She was headed into space!

CHAPTER 4

Orbit

It is so easy to get caught in the trap of looking at others, seeing what they have, or what they are, or what is available to them, and falling into angry despair. It's not fair that some people are given the opportunities you aren't. When that happens, remember what you have that others don't, and make the best of what's given to you. Everything passes in time. Don't deny yourself. Don't let life just pass you by...

AS THE SHUTTLE ASCENDED, and Earth fell away, Aisha was surprised to find that she wasn't weightless. She expected it to be like the movies where she would float around.

"We're still not far enough from the surface of the Earth," Soo-Kyung said, seemingly reading her mind. "And the inertia from our upwards ascent is counteracting any effects of micro-gravity."

Aisha remembered her science classes, and realized that Soo-Kyung was right. "Astronauts don't experience zero gravity anyway, do they? It's more free-fall that makes it feel like they are weightless."

The Korean girl nodded. "And we aren't falling, we're climbing. But when we reach the end of the cable."

"Sounds like fun."

"I always wanted to lose weight. Now it looks like I'll lose most of it."

"You don't need to lose weight, you're *tiny*," said Aisha. She then stopped as Soo-Kyung blushed. The girl had grown up in a country that had been impoverished even before the bombs fell. She could have been subject to malnutrition, or worse.

Outside the windows, Earth continued to recede. At some point Aisha felt that they must have crossed the psychological border into space. There was no real border -- the atmosphere got gradually thinner as they ascended, but she decided that the moment that light wasn't coming from all around -- through atmospheric diffraction, and instead was coming from *below*, being reflected off the Earth's surface, that they finally were in space.

"We're accelerating," she said.

"Yes," said Soo-Kyung. "The higher we get, the thinner the atmosphere. The thinner the atmosphere, the less friction to slow us down."

They watched in silence as home slipped away, faster and faster. Somewhere along the way it stopped feeling like Earth was beneath them and they were rising up from it, and it just felt like they were moving *away* from it. They were told that once they were in space, and in free fall, that weightlessness would be confusing if they kept their old up-down orientation. When on the Earth, it was easy to think of down as being the ground, because gravity pulled you towards it, and up was the opposite direction -- towards the sky and the stars.

But once in freefall, and weightless, thinking in that manner could confuse you, as there was no clear direction to call *down*.

She had done the mental exercise many times, of taking a fixed point and thinking of it as down. A window in her bedroom. If that is *down*, then the door is *up*, the walls are *east* and *west*, with the floor and ceiling being *north* and *south*. While her body and instincts told her otherwise -- of course the *floor* was down -- she concentrated and concentrated until she could naturally envision it.

Maybe all of that effort was helping her now. The acceleration still gave *down* towards the floor, and thus towards the Earth, but as she looked out the window, it was easy for her to visualize alternatively that down, instead of being the floor, was her back. She was lying instead of sitting, and the Earth was moving away from her feet. Then, she could change her orientation, so instead of lying down, she was hanging from the ceiling.

The Earth filled less of the sky with every passing moment. The stars started to peek into view, having been mostly obscured by the reflected light of the planet below. The belt of Orion was instantly

noticeable, its three bright stars forming a straight line. As they rotated, accelerating all the way, corkscrewing their way through the atmosphere, she could hear the oohs and aahs of delight as people saw the stars in a way that was impossible on the Earth.

Soon, an almost eerie silence fell among the passengers as the reality that they were away from the cradle of life sank in. Now, all there was between them and the hostile environment of space was that large glass window. Aisha was glad she had taken a seat near the back, as she could partially feel the desire to shrink away from it, to bury herself somewhere *safe*. A single micrometeorite could penetrate that glass and kill them all. The odds were astronomically small, but that didn't prevent the fear.

It took almost three hours before the deceleration rockets fired, and lifting from her seat told her that they had almost reached their destination. In an instant, Soo-Kyung unbuckled and was out of her seat. Aisha laughed as she watched her lift ever so slowly, floating up.

"I'm not completely weightless," she said. "But this feels great!"

Aisha's stomach was already in her mouth. Despite being worried that she might throw up, something that wouldn't be pretty in this environment, she figured that she may as well just go for it. She'd have to get used to weightless conditions in the Academy station anyway. She unbuckled and pushed herself out of her chair, trying to be gentle, but failed and launched too quickly.

A fine netting stretched across the passenger area, and she bumped into it. It was loosely spread, absorbing the impact and propelling her gently downward. She hadn't noticed it before, but was glad it was there now.

"Makes sense to have that netting," said Soo-Kyung. "They don't want us bashing our brains out on the hardware."

Before long, a klaxon sounded, warning them of the impending end of the journey. Their shuttle would dock at the top of the cable, from where it would be disassembled into different pieces. Some would head toward the Academy space station, some to the moon base, and the rest to the end of the cable - 70,000 kilometers further - to act as a counter-weight to improve the efficiency of the Elevator.

In response, the girls strapped themselves into their seats and awaited deceleration. It was smooth, they barely felt it, and their

journey ended with a soft clunk. They exited their ship into the area affectionately called 'the Lobby', where they waited and watched in rapture as the shuttle's deconstruction commenced.

"It's like Lego," said a boy with an English accent.

"You mean Legos?"

"It's actually called Lego," he said. "Despite what you *Americans* say."

He sniffed a little and pushed his feet against the wall, causing him to float off, away from Aisha, ignoring her outstretched hand.

Aisha rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

"Seriously," said Soo-Kyung. "That's something you're going to have to watch out for up here. I think there are many things you do differently in your country that the international community don't understand or accept. Just little things that shouldn't matter." She nodded her head in the boy's direction. "Like him."

Aisha nodded. "Yeah." Looking into Soo-Kyung's deep brown eyes she could see something within. The girl had more to say on the matter, but was holding back. Aisha made a mental note to ask her about it sometime. It was clearly personal, and Soo-Kyung had the discretion not to bring it up here.

* * *

Before long, their transport was ready, and they boarded the flight to the space station containing the Academy. While it was made from various pieces that were recycled from the shuttles, it was clearly more functional, and definitely less luxurious than its predecessor. They boarded, and the passenger compartments more clearly resembled a typical terrestrial aircraft. They sat in rows, without assignment, so Soo-Kyung joined Aisha. There were no windows. Aisha turned, looking around the cabin, counting the passengers. There was an even thirty, including the smirking English boy from earlier.

"Can't risk micrometeorites or other space junk penetrating a window and killing us all," said an attendant cheerfully as Aisha fumbled around, trying to find a view.

“Better settle in,” he continued. “It’s going to take about an hour to an hour-and-a-half depending on traffic.”

The Space Elevator was tethered in the waters just south of Hawaii, at the geosynchronous orbit distance. Because of this, it always stayed above the same spot, which it would do even if there was no tether. Anything other than geosynchronous orbit and the Elevator wouldn’t work, as the end of the cable would be moving independently around the Earth. It would eventually get wrapped around it like yarn in a ball.

Similarly, the Academy’s space station was in geosynchronous orbit, so it wouldn’t appear to be above any particular country. It maintained its UN-mandated neutrality by orbiting above a point in the mid-Atlantic ocean, halfway between the Brazilian coast and the African country of Gabon.

The nervous anxiety of the last few hours was catching up on them now. Soo-Kyung was already fast asleep, and Aisha realized that it wouldn’t be a bad idea to take a nap. Who knew what awaited them in the Academy? She’d certainly want to be awake to see it.

CHAPTER 5

Arrival

There are many reasons why we fight in wars. Sometimes it is to defend our homes and our families. Sometimes it is to ensure that our way of life can continue. Sometimes it is to go to the bully and smash them in the mouth before they can hurt someone who is defenseless. With great power comes great responsibility, and we have been blessed with great power. The trick is in exercising our responsibility appropriately.

This applies not just on the national level, but on the personal level. In everything you do, my dear daughter, you will exercise that responsibility. Be sure that you are wise in all things. And if you can't be, find someone who is, and support them with all your might...

THE LIGHTS SUDDENLY coming on woke Aisha from her reverie. Their transport had docked with the space station, and passengers had already begun disembarkation. She nudged Soo-Kyung, who woke instantly.

"We're here."

Still weightless, they pulled themselves out the airlock into a long corridor. It was featureless, but for the occasional blinking LED animation showing them the direction they should float.

"As if there was any other way," said the English boy snidely as he drifted past Aisha.

"It's to ensure we keep moving," said Soo-Kyung, "so we don't linger and block the corridor. Not to tell us the direction. That's why it's animated. Moving. Us. Like the lights."

The boy looked at her, hostility in his eyes. Then, realizing she was right, he defiantly acknowledged her. "Well, duh. Of course that's what it means. You really feel you have to say it out, little girl?"

Even weightless, he loomed over her. Soo-Kyung, her face as blank as could be, just looked him in the eye, saying nothing. He held her gaze for a moment, smirked and continued floating down the corridor.

He was first to reach the airlock, and Aisha couldn't help but smile as he struggled to open it. "It's pressure locked," the attendant said matter-of-factly. "It won't open until we close the other end."

The boy blushed ear to ear, and instantly glanced towards Soo-Kyung. Instead of making him squirm further, she kept her neutral face.

She was *smart*, that's for sure. Aisha saw right through her. By ignoring his predicament, Soo-Kyung placed the boy much further beneath her than if she had rubbed his face in it. She could tell that he saw it too. When he glanced in Aisha's direction, she saw menace.

We'll have to watch that one.

What was it Mark Twain had said? "Never argue with a stupid person, because they'll bring you down to their level, and then beat you with experience."

She smiled, recognizing the wisdom. She'd have to share that with Soo-Kyung later.

Finally everyone had disembarked, and the door on the transport side was closed. Then the door to the station opened effortlessly, and they glided in.

They were guided to the assembly room. Taking up an area on the outer wheel of the station, rotation gave it a reasonably-comfortable simulation of gravity. It took some trying to orient themselves correctly as they moved from weightlessness into the spinning sections, and more than a few of them fell over.

"You'll get used to it in time," said a kindly-looking boy, maybe three years older. He wore a black uniform which was tight-fitting, almost like a bodysuit. It was highlighted with some red stripes. On his chest, his nameplate read 'Smith' and bore a Canadian flag. He nodded at Aisha as she wobbled on her feet, taking her first steps like a toddler, and smiled slightly. Her heart fluttered a little as she smiled back.

"You're blushing," said Soo-Kyung. "Do you think he's cute?"

Aisha looked back to ensure he was out of earshot. "If I have a weakness, it's for sweetness," she whispered. "Don't care for the looks as much as the heart, and sweetness is the taste of the heart."

"You're such a poet!"

Aisha smiled as they continued walking.

The assembly room was very normal looking, a large area surrounding a raised dais.

"I wonder if we'll have a school play," she heard someone say, and others snickered.

When the final kid had entered, a man in a dark uniform similar to the one Smith had worn took his place on the stage.

"Welcome to the International Space Academy," he began, looking around the audience, making sure their eyes were on him. "You have been selected from the best and most suitable people on the planet to come here and to learn the skills you need for the next phase of mankind's civilization."

He stopped, taking in the room. "Good, now that I have your attention, I want this to sink in. This is quite unlike any other school you might have been to, and quite unlike the videos used to tell people back home what we do. We don't call it an *Academy* for nothing. It's not a floating playground. Military-like discipline is enforced at all times, and you are expected to obey everything without question. Let me repeat that. *Without question.*"

A few mutters went around the room, and eyes began to drift away from him as the murmurs increased.

"If you don't like it, you are welcome to go home," he said firmly. "But realize that sending a shuttle back to Earth is far more expensive than bringing you up here on the Space Elevator. That makes it a one-way journey. Once you're out, you never come back. Is that clear?"

A few, including Aisha nodded.

"I can't hear you! I said, 'Is that clear?'"

Some shouted out 'Yes', but still the man wasn't satisfied.

"From now on, the first and last word out of your mouth when you address me is 'Sir'. Now, I will ask one more time. Is that clear?"

"Sir, yes, Sir!"

"Better. Now let me help you understand one more thing. This Academy was built with discipline in mind. The first few years of students were handpicked from the greatest academies on the

planet, and they fit right in. You, on the other hand, are a product of *open enrollment*, a process put in place by those liberal idiots in the U.N. who thought that space should be an opportunity that is open to all. Most of you have been molly coddled in your high schools. That ends now."

He looked around the room, nostrils flaring, disdain in every ounce of his being. "Someday space will be open to the average civilian, but that day is not today. So you are here, as the type of people I do *not* want. But I am stuck with you. So you *will* do what I order you to do in this place. And you *will* succeed. Or, you can do things the namby-pamby way they do them back home, and you'll find yourself on the next shuttle out of here. If you're lucky."

His eye caught Aisha's and his gaze dwelled on her. "You might think you're special because you're here. None of that counts now. It's up to *you* to make yourself special from this moment onward. Understood?"

Aisha felt herself shouting. "Sir, yes, Sir!"

He nodded approvingly as his gaze continued to explore. It fell on Soo-Kyung, and his lip curled a little, almost like a snarl. "Your link is your life in this place. My assistants will issue them now. The link will show you the way to your *quarters*," the last word dripped with sarcasm. "Follow them, and be ready for first classes at oh-six hundred hours."

Without another word, he turned to leave the stage.

Aisha surprised herself as she shouted out, "Sir?"

He turned and leered back at her. "What is it, Cadet?"

"Sir, we didn't get your name, Sir."

"I know."

"Sir, may I please ask it, Sir?"

Did he smile just a little? "Initiative, eh?"

"Sir, I think it's important that I know my C.O., Sir."

The smile grew a little bit. His eyes met hers, searching a little.

"Good. My name is Major Carter."

"Sir, thank you, Sir."

"And it's good to know somebody in this group has a bit of a backbone." He reached out a hand, and she grasped it, firmly, the way she had always been told to.

"Good," he smiled again. "Nice to meet you, Miss Parks."

He was gone before she could wonder, *How did he know my name?*

CHAPTER 6

Quarters

A beginning is a very important time. It lays the groundwork for everything else that follows, so be sure that you get your beginning right. It's much easier to course correct when the rails are taking you in generally the right direction. It's easy, however, to get distracted at the start. There may be new and exciting things, or different places and people that divert you away from what is important. Don't fall into that trap. Keep your eyes on the ball always, but doubly so right then. That way you set yourself up for success...

THE LINK WAS A MIRACULOUS little piece of technology. As they were in a closed environment, within reach of access points to the 'nets every few feet, it was part cell phone, part communicator and part computer. Aisha had heard of them, and had seen crude replicas on Earth, but she finally held one in her hand.

She snapped it onto her wrist and touched the curved screen. Instantly it projected a map into the air above it, with an arrow pointing towards her quarters. She looked to Soo-Kyung.

"Apparently we are roommates," said the Korean girl, holding her wrist near Aisha's. The directions were identical.

"What are the odds?"

"I think that they are smaller than you think. They've probably been profiling us for weeks, and matched us for maximum compatibility. As a result, it's likely no mistake that you chose the seat near mine on the shuttle, and no coincidence that we get on very well. In hindsight, I think, it must be obvious. Logical, even."

"You sometimes sound like a Vulcan."

"A what?"

Aisha joined her first two and last two fingers together and stretched them out in the shape of a 'V', the famous Vulcan salute.

"You know, *Star Trek*?"

"I haven't seen much TV."

"Oh, well, given that we live here, now -- it should be required viewing."

After rounding a few corners and traveling down similar-looking corridors that offered tantalizing glances at the rooms within -- some with games, some with simulators, others showing well-stocked gymnasiums -- they finally reached the destination flagged on their links as their quarters.

After Major Carter's pep talk, they were expecting a basic, utilitarian apartment. They opened the door, and gasped simultaneously. Their quarters were *gorgeous*. Built around an enormous bay window that protruded from the side of the station, giving a 270-degree view of space, they each had a bedroom, equipped with the latest and greatest in terminals. A shared kitchen and entertainment area capped off the common area.

Their bags had been thoughtfully delivered into the room, and were waiting for them.

"This is better than a hotel!"

"I've never been in a hotel," said Soo-Kyung, matter-of-factly. "But this seems excessive."

"I'm not complaining!"

"Agreed."

Soo-Kyung stood in the bay window, leaning out and looking along the rim of the station. "It appears that all the living quarters are similar. See how the windows blister out?"

Aisha nodded. "Yeah. I wonder if they have curtains." She nodded her head in the direction of an apartment below them, where two boys were walking around shirtless.

Soo-Kyung giggled nervously. "Good thing the bedrooms are on the back wall, away from the windows!"

Between the bedrooms, directly behind the kitchen was a small shower stall.

"Water is a precious commodity in space," said Soo-Kyung, pointing at how the arrangement made the kitchen, shower and toilet plumbing fork off from the same source. "We probably recycle much of what we use."

Aisha peered at the stingy-looking shower head. "I'm sure we'll get used to it."

Soo-Kyung shook her head. "Spoiled!"

Aisha laughed and raised her hands in defense. "You got me."

She walked back to the common area and took a stool at the main counter. Calling up the school schedule, she realized something. "It's late," said Aisha. "Station time."

Soo-Kyung nodded. "And we have orientation first-thing tomorrow. Better get some sleep."

"Which room would you prefer?"

Soo-Kyung looked from bedroom to bedroom. "They're identical."

"But you still need to pick one."

"So do you."

"I'm trying to be nice and give you first pick."

"Oh," said Soo-Kyung, finally. "In that case, this one."

She pointed at the bedroom behind the common area, furthest from the kitchen.

"Suits me," said Aisha. "Good night, Roomie."

"Good night," came the reply. Soo-Kyung was picking her words carefully. "Roomie."

* * *

The bed lay in an alcove in the bedroom, with what looked like a window, covered by a metal panel beside it. Aisha had finally been able to change, and Soo-Kyung didn't spend much time in the shower, so, refreshed and changed, she was ready for bed. The 'window' had a control button and handle. Gingerly, she reached out and touched the panel. The panel slid up, revealing a large video screen. Presently it showed fields and rolling hills outside. A reminder of home. She felt like she was sitting in a French cottage, enjoying the countryside!

Smart, she thought. One of the few places on the station where we can have solace, so they give us views of home. Aisha touched a panel, and

was looking out at a big city. Another touch, and she was on a boat in the middle of the ocean. *They can't have us going crazy in here.*

She liked the ocean, and heard the soothing sounds of lapping waves. She lay back, and reached that moment when you are about to drift off to sleep, but not quite there, when the doorbell rang.

She stumbled sleepily towards the door, but before she could reach it, Soo-Kyung's hand was on her arm.

"Wait," said Soo-Kyung. "You're not fully dressed."

Then she noticed that her roommate was in full uniform. Aisha had seen one hanging in her closet but hadn't tried it on.

"Why do I need to be dressed?"

"Our first night in the school? I'm sure there's a special student *welcome*."

"Oh."

Aisha turned back towards her room, while Soo-Kyung stalled whomever was at the door. Quickly, she slipped into her uniform.

On first glance, it looked like it would be too tight, and too form-fitting. In reality, it was extremely comfortable. She tested it by stretching and bending and it held very well. Despite its tightness, it was padded slightly with a gel-like material.

It made sense -- in weightless conditions, it was easy to bump into things and the padding in the uniform would protect her from minor scrapes and bruises.

The tightness also meant that the uniform wouldn't get caught on surfaces, and potentially cause injury.

The shoes on the other hand were bulky, leather, masculine monstrosities. She took one off and looked at it. Bending it in her hand, she felt its strength and springiness.

They looked like they'd be great for jumping. It might be fun to try them out in weightless conditions.

She heard Soo-Kyung call the all-clear and stepped back into the apartment.

Two boys were waiting in the foyer with Soo-Kyung, in full uniform. She recognized one of them as the Canadian boy, Smith, from disembarkation.

"Good evening," he said. "I guess we are your welcoming committee."

CHAPTER 7

Secrets

Someday we will go to the stars. I will not be around to see that day, but, from what I've learned, it will happen in your generation. We are closer than you might possibly think. If nothing else, I want you to go there. I'm asking your mother to make sure that whenever an avenue opens up for you, that she push you through that doorway as much as possible. You don't understand why, but maybe someday, you will...

SOO-KYUNG FOLDED her arms and faced them down. "Welcoming committee? You expect me to believe that?"

Smith smiled, warmly. "Yes."

"I've been in academies before, and by welcoming, they usually mean *hazing*."

"Not here. We've come to just show you around, help you to get to know the place before classes begin."

"And you expect me to believe that?"

"I really don't know what to expect, I can only tell you that I'm speaking the truth."

The other boy stepped forward. His nameplate bore the tricolored flag of Ireland and the name Murphy. "Soo-Kyung," he said. "I can understand how all of this might seem unusual, but, to be honest we *requested* to work with you guys, for the very reason that you might be worried about hazing, and we're here to prevent anything like that."

Aisha raised an eyebrow. "How do you know her name? It's not on her nameplate. That only reads as 'Kim.'"

"We know a lot more about you than you might think," said Murphy. "And we are on your side."

He looked over his shoulder out into the corridor, and then he and Smith exchanged glances. Smith nodded, and Murphy continued. "It would be great to show you around this place."

There was something about his voice that gave Aisha pause. Soo-Kyung seemed to notice it too. It was like Smith had something to say, but didn't want to say it *here*. He seemed trustworthy and sincere enough.

Soo-Kyung met her eye and nodded. "I'm not sleepy yet. Maybe a short walk around the station will help. I'm so curious about what's out there."

"Agreed."

She gestured to the boys to lead the way. They smiled and walked out.

It felt like a double date when they paired up. Aisha couldn't help but wonder if Soo-Kyung deliberately took the Irish boy, whose name she discovered was Seamus, so that Aisha could spend some time with Smith. Her friend had already noted Aisha's instant attraction to him. Or maybe it was the other way around. She felt confused. Maybe that meant she really *did* like him.

Smith, for the most part was quiet, smiling gently and pointing out the essentials. The station was designed to be extensible, and had been extended many times. Each 'section' was a large wheel, and the rotation of that wheel provided artificial gravity. The habitat was at the very outside rim of the wheel.

"You would expect the floor to be curved, and for it to feel like we're always walking uphill," he said. "And, to be honest, it is. But it has been carefully designed so that there are no long corridors. Apartments and rooms 'stick out' into the corridor, so that our distance view is blocked."

He was right -- she had wondered why their course was a zig-zag one, but it made perfect sense. This way, even though they were

in a gigantic wheel, it felt like they were walking on a flat surface. With their eyes being fooled, their brains were too. It was one small thing that made life in space that little bit easier.

"Right now there are ten sections," said Seamus. "Six of them rotate at a speed that emulates Earth's gravity. One emulates the moon, one emulates Mars."

"What about the other two?"

"Nobody is telling."

Soo-Kyung stopped, and looked him in the eye. "Other planets?"

"We think so."

"We?"

"It's something I didn't want to talk about in the apartment," said Smith. "But yes, *we* are keeping an eye on what's going on around here. What's *really* going on."

"But we just got here."

"I know," interjected Seamus, before she could finish. "And many of our group worried that you might be on their side."

"Their?"

"Those who run this place. The ones keeping the truth from the rest of us."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I know," said Seamus. "When we heard about the whole open-enrollment thing, some of our suspicions were confirmed. So we gained access to their records, and researched most of the new kids coming aboard. You two are different."

Aisha stopped. "Different?"

"Because we're celebrities," said Soo-Kyung, matter-of-factly.

"Not *because* you are, but *why* you are," said Smith.

They walked on in silence for a while. The girls not knowing what to say, the guys not knowing if they should discuss it further.

Finally, Seamus broke the silence, addressing Soo-Kyung directly. "My country and yours are very similar in many ways," he said, looking her in the eye. "Divided north and south, primarily because of foreign powers. Lots of violence and lots of death, but nothing changes."

She stopped in her tracks, looking at him directly with a 'you're not serious' expression on her face.

"So," he continued. "When I heard they were doing open enrollment, I started looking into who they were going to bring in, and why. You jumped to the top of my list."

She turned away, coolly. "I know who you are," he continued. "And I know how you survived the wars."

She stopped again in her tracks, and turned back towards Aisha.

"We're leaving," she said. "Now."

CHAPTER 8

Mysteries

I remember the night I had my epiphany. I was sitting in a trench, afraid to put my head up in case it was shot off. It was like the previous century and a quarter had never happened. Then, there was a blinding flash of light, brighter than a thousand suns, and I knew civilization had begun its grind to a slow and painful halt...

“INTERSTELLAR TRAVEL,” said the teacher, Miss Abby, who seemed impossibly tall and blonde, “isn’t just possible, but it’s in the here-and-now. We have it!”

Her legs were so long that Aisha wondered if she was born in microgravity. But then her words sunk in. *Interstellar Travel*. No longer the realm of science fiction. It was real.

“However,” continued the teacher, “to understand the nature of it, you’ll understand why it is we can’t do it easily. Not yet, anyway.”

She called up a graphic, showing the solar system, with the sun at the center, and the planets orbiting along the plane of the ecliptic.

“Every solar system,” she said, “has a sphere of icy debris surrounding it. It’s called the Oort Cloud. In our case, it’s about fifty thousand A-U’s from the sun. That is, fifty thousand times’ the distance of the Earth to the sun. It’s really far away.”

“But studying it gave us some clues about the nature of gravity, and in particular the force properties of gravity. It has a wave like nature, like any other force. But what happens when waves interfere with each other?”

A French boy, Jacques, answered. "You can have constructive and destructive interference."

"That's right," continued Abby. She spread iron filings on a piece of card, and turned on a speaker beneath the card. Classical music filled the room. The deep bass caused Aisha's ears to throb. The fine filings vibrated from the sound, and started to form patterns. She turned on another speaker, and the filings began to form patterns for that too. In some places there were no filings at all.

"And just like with any other destructive interference, there are null spots, like these."

"Wait," said Aisha. "So if there are areas of null gravity, from destructive interference between two stars, then--"

"Then the space around that area forms a kind of bubble. If you travel into it, headed in the general direction of the other star, you are instantaneously transported towards the Oort Cloud surrounding that star."

"That's how we get interstellar travel? No warp drive or hyperspace?"

"Nope. But what's the problem with this approach?"

Soo-Kyung spoke up. "There are many," she said. "Not least, how do we send a ship the fifty thousand A-Us to the Oort Cloud in order to find one of these null zones? And once we're there, it's still a very long journey to any potential, prospective planets."

"Correct," said the teacher. "But also, how do we get back once we've done so?"

"How do we even know the ship made the journey successfully?"

"Wait," said Aisha, a thought growing in her mind. "You've done it already, haven't you? The closest star is just over four light years away, so you might have sent a ship four or more years ago, and then detected their transmissions, which would take four years, at the speed of light, to let us know that they made it in one piece. Or at least their transmitter did."

"So," said Soo-Kyung. "Did you?"

"Yes," said Miss Abby. "We did. And just over a year ago, we got confirmation that the ship made it all the way across the gulf between the stars."

"Amazing," said Aisha. "Travel between the stars. The galaxy is open to us."

"Not *quite* yet," said Miss Abby. "But maybe soon. A few problems to solve first."

"Wait," said Soo-Kyung. "You got confirmation just over a year ago?"

"Yes."

"And wasn't it just over a year ago that the Academy opened enrollment to anybody that could qualify?"

"Why, yes it was. Your point?"

"Is there a connection?"

"There's always a connection, in everything. The question is, of course, whether that connection actually *means* something or not."

"Does it?"

"Time will tell."

"Time will tell?"

All eyes were on the exchange between the teacher and this brash young Korean student. And when people saw the flag on her nameplate -- that of North Korea -- there were gasps.

"Wait," said Aisha. "There's something else, isn't there?"

"What could you mean?" There was mischief in Abby's voice. She was waiting for someone to make the connection.

"We discovered it very easily," said Aisha. "Surely, if there were other alien races, they would discover it, too. And one of the reasons why we believe we've never encountered aliens is that it takes too long to travel between the stars. But this discovery makes star travel quick and simple, relatively speaking," said Aisha. "So where are they? Surely we would have seen some evidence of them by now."

"That *is* the question," said Abby finally. "And the one we're working on answering."

"By going out there. By looking for ourselves," said Aisha, nodding. "It makes sense."

Soo-Kyung furrowed her eyebrows. "Does it?"

The teacher looked to her again. "What do you mean?"

"If they do exist, and they've not visited, there's a good chance we want it that way, isn't there? I mean, we've been listening for radio signals for years and have heard nothing. Why is that?"

"There are many reasons that could be so," said Abby. "And the most likely explanation would be that most civilizations are like ours, if they exist, and that they've only used radio waves for

communication for a very short space of time. So, say a civilization has used them for a hundred years. That means there's only a one-hundred-year window in which they would reach us. If a civilization is around for, say, ten thousand years, that's only one percent of their civilization time that they use the waves."

She looked around the room. "It gets more complex when you think of distance," she added. "Say that civilization is fifty light years away. If they reached the ability to produce radio waves one hundred fifty-one or more years before we started listening for them, then those waves would have passed us right by, and we'd never know they existed."

Aisha shrugged "So listening for radio waves is--"

"Like hunting for a needle in a haystack the size of the moon."

* * *

There was a buzz around the lunchroom as the new students walked in. Some looked on and sneered, and Aisha more than once heard words like "rabble."

She took an empty table and was joined by Soo-Kyung. Some of the other new students joined them, while others looked around for a different table.

Oblivious, Soo-Kyung wolfed her food. "Surprisingly not bad," she said between mouthfuls.

"What happened last night?" Aisha was surprised to hear her own voice as she blurted out the question. Since the night before -- and Soo-Kyung's response to Seamus -- it had been burning inside her. She'd been afraid to ask. There was something intimidating about the Korean girl.

Soo-Kyung looked up at her, and Aisha could see a decision being made behind her eyes. Then, something changed, and she went back to her lunch without saying anything further.

* * *

For the rest of the day, they were paraded from class to class. They saw more of the station, and explored the various habitats. While they lived in the rims of the wheels that made up the station because of gravity effects, there was a lot more to the station. They accessed these areas by climbing 'up' from the rims towards the central hub.

"As we climb," said Mister Porter, their primary attendant, "the effect is unusual, because you'll feel yourself getting lighter. The wheels that made up the station are made up of concentric circles, with the outermost operating at one gee."

Aisha nodded, remembering how astronauts measured gravity. 1G, or one gee, was the equivalent of the surface of the Earth. Gravity was measured relative to that, so that with the moon having approximately one-sixth of the gravity of the Earth, so they called it 1/6th G.

"At the hub of the wheel," continued Porter, "there is no rotation, so you're weightless, like in outer space."

"What happens there?"

"First-year cadets," he continued, "will fly training craft in that space. While some of you might be familiar with flight on a planet's surface, doing it in space is very different. So, the safest way to train is at the central hub of the station where we have a close simulation."

One student was incredulous, and Aisha noticed the French flag on his breast. "We learn to fly?"

"Oh yes," said Porter. "And a whole lot more besides!"

For the whole trip Soo-Kyung walked no more than an arm's length from Aisha, but didn't say a word. She caught her friend's eye from time to time, but the Korean girl just gave a downward look that almost appeared to be a bow. Aisha didn't push it.

* * *

Classes finished for the day, they returned to their quarters, exhausted. Smith was waiting at the door, with Seamus nowhere to be seen. There was a flicker across Soo-Kyung's face that almost looked like disappointment.

Smith nodded to her, and she returned the gesture. "Can we talk," he said to Aisha, "alone?"

For the first time that day, Aisha saw a small smile on Soo-Kyung's face. She nodded, and entered the apartment, leaving Aisha with Smith.

"I'm sorry about last night," he said. "I think we came across a bit strong. I hope we didn't scare you."

"It's okay," said Aisha, realizing that she meant it, but also curious about what had spooked Soo-Kyung. "But don't talk about Soo-Kyung, I want to talk with her directly."

"Okay," he said. "Walk?"

"I don't even know your name."

He smiled. "You're right. Patrice."

"Isn't that a girl's name?"

He laughed. "Not in Canada, apparently!"

She liked his natural laugh. There was something so sincere and unguarded about it.

"So what do you want to talk about?"

"I have been here for almost six years," he said. "Almost since the beginning. There were only two wheels then."

"You must have been, what, eleven?"

"Ten," he said. "But my parents thought it was best for me to come here."

"That's rough. You must miss them."

"I do, and I don't," he said. "I rarely saw them when I was Earth-side, as I was always carted off to various boarding schools. I think I miss my sister most of all."

"I'm sorry, that must be hard," said Aisha, putting her hand on his arm gently for a moment.

"I guess I'm used to it," he said. "That's the life of a rich kid."

Aisha nodded. "You were one of the first ones here, so I figured you must be."

"Not just rich," said Patrice. "My family is one of the richest in the world. They funded much of the development of this place."

She resisted the impulse to say 'wow', and instead defiantly burst out, "Am I supposed to be impressed?"

"I'm glad you aren't," he said. "Money is a fleeting thing after all."

"So why are you telling me this?"

He sat on a small bench, and she joined him. There was a window in the floor in front of them, and they watched as the Earth slowly moved into view. Through the clouds, Aisha could make out the Indian subcontinent. In the twilight, lights were on in the cities, except for the Punjab region in the north. There, like in Korea, a nuclear exchange had taken place, and several cities were piles of radioactive rubble.

"My family made their money by understanding the needs of the many, and selling it to them, at a huge profit. They've done this for generations, and then they just..."

"Just what?"

"Liquidated it all, and funded *this*."

"Why?"

"That, indeed, is the question."

"Well, they're *your* family."

"And if they'd tell anybody, they'd tell me, is that it?"

"Yes."

He paused, breathed deeply. Aisha must have hit a nerve. She regretted it, but before she could say anything he spoke. "I wish it were that simple."

Trying to be more gentle, but still curious, she sat closer to him, and looked him in the eye. "Did you ask?"

"You don't just barge in and ask your father why he blew hundreds of billions of dollars and several generations' worth of family wealth on a Space program."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm not supposed to *know*. It's supposed to be a secret. As far as all the shareholders of his companies are concerned, they are still sitting on a big pile of cash."

"So he took *their* money?" She was surprised at her own snarky comment, but it just leapt out of her mouth.

"Technically, it's not theirs. They bought stocks with it, and he used the money from the various companies to do this. Most of which was his own."

"Technically."

"I don't want to argue with you, Aisha," he said, sighing. "I know that much of this is distasteful to you. It's distasteful to *me* also. I'm not like him. I'm not like the rest of them."

"But you benefit from it, don't you?"

"Yes, but the difference is that I aim to share that benefit."

"That's why you're talking to the first black girl who came through open enrollment, is that it? Spread a little charity, spread a little love to make yourself feel better. Well I don't--"

His voice broke in anger. "Stop!"

He was usually so gentle-spoken that the venom in his voice stopped her cold.

The look of shock and hurt in his eyes made her heart flutter. "If you are such a poor judge of character, then I was wrong about you. I was wrong to do this, and I should just--"

She put her hand on his arm. His eyes met hers again, and she thought he would cry.

"Sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to..."

He exhaled, and looked downwards at the Earth as it curved below.

"Don't hate me because of who my family are. Judge me for myself."

She put her hand on his back, and stroked it lightly. "I will," she said. "I will."

She saw a tear drip onto the glass, like it was raining on the Earth.

"That hurt," is all he could say. "I didn't think it would ever hurt that bad, but it hurt."

She sat a little closer to him, and put her arm around his shoulder. He had lived such a life of privilege. At first, she felt resentment that they were in this situation, but then she was overcome by a wave of compassion. As her hand rested on his shoulder, she could begin to understand. All the good things he had in his life were a sham. It was nothing about him, and everything about his wealth. Nobody saw *him*. They saw who his family was, and what they were capable of.

And here, he had begun to open up to her, and she rejected him because of all that.

"You don't do that a lot, do you," she finally asked.

"Do what?"

"Open up like that."

"First time."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Why me? Why now?"

"I don't know. I didn't think I could feel like this, but I feel so comfortable around you. So relaxed. I feel like I can trust you."

"You can. Even though I didn't show it right now. But you can."

He looked at her, sideways. His eyes were red, and his nose was running. Surprised at the intimacy of the move, she put her sleeve over her hand and wiped his face. She felt herself tearing up.

"I'm really sorry," she said. "I don't know what came over me."

"Generations of people like me screwing over people like you came over you," he said quietly. "I think that can all end, and I want to be a part of it."

"How?"

"This place," he said. "I don't think anybody really knows what's going on here. Nobody here is exactly who they seem."

"Except you?"

He laughed ironically. "Especially me."

She put her hands on her knees and looked at her feet. "Why am I here?"

"I don't know," he said finally. "I thought I had figured out some of their plans. The consortium of people who pushed the world to build this place, including my father. I thought that open enrollment would give us a clue."

"How?"

"By looking at who they choose and why they choose them, it might give an idea about their intent."

"What did you find?"

"That most of the kids they brought up were brilliant. Major assets that wouldn't make it in the 'real world' because they couldn't afford the Harvards or Stanfords of the world."

"Most of them?"

"Yes. There were two mysteries."

"Two?"

"Yes, two. Soo-Kyung was the first. She has a very interesting history. Seamus is an amazing hacker, and he was able to dig into everyone. Her background blew his mind."

There was a sinking feeling in her stomach. "And the other?"

"You, of course."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Why? What made me a mystery?"

"When we tried to investigate you, your records were sealed so tight, Seamus couldn't break into them. According to him, even *God* couldn't decrypt them."

CHAPTER 9

Flight

The flash didn't kill me right away. But the radiation from it zipped through my body at close to the speed of light. I didn't feel it, of course, and most of it went through me like tiny fish through a large net. But not all of it. A little here, and a little there hit targets. It caused cells to unravel, and new things to grow. Cancers. And just as if it had incinerated me on the spot, I was a dead man. But God had given me the gift of time. Time to do something with what was left of my life. Time to get things ready for you to have the life I could never have. And time to write this letter to you, my dear daughter...

THEY HAD A FEW minutes before class, and Aisha wanted to make the most of it. Patrice had asked her if she would join him. He had said he had something very special to share with her.

Soo-Kyung had teased her all night, speculating about all the things Patrice might do. "Maybe he'll even ask you to marry him," she laughed, before Aisha took her down with a well-aimed pillow.

But she was curious. It wasn't like Patrice to be so secretive. After breakfast, he led her away, and down the corridors. She couldn't help but notice Seamus' raised eyebrows and Soo-Kyung's hand covering her mouth.

"Look, I don't normally do stuff like this, so don't judge me," said Patrice, as he led her through a maintenance hatch.

"What *are* you doing?"

"Not here," he said. She stopped in her tracks.

He grabbed her hand and her heart skipped a beat. He pulled gently, and she took a couple of steps before stopping again.

"What? What is it?" His eyes searched hers. She felt her cheeks flush.

His eyes widened. "Oh no!" He laughed and blushed a little. "It's not that!"

Somewhere, deep down, she felt a little disappointed at how vigorously he said it, almost as if it was something he despised.

"Not like I wouldn't like to," he said, winking. "But I respect you way too much to ask you for *that*."

"Then what?"

"We're almost there."

She followed him as he walked on. He hadn't let go of her hand. A glow moved up her arm into her heart and burst out as a smile.

"Here we are!"

"A closet?"

"Not just any closet, check this out."

He palmed the lock, and it opened. Inside was a monitor. Beside it a communications pad.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"Yep," he said. "Seamus and I cobbled it together, and hacked together a downlink. It allows me to call someone very special to me."

"Who?"

The face of a young girl appeared on the screen. "Sophie, this is Aisha. The one I told you about."

He turned to Aisha. "Aisha, this is Sophie, the most precious person in the world to me. My sister."

Sophie smiled. She had the same angelic looks as her brother.

"She's pretty," said Sophie. "I can see why you like her."

"She's more than just pretty."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Otherwise *you* wouldn't like her. Hello Aisha," she said, smiling. "I think we are going to be best friends."

* * *

For the rest of the day, Aisha felt like she was glowing. Sophie was clearly very important to Patrice -- to the extent that he risked getting kicked out of school so he could stay in touch with her. And he had shared this with Aisha. She could see why he loved Sophie so much. She had his wit, his looks, and from the brief time she spent chatting, it was clear that Sophie's brain was off the charts.

"She's no spoiled rich kid, that's for sure," said Patrice. "I just hope that she can be who she is capable of being. That the world we will build will be the one that she can enjoy."

And just like that Aisha embraced him. Held him close.

"We will," she said. "We'll do it together."

* * *

She didn't know if it was because of their schedules, or because they were afraid of cover being blown, but she and Soo-Kyung didn't see much of Patrice or Seamus for the next few days. Maybe it was a good thing -- there was just so much to take in. The school was hitting them hard with science, mostly physics, and mostly practical.

Not for the first time, she wondered why they spent so much time in labs, when they were up in space. Mister Stevens, their lab master, had them working on experiments in understanding inertia and the transfer of force. Aisha swore that if she bounced one more metal ball off another steel block to measure the transfer of energy, she'd scream.

It was relief when, at the end of class, their form master entered. He was a tall man with a craggy face who only wanted to be called Simms.

"Today, Cadets, we have a little surprise for you. We're going to the hub, where you're going to get your first taste of being a real cadet. So take off your lab coats and safety glasses, and rank up behind me!"

They followed him, in rank, up ladders through section after section as they approached the hub. With a giddy feeling, Aisha felt herself get lighter and lighter as the gravity reduced. Finally, they entered through a hatch into a wide, empty area.

She was floating again, weightless as she looked down the long space of the central cylinder that acted as the hub for each of the wheels that made up the station.

"The cylinders interconnect here, and even though each wheel's rim may spin at a different speed, there's no spin at all," said Simms, matter-of-factly. "So it's perfect for simulating space-like experiences without risking you guys out there in hard vacuum."

Aisha was finding it difficult just to focus on the space. It was *huge* and it seemed unreal. She could see green patches around the walls.

"Gardens," said Simms, catching her stare. "We don't import *all* our food you know, and the plants provide carbon dioxide scrubbing."

Soo-Kyung was always straight to the point. "What would stop us crashing into them, or any of the buildings?"

"Good old-fashioned nets," said Simms. "You can't see them from this distance, but there's netting strong enough to stop you from crashing, even though a good crash might teach you a lesson."

He thumbed a control on his link, and a large hangar door opened behind him. In it were a number of small 'Y'-shaped spacecraft, with the cockpit at the apex, and thruster engines at the peak of the 'Y'.

"Find a ship and get in," said Simms. He didn't need to ask twice, as excitedly the students took a ship each.

Aisha got into her ship. The cockpit was cramped, with a joystick to her right and a handle that moved forwards or backwards to her left.

Simms' face popped up on the glass of the cockpit, and Aisha noticed the reflection of a typical heads-up display. "You've all played video games or used flight simulators," he said. "And the control concepts are the same. The joystick is used to tilt your craft

left and right with those directions. Forward or backwards will dive or climb. Handle on your left is for main thrusters."

She moved the stick, getting a feel for it, as well as the throttle handle. It looked like this might be an easy ship to fly.

"There's two major differences in flying here," he said. "The first is gravity. There is no *down*. So learn to orient yourself on a fixed item. The sun might be up, down or sideways. The Earth is the same. You need a point of reference so you can measure your position relative to your enemy. Find one that you're good at and stick to it. Got it?"

"Sir, yes, Sir," they replied.

"The second," he said, "is friction. When flying in the air, wind resistance slows you down. So between that and gravity, you'll slow down and you'll fall. In a vacuum, there's no inertia. When you push your engines to send you forward at a speed, you'll continue in that direction at that speed *forever*. So if you need to slow down, you have to spend more energy to push in the opposite direction. The same applies for turning. In air, you have elevators on your plane that change the resistance to make you turn. In space, if you want to go left, thrusters on the right of your plane will fire, thus pushing you left. What does this mean?"

They thought about it a moment, before James, a white kid from New York spoke up. "We burn energy in different ways. Braking costs energy. Turning costs energy. So we need to ensure that we monitor our potential energy effectively."

"Bingo," said Simms. "Nice work. Okay. First class. Start flying these things. The red button on the joystick fires your lasers, the green button near your thumb is your projectile weapons. Last pilot standing gets no homework for a week. Go!"

"Wait, what," said James, before his ship was immediately hit by fire from one of his neighbors, splattering paint all over the cockpit, and he was out of the game.

Aisha quickly dropped her ship from the hangar, and accelerated as fast as she could away from the melee. She had chosen the far end of the cylinder as her 'up' position, so she tried to shift

her mind into the mode that she was climbing above all the other fighters. One by one they dropped. She had burned close to a quarter of her meager supply of fuel when she cut her engines, and continued to drift.

Projectile weapons he had said. She thumbed the stick, and felt a machine gun empty several rounds. They shot out in front of her at high speed. Being a friction free environment, they kept moving, without slowing down, and without falling.

She could see how useful these would be, tactically. One could shoot these widely and put up a curtain that any ship coming towards her would have to go through. They'd take hits trying to get through it, perhaps enough hits to take them out of the game.

She turned her ship around, pointing her nose back at the fracas below. Then, nudging the joystick while she held the firing trigger, she spun her ship so that the bullets shot in front of her, making a cylinder of fire. With a few more nudges of the joystick, she widened the cylinder into a cone surrounding the hangar. Any ship escaping the chaos would take hits. The question is, were they enough to drop them out of the game?

This worked both ways, though. Ships down there could shoot bullets in her direction, too. They were all too distracted by each other, but surely one of them would have seen her escape, or, others had the same plan as her. The worst thing she could do was stand still. She checked her radar, and found an alarm that she could turn on for incoming mass. That might give her warning, but warning wasn't enough.

And then there were the lasers. She held the button and a lance of light lanced out from the nose of her ship. No matter how tightly she focused it, she could see that the laser still attenuated, so that at longer distances – such as the distance to the hangar – it was clear the laser would have little effect. She also noted that this wasn't *Star Wars*, where laser bolts flew so slowly through the air that one could dodge them. The speed of light was the speed of light, so as soon as she pulled her trigger, she would hit the enemy almost instantaneously. It was a question of whether she was close enough that the focused energy of the laser would do enough damage to take out another ship.

Again, she checked her scanners. There was a basic radar that bounced radio waves off other sources, with a computer filtering out what was moving and what was stationary. Instantly she noted that this had several disadvantages. First, in order to detect other ships, she was sending out radio waves, giving away her position. Second, of course, was that radio waves traveled slower than the speed of light. If her enemy was armed with lasers, they could conceivably kill her before she saw them.

A second scanner detected *heat*. It did this by analyzing the light spectrum coming into the ship. Anything in the infrared band was hot, and again the computer was smart enough to filter out stationary objects. If she flew to a new position, and cut out all heat emission, or as much of it as possible, and held her ship as still as possible, she could be invisible to their scanners. It was impossible to come to a full stop without firing her thrusters heavily and generating lots of heat.

She would have to be gentle on them, trying to keep her ship's external temperature as low as possible. She hatched a plan to hit her thrusters gently in order to get her moving on a trajectory slowly. Any incoming bullets fired at her old position moved relatively slowly compared to lasers, so she would likely be out of their way before they reached her. Any ships using lasers would show up as red hot, so she could evade them before the laser could do too much damage. She would glide silently and pick off ships one by one.

She figured she'd be close to invisible on their scanners, but she couldn't fool anybody's eyes. If they looked in the right direction at the right time they'd still see her.

By now more than three quarters of her classmates were 'dead', their ships towed back to the hangar in shame. She counted the ships on her scanners, and they were all present, flying around at high speed, dog-fighting each other. Nobody else was drifting like her, trying to be invisible, and they were all so busy that none of them noticed.

One ship, corkscrewing up and away from a pursuing fighter started getting close to her. She held her nerve, wondering if her stealth tactic was working. Sure enough, he didn't see her and turned his ship, heading back down towards the melee below. She opened up with her lasers, lighting him up, and displaying as a 'kill' instantly.

She had given away her position, so, quickly, she turned and thrust away. Some of the surviving fighters, including Soo-Kyung's, began to see what was happening, and flew away from where Aisha's laser had come from.

As they were so intent on each other, Aisha realized that she could get away quite safely, and they didn't have the eyeballs to seek her out. That might change when it became one-on-one.

Soo-Kyung must have been looking, for she flew her ship about half the distance from the hangar to where Aisha had shot from. She stopped, gently rotating her ship. Aisha could almost feel her friend's deep brown eyes searching for her.

Another fighter saw Soo-Kyung, and she made for an easy target. It accelerated towards her, opening up with its bullets. But Soo-Kyung was too fast, and she pushed her attitude jets, spinning her ship to the side, and watching the other one overshoot. She opened up with her guns, and 'killed' him instantly.

But it was clear that she was hunting Aisha now. Aisha realized that her best chance was to stick with the plan. Silently drifting, watching with her eyes as well as her heat sensors she saw Soo-Kyung slowly pick off the other fighters. She'd lure them in and kill them, or she'd wait until two of them were focused on each other, and she'd kill them both.

Like a lioness, Aisha's roommate slowly made her way to the top of the pecking order. Soo-Kyung was as smart as she was lethal. And she knew that Aisha had retreated to a position of safety. It was likely that she knew as much about the ship by now that Aisha did, but how could she go into stealth the way Aisha had?

There were only three other fighters left, now. Aisha watched as Soo-Kyung lured one of them to chase her, right into the path of the third. It did her dirty work for her, and now it was just Soo-Kyung, Aisha and that third. It was piloted by a Brazilian kid that everybody called Ronaldo.

She watched as Ronaldo turned and chased Soo-Kyung's ship. After the earlier chase, when Soo-Kyung had lured the fighter towards Ronaldo, she had shot off as fast as she could, trying to put as much distance between her and Ronaldo as she could. On the heat sensor, her ship was a bright light.

But there was something wrong. The ship was flying much too predictably, in a wide, fast arc around the cylinder and back towards the hangar. It was easy for Ronaldo to see her and chase her. Calculating her trajectory, he headed her off with a tight beam laser.

Aisha flicked on her heads-up display, and Soo-Kyung's ship was so bright with heat that it washed out the rest of the display.

She peered through the cockpit, but both ships were too far away. What could she do? Her hand hovered over the radar button. She could send out a ping, and positively identify the ships. That would allow her to get a lock on Soo-Kyung *and* Ronaldo, so whichever one survived would be at her mercy.

Something didn't feel quite right. She looked out the window again, seeing that Ronaldo was almost in firing range. She had to act.

Taking a deep breath, Aisha activated her radar. She instructed the computer to lock onto the results. It beeped back at her, and she quickly deactivated the radar. Ronaldo had Soo-Kyung in range and was opening up with his laser.

He had her with a direct hit. But something was wrong. There was no kill sound on her display. She looked at it again, and--

Boom! She was hit, hard, with both bullets and lasers, and at almost point-blank range. A clear kill; she was dead. What had happened? Craning her neck, she turned around to see Soo-Kyung's ship only feet behind hers.

She could see Soo-Kyung smiling, and giving her a thumbs up. Aisha sighed, not believing she could have been fooled so easily. She wasn't even sure *how* she'd been fooled. Soo-Kyung's ship moved slowly, ever so slowly toward her. The nose of her ship connected with Aisha's just behind the cockpit, and began to *push* her.

That's how she had fooled everyone! When someone pinged with radar, she'd know where they were. But when they used the heat sensors, they were fooled by the proximity of the ships. She'd push one ship onto a path, and shut down her own ship. While her opponent chased the bait, she could zero in on it. In this case, she used Ronaldo as the bait to get Aisha to turn on her radar and give away her position.

It was genius.

Ronaldo was still shooting his laser at the decoy, so Soo-Kyung pushed Aisha's ship in his direction, burning what must be the last

of her fuel to get enough speed to be a burning glow on his heat scanners. When she was close to laser range, she boosted away from Aisha, effectively pushing herself slowly in the opposite direction. Ronaldo opened up with direct hits on Aisha's ship, the bullets racketing against her hull, splattering red paint all over it.

Then, from behind, she saw Soo-Kyung's ship light up. Her beam hit Ronaldo's ship, straight and true, killing it instantly.

The lights came back on in Aisha's ship, and she was able to regain control. Simms' face appeared on her screen. "Nice work, Miss Kim," he said. "And not bad, Parks and Ronaldo. The rest of you...that was a shambles! You are a *disgrace* to your species. Get the heck back here, now!"

CHAPTER 10

Korea

May there be peace with you always, my dear girl. May you understand what peace is, and the difference between peace and victory. When we win a war, we like to call it declaring peace, but it isn't, it's just postponing future war.

Peace only comes when we work together for a common, agreed upon goal. There'll be a chance for you to do that in the new world. Don't forget. Work towards this peace, and make it not just yours, but everyone's...

SILENTLY, THEY RETURNED to their apartment. Most of their classmates were jealous at Soo-Kyung's prize of no homework for a week. "It's not like homework is *hard* for you anyway," grumbled Ronaldo, shaking her hand in a concession to her victory. He smiled and winked. "Just kidding," he had said before going to join his friends.

They entered the apartment, and Soo-Kyung kicked off her shoes and put her slippers on as always. Quietly, she sat on one of the sofas and looked out at the stars.

"Nice work, Soo-Kyung. I'd love to know how you were so good, so quickly," said Aisha, finally, unsettled by the silence.

The answer surprised her. "Really? You assume a lot. I couldn't have just learned it on the spot, like you did? I had to know something already, is that it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh come on, it's been days now since you spoke with those boys, and I'm sure they told you all about me. You've been on-edge around me ever since."

"That's not it, they--"

"Am I supposed to believe you? They hacked into my records and found out all about me, and you believe *them* over me? I thought I was your *friend*."

Aisha was aghast. "You *are* my friend."

"But you believe *them* over *me*?"

"There's nothing to believe. They told me nothing."

"What? Then why are you--"

Soo-Kyung stopped, and looked into Aisha's eyes. Aisha glared back. If Soo-Kyung were to read anything it would be righteous anger. She turned away from Aisha, and sat, putting her head in her hands for a moment before looking back.

"Sorry," she said, quietly. "I know I'm over-sensitive about this, and it made me jump to the wrong conclusion."

Aisha sat down beside her and told her of the entire conversation with Patrice.

"He was on the verge of telling me something. Something not just about this place, but about...I don't know, *everything*. But I blew it. I got angry and flew off the handle."

"Go on."

"But he did tell me about open enrollment. He and Seamus and some others have their little conspiracy going on up here. They thought that the opening of the school to the general public might yield some kind of clue as to the true purpose of the school."

Soo-Kyung raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"And, it turned out that there were two students that came in who are very special. You and me."

"What makes us special?"

"For you, I have no idea. Seamus said he read your files and that they 'blew his mind', but other than that, they told me nothing. I wanted to hear it from *you*. Despite what you said earlier, I *am* your friend, and I care about you deeply."

Soo-Kyung smiled a little, and Aisha was surprised at how much she meant it. "I really do," she repeated. "And I know there's an air of

secrecy about you. That there's something terrible that you carry alone. And you don't have to. Not anymore."

Soo-Kyung opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it. It was like she was unable to find the words. Finally, she spoke. "So, has my silence been the thing that bothers you?"

"Yes!" Aisha reached towards Soo-Kyung, and rested her hand on her shoulder. "And, no," she said, knowing that she needed to be honest with Soo-Kyung. "There was something more."

"What?"

Aisha told her about her own file. That it had been sealed and encrypted so deeply that Seamus couldn't break it.

"Yet he was able to break mine?"

"Yes."

"Curious," Soo-Kyung said.

"So what did he read?"

"Probably the cover story."

"Cover story?" Aisha asked.

"I'm not exactly what I appear to be."

"He said that *nobody* here is exactly who they appear to be."

"He is very wise," she smiled a little. "And cute."

Aisha wasn't going to let her change the subject. "Just who are you, then?"

"According to the files, I'm one of the children that were hand-picked by the regime in my country to go through the best of training in everything. Science, technology, martial arts, languages, piloting, strategy...a list as long as your arm."

"According to the files?"

"Yes. That was planted to explain how I can do the things I do, and to distract from the truth about who I am."

"Who are you?"

"My name is Kim."

"Yes. I know. It's a common name in Korea."

"It's also the name of the family that have controlled the Democratic People's Republic of Korea since its founding over a hundred years ago. How else do you think I survived the nuclear war?"

Aisha sat for a moment. The family that had controlled the country. That had brought it to war with the West. A war that had claimed the life of her own father. She felt anger growing.

"I wasn't a part of it," said Soo-Kyung. "I am as much a victim as you."

The pit of Aisha's stomach went cold. That war had killed her father. Soo-Kyung's family was responsible.

"You could judge me for what they did," she said. "But you'd be wrong to do so. You can't hold me guilty by association."

Aisha sighed. Anger wasn't right. She didn't want to blame Soo-Kyung. Finally, she said, "You sound just like Patrice."

"Patrice?"

"Smith."

"Oh. First-name terms now, huh?"

She wasn't going to let Soo-Kyung change the topic. "I don't know what to say."

"Well, nobody else knows who I am. Only you. If you want to report me, I am at your mercy."

"But the files show you are someone else."

"Files, which in your case, are locked. If *you* were to report something it would probably be believed. They clearly hold you in high regard."

"So, why?"

"Why what?"

"Why come up here?"

Soo-Kyung looked thoughtful for a moment, like she was searching for the right words to say. "For a new start. If I were to stay on Earth, someone somewhere, would recognize me, and my life would be ruined, or I'd be killed. I want that fresh start, Aisha. And I beg you, as a *friend*, to let me have it."

"I want to be mad, I really do. I want to blame you for--"

"Then do so, I'll understand."

"No," said Aisha, reaching out her hand. "You're right. Fresh start. Let us not hold each other accountable for the sins of our fathers."

"*Your* father, at least, didn't sin, did he?"

"I don't know," said Aisha. "But my files are locked for a reason."

“And I think they put us together for a reason. I wonder if those reasons are related.”

Soo-Kyung looked thoughtful for a moment. She walked to the glass windows, overlooking the stars. “I haven’t ever been able to trust someone as a friend,” she said finally. “Because of the family I come from. I have trusted you tonight.”

She turned and held out a hand. “Friends?”

Aisha looked at her hand for a long moment before holding it in hers and shaking it. “Friends,” she nodded, first smiling, then grinning, and finally embracing the Korean girl in a giant hug.

She surprised even herself at the warmth of her feelings, and knowing that she really meant them.

CHAPTER 11

Bully

Wherever you are, and whomever you are, there are people who will, for whatever reason, try to put you down and make life difficult for you. There are many ways to deal with people like this, but there's only one truth: You never start the fight, but you always finish it.

No matter the cost...

IT HAD BEEN A LONG and difficult morning, and Aisha was tired and hungry as she entered the mess hall. The doorway was partially blocked with other enrollee students.

Enrollee was the official name to students like herself who had come through open enrollment, but the other students had far less kind words to describe them. Everything from *rabble* to *scum* to *meteors* had been muttered near her. The first two were obvious, the third she had no idea.

"When they throw us out the airlock, we'll burn up in the atmosphere as meteors," Soo-Kyung had explained one night, seemingly unbothered by the implicit threat.

"Shouldn't we talk to the authorities," Aisha had asked. "They can't do that, can they?"

Soo-Kyung shook her head. "This isn't a public school. It's an academy, a military academy. If you do that, the teachers will think you're soft. And *worse*, the other kids will think you're soft *and* a snitch. We'll have to deal with this ourselves."

"How?"

"There's only one way," she replied. "*Earn* their respect. Sooner or later they'll have to depend on us, and they know it. The sooner we make them respect us, the sooner all this ends."

Those words echoed in Aisha's mind as she worked her way through the crowd into the mess hall. Then she saw the issue. The older kids had spread themselves across all the tables, leaving no room for Aisha's peers.

The new kids looked at each other, unsure of what to do. As Aisha entered, they looked to her too. Soo-Kyung had gone straight back to the apartment to get some sleep.

Earn their respect, she had said. *Stand up to a bully and smack him in the mouth*, she had always learned. The closest table had only two students -- the English boy she had recognized from the launch, and a short Asian girl who also bore a British flag. The name *Lim* was embroidered beneath.

Without a word, Aisha grabbed her food and sat at the table.

"Space is taken," said the boy. His nameplate bore the name "Bennett."

"Which ones?"

"All of them."

"By whom?"

"None of your business, Meteor."

"Well, I will use it until they get back."

"No, you won't," he snarled.

Aisha was aware that all eyes in the room were on her. She put her tray down, sat, and calmly began to eat as if nothing happened.

"Did you hear me?"

Looking at her plate, Aisha picked up her knife and started slowly cutting the meat, trying to ignore him, and trying to look like she *wasn't* actively ignoring him -- and instead that he just wasn't part of her universe.

She cut a small piece of meat, put it in her mouth and began to chew.

"I said, 'Did you hear me,' you stupid cow?"

His voice was raising in volume and pitch. She knew that she shouldn't react. She was winning. She closed her eyes a moment and took a deep breath. She wasn't going to let him get to her.

She felt the table jar as Bennett stood and pushed himself back from it. Her drink toppled and spilled. She tried not to flinch, and calmly picked the cup up and placed it upright.

"You think the silent treatment works with me, is that it, you little scumbag?"

It obviously is working, she thought to herself. Keep it up.

She quickly looked around the room. All eyes were on the confrontation. Many of the older kids were watching her, measuring her up. Her launch group was gathered around the doorway, eyes darting between her and Bennett.

Suddenly she felt a hand on her back, grabbing her hair. With surprising strength, he pulled her out of her seat and slammed her against the wall.

"You think you are so smart, don't you? Well, you are nothing. You've never been anything. You'll never be anything, and definitely not around here."

"That's not for you to judge," said Aisha, trying not to show the pain she was feeling in her voice or on her face. She fought to stay calm.

"Oh yes it is. You'll listen to me. You keep your ugly black face out of my sight for the rest of the time you are here, or I will break it for you in front of all your friends."

"You are in front of them now," she said. "Show them what you can do."

Fighting the urge to cry, she instead smiled a broad smile.

"You don't know what I can do, you stupid n--"

Aisha was stunned. Was he really going to use *that* word? Before she knew it, she had flinched. Eyes opened wide. Tears began to flow. Her body involuntarily began to shake.

But he hadn't said it. He stopped, and she realized that he was baiting her. "One simple word can do all that? And I didn't even say it," he smiled. "That's how I know *we* won. That's how I know *we* are superior. You and your stupid little people use that word all the

time, and think that you are taking our word for you and turning it against us. But every time you use it. Every time you call each other by that name, *we* win."

She could feel the anger rising. She began to breathe hard. Her eyes narrowed and looked at him.

"You want to hit me, you stupid slave? Go on. I'm right here."

He let her go and stood back, arms wide open. "Go on, you get a free shot. Heck as you're just a *girl*, I'll give you two shots. Go on."

He turned and addressed the room. "What is she you waiting for? Right here. A couple of freebies." He faced her again. "Hit me with your best shot, you stupid meteor!"

She was shaking uncontrollably. She felt a sob begin to move through her body. She had to get out of there. She had to leave. Now.

She ran out of the room, bumping into other students, hearing the laughter echo behind her. Her stomach began to churn. She found a restroom and ran into it. Bursting into one of the stalls, she fell on her knees and heaved.

* * *

Feeling a little better, she came out of the stall and went to the sink to wash her face. With one hand she held her hair up, and with the other she splashed water on her face. She plugged the sink to let it fill up with the clean water.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and looked up to see Lim, the girl that had been sitting at the table with Bennett.

"Let me," she said softly, and took hold of Aisha's hair.

"Thanks," said Aisha, throwing more water on her face, and bending further to cup some water into her mouth to rinse out the taste of vomit.

She felt Lim grip her hair roughly, and with surprising strength push her face down into the water. She struggled, but Lim used her weight to push Aisha's neck against the rim of the sink. The message was clear -- if she struggled, she might choke before she drowned. She tried to calm herself, and Lim got the message.

Pulling her out of the water, she snarled into Aisha's ear, "You might think you're hot stuff, but you're nothing here. And if you ever try to show him up like that again, I *will* kill you. You got that?"

Again, Aisha's face was buried in the water, and her head was banged roughly against the faucet. She felt Lim's grip release, and she pulled herself up. Blood from her scalp seeped down into the water, thickening and reddening it.

She fell to her butt and put her face in her hands. Sobs wracked her body, and all the control that she had tried to keep just gave way. She flopped onto the ground, not caring about the blood seeping from her scalp, and cried more than she had done in years.

She wanted to go home.

CHAPTER 12

Sebastian

When the Pharisees asked Jesus what he thought the greatest commandment was, it appeared that they were trying to trick him. If he picked one over the other, they could bludgeon him with well-prepared arguments about why the one he chose was wrong.

Perhaps Jesus knew, ahead of time, what Mark Twain famously said -- "Don't argue with stupid people, because they'll bring you down to their level and beat you with experience." So he answered them with a sentence that captured all of the commandments, without being any of the commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul, and love your neighbor as yourself".

Whether or not you follow in his ways, you have to admire the intelligence in this answer. The Pharisees were trying to maneuver him into a fight, but he not only saw that fight, he won it before it began.

You might think it a pity then that they killed him eventually, unless you realize that that's probably what he wanted all along. They were pawns in his plan. And you can do the same with your enemies. Find what it is that they yearn for, and manipulate them into what you want using that...

STAGGERING BACK TO HER apartment, she was glad that the corridors were quiet, and few people would see her. She barely

noticed Soo-Kyung in the common room as she ran past her, into her room, and slammed the door.

She turned the window beside her bed to views of home. Hills, fields, oceans and beaches. Anything that wasn't this place. It didn't help. If anything, it made things worse, and the yearning within her chest hurt worse than the cut on her scalp.

There was a soft knock on the door.

"Go away," she yelled, trying not to sound like she was crying, but she found herself crying all the more.

She knew that Soo-Kyung was still standing outside. "Just go away, I want to be alone," she repeated. But quieter this time.

"No," came the soft voice from outside. "You don't, please come out."

Aisha sat in silence, calming herself. Trying to stop the sobbing. How had she fallen apart so quickly?

Another voice came from outside. Patrice. "Aisha, I heard what happened. Can you please come out? We're here for you."

At his voice, her heart leapt in her chest. She just wanted him to hold her right now. Not to fight her fights for her. Not to save her. Just to hold her. She wanted to feel the closeness of another person. Of a *man*. That strength that only a man had. She wanted to hold onto him and feel it seep into her pores so she could stand up and face everyone again. So that she could walk up to Bennett and Lim and...

And what? Beat them up? What would that solve? How would she win this fight?

She'd have to start by picking herself up off the floor. By ceasing the crying and feeling sorry for herself. By working with her friends to gain her strength, her confidence and her self-respect back. They were just on the other side of the door. It should be so easy.

It wasn't. She'd try to lift herself up, envision walking out the door and seeing Soo-Kyung, Patrice and Seamus there. See the kindness in their eyes as they heard about what happened. It would be so beautiful.

But she was still sitting here.

"If you're not coming out, I'm coming in," said Patrice, finally. "I'm giving you a count of three."

She hugged her knees around her. *He was coming to her.*

"Three," he said.

She thought of him coming into the room and sweeping her up in her arms. It felt *good* to be so wanted.

"Two," he continued.

But no. She couldn't have that. She wanted to be a great woman, and not the woman behind the great man. They would have to do it as equals. There was no way she would let him carry her. She made to stand up, but her legs wouldn't respond.

"One," he said, flatly.

She stood up, turned and faced the door.

It opened, and she saw his eyes first. Locked on his eyes. They were the windows of the soul after all, and through those eyes she saw a good soul. Did he see the same in her? She hoped so, she longed for him to see her as good also.

His eyes never left hers, as he smiled gently. "We are here for you, Aisha. Always. But you need to know what you're up against."

She half-walked, half-staggered into the common room, and took a seat on one of the sofas that looked out on the stars. Mercifully, Earth wasn't in view right now, because she felt she might try to jump out the window, to go home, to be a *meteor*. Perhaps the rich kids were right after all.

Seamus had pulled a couple of the bar stools over, and was sitting, watching her silently, with an encouraging smile on his face.

Soo-Kyung had gasped when she saw the cut on Aisha's scalp. The blood still oozed from it. The blood that had already dried on her neck was beginning to itch. Soo-Kyung withdrew to the bathroom and came out with a towel she'd soaked in hot water. She began cleaning the wound, and Aisha flinched.

"Sorry," said Soo-Kyung. "But I'd better clean this in case it gets infected."

"Thanks," said Aisha, and looked back at Seamus. His eyes had drifted up to look at the top of her head. "How bad is it?"

He looked back at her. "It's pretty deep. There's a lot of blood. But I think Soo-Kyung knows what she's doing."

Aisha felt Soo-Kyung pause in her work a moment. Seamus was back looking up. So he wasn't watching Aisha's head. He was watching Soo-Kyung. Despite the throbbing of her head, Aisha smiled.

Patrice took the other stool, facing Aisha. Seeing her smiling, he raised an eyebrow.

"Thanks," said Aisha. "You guys are cheering me up already."

Patrice was all business. "It was Bennett, wasn't it? Sebastian Bennett."

"Yeah."

Seamus rolled his eyes. "Not again," he said.

"Again?"

"That guy is a piece of work."

"Wait, you *know* him?"

"Yeah, he's been in the academy as long as I have," answered Patrice. There was something in his voice.

"But he came up with us in our launch, I remember him."

"The one at the airlock," said Soo-Kyung, her voice was quiet. Aisha turned to look, but Soo-Kyung's hands held her head firmly. "Don't move," she said. "I'm trying to dress the wound."

"That's the one," said Patrice. "He was kicked out of the school last semester, sent back to Earth. I thought we'd never see him again."

"But like a bad penny, he keeps showing up," said Seamus. "And to put him on the same shuttle as a bunch of enrollees. That was just stupid."

"What did he do?"

"What didn't he do?"

"Okay, in that case, what got him sent back to Earth, and how did he get back?"

Patrice sighed. "If there's anyone in this school who has a richer family than mine, it's him."

"So he *bought* his way back in?"

"Tells you a lot about this place, doesn't it?"

"What got him iced," interjected Seamus, "the last straw, I guess, was that he beat one of the Indian students to a pulp."

"Indian students? I haven't seen any Indian students!"

"And you probably won't for some time, unless some get in via open enrollment. Raj was our only one. He was a good kid, but constantly getting picked on by the others. One day, Bennett decided to make an example of him."

"What happened?"

"We don't know for sure, but Raj had to be returned to Earth for treatment."

"How do you know it was him?"

"They don't send too many shuttles down to Earth, and Bennett was on the same one. His records at the school were instantly erased, like he'd never been here."

"And now he's back?"

Seamus sighed. "And up to his same old tricks, it seems. Was there a girl with him?"

"Lim?"

"Yeah, that's her," said Seamus. "Victoria Lim. That girl's nastier than a bag of ferrets."

"She's the one that cut you, isn't she?" asked Patrice. "Bennett would never be so stupid as to get his hands dirty. No offense."

"None taken," said Aisha, understanding what he meant. "What's her story? She's Asian, why would she be with a racist like him?"

"Racist?"

Aisha explained what he had said to her, and how he had tricked her into a response using *that* word.

"She's an unusual creature," said Seamus. "Her family were emigrants to the UK from Hong Kong. She was born in England, in Dorchester. Because of the money her parents were able to make in the UK, she lived a life of privilege. She associated all the *good* things she had with being British, and by extension, her family had left all the bad behind in China."

Patrice sighed. "She's the perfect companion for someone like him. Someone who leaves behind all that she is in a desire to be more like him. It's a reaffirmation of his perceived superiority."

Aisha shook her head, and Soo-Kyung punched her gently on the shoulder. "Hold still or this wound will get worse. I'm going to give you some stitches now, okay?"

She felt the cold spray of anesthetic on her scalp, as Soo-Kyung got to work.

"I have some expertise in Martial arts, including the *bo*, which is very popular amongst the older children," said Patrice.

"Bennett," said Seamus, "is really good at it, too."

"Not as good as me," said Patrice.

"I'm not going to let you fight him for me," said Aisha, defiantly.

Patrice smiled his kind smile. "I know," he said. "But you are going to let me help you learn how to use it, so you can defend yourself against him in the future."

"And I know a thing or two as well," said Soo-Kyung, as she put the finishing touches on some liquid sutures. "Wound is clean and stitched up. It'll likely sting for a while, but I don't think your brain leaked out."

"So you're going to teach me to fight?"

"I'm going to teach you to *defend yourself*, there's a difference."

She could see the seriousness in his eyes. She never thought she'd find that kind of thing attractive, always thinking that she wanted a guy that would make her laugh. But whenever she looked into his eyes when he was like this, she just wanted to get lost.

She felt a tap on the top of her head from Soo-Kyung, presumably asking her to stop drooling.

"When do we start?"

"Tomorrow," said Patrice.

"Why not right now?"

"Because you've taken a blow to the head. You should rest."

"That's no fun."

"Learning to fight isn't fun either."

"I thought I was learning to *defend myself*," she said, mimicking his voice.

Seamus covered his mouth with his hand and snickered. "She got you there, Buddy!"

Aisha laughed, covering her mouth, and trying not to cry again. She remembered the despair that she had felt earlier in the day, the desire to go home.

And then she realized that home was *here* with these crazy people. Soo-Kyung, a member of the North Korean elite; Seamus, an Irish hacker; and Patrice, the kind of person she always thought that she would hate: Rich, white and privileged. But instead he was kind and warm and good. She looked at him and a warmth radiated from her heart.

Is this what they call love, she wondered, before Soo-Kyung insisted that the boys stay for dinner.

CHAPTER 13

Friendship

Love can be such a powerful force, and such a fickle feeling. Before you ever find love, you will wonder what it is, and there are many emotions, many states of mind that you might confuse with love.

Don't fall for words of love. Words without actions to back them up are meaningless. Don't be a fool for flattery.

Don't fall for promises of love. Love is present in the here and now. If someone loves you, they love you now, not sometime in a nebulous future.

Above all, don't fall for mere feelings of love, feelings come and go, and can be fooled.

You'll know when the time is right and the person is right. He won't be one that you want to be the one, he'll just 'be' the one.

Love is an action, and the ultimate action is sacrifice. When you find the one that would lay his life down for you, and you would lay yours down for him, you'll have found love...

"THEY ARE CALLED BLACK BEAN noodles, and they are a comfort food in Korea," said Soo-Kyung as Aisha tried to manipulate the inky, sticky mess onto a pair of chopsticks. Patrice was looking at his suspiciously, but Seamus was slurping them down like a pro.

"Well, South Korea anyway. We used to smuggle the packaged ones across the border into my country. Cheap, nasty stuff, but comfort food nonetheless," she smiled as she ate a mouthful. Some dangled like a helpless squid before she bit through them, letting remainders land on the plate.

Aisha sniffed hers. Despite the dark color, they smelled sweet, almost like caramel. There were small black bits mixed throughout the sauce.

"It's just chopped meat and vegetables," said Seamus. "It's good!"

Patrice took a little bite. His expression changed from one of surprise to delight. "*It is* good! Where did you get this?"

Soo-Kyung shrugged. "There weren't a whole lot of them in my country, so we had to smuggle them in, like I said. I figured there'd be less in space, so I packed some of the ingredients to make them here myself."

Patrice put his bowl down. "I can't eat them, then. You can't have a lot, and it's precious to you."

Soo-Kyung rolled her eyes. "Don't be silly, a pleasure shared is a pleasure doubled, right?"

Patrice blushed and reached again for the bowl. "I'm glad you said that," he finally admitted. "I'm starving and didn't want to give up good food!"

Aisha realized she was the only one not eating. "Go on," said Soo-Kyung. "It won't hurt you. Maybe a bit messy, but that's part of the charm."

"I'm not very good with chopsticks," she said finally.

"Then use your fingers," said Patrice, putting his chopsticks down again and using his fingers so she wouldn't be alone. Instantly, his hands were covered in black goo. He slurped the noodles down, and then licked his fingers.

"Go on, what are you waiting for? If I can do it..."

Aisha laughed and dug in. Seamus was right. They *were* good. And it was nice to have a taste from home, even if it was somebody else's, instead of the endless supply of mess-hall food.

Once Aisha had had a few days to recover, Soo-Kyung had booked one of the exercise rooms, and cleared it out to make a dojo. Together, she and Aisha had laid out mats.

"I will teach you basic self-defense," she said, "before you work with Patrice. I know you can't wait to get your hands on him, but you can work with me first."

Aisha blushed. Soo-Kyung only smiled more.

"It's okay," she said. "Your secret is safe with me."

"I'm not so sure it's a secret anymore," Aisha replied, quietly.

"You are bigger than I," said Soo-Kyung, "and stronger. I would have no hope against you in close combat -- if it were just a question of mass."

There was something about the way Soo-Kyung moved, a confidence and liteness about her that Aisha hadn't noticed before.

"Okay," she said, grabbing the front of Aisha's uniform. She twisted her wrists, bent her knees and turned at the hip. Suddenly Aisha felt herself being flung to the ground. The smaller girl had thrown her like she was a toy. She had done it with enough control so that Aisha didn't get hurt.

Soo-Kyung laughed a little, and reached out a hand to pick Aisha up.

"It's just physics," she said. "It's the concept of a lever. These allow you to exert a large force over distance by applying a small force at the right place. My arms are the levers."

Soo-Kyung twisted her hips like earlier. "So when I twist my hips like this, I can turn your own weight against you. Now, you try."

"But I'm bigger than you."

"It doesn't matter. You aren't strong enough to pick me up and throw me, are you?"

Aisha shrugged. Gripping Soo-Kyung the same way she had been gripped, she twisted her wrists and turned from the hips in the same way. Nothing happened.

She pulled harder, and lifted Soo-Kyung a little, but by turning she lost balance and fell, pulling Soo-Kyung down on top of her.

"Am I interrupting something?"

They turned to look at the source of the voice: Patrice.

Soo-Kyung lifted herself off Aisha and nimbly jumped to her feet. Patrice smiled and reached down. Aisha took his hand, and he effortlessly lifted her to her feet.

"Nice effort," he said. "But you need to work on it."

So Aisha grabbed the lapels of his uniform, flicked her wrists and twisted at the hip. The expression of surprise on his face as she threw him to the ground was perfect.

* * *

For the next few weeks, life continued apace in the Academy, and things began to take on a feeling of normalcy. Aisha was even beginning to enjoy her classes, especially the science and math ones, at which she excelled.

The highlight of each week was when Simms took them flying. While others, such as Soo-Kyung and Ronaldo, were extremely effective flyers that Aisha could never hope to match, she did seem to have a knack for strategy. Simms regularly called upon her to command groups of flyers against ones that he set up.

At first, his teams won easily. But, over time, she began to see how he thought, and how he *did* things. That was his weakness -- his predictability.

The first time she beat him, it was a tough slog and narrow victory. After that, the wins came easier and easier, until he didn't seem to be much of a challenge anymore.

Her sessions with Patrice were also extremely rewarding. Not only was she learning a lot about self-defense, she also found herself growing in confidence as she understood the art better. She remembered the first day that Soo-Kyung had shown her basic throws, and how the smaller girl had held herself. Now she felt more comfortable in her stance.

She hadn't yet dared go into the mess hall, but she knew the day was coming soon.

Patrice became more and more interesting every moment she spent with him. He was certainly a very masculine guy, but not the cliché musclebound moron that she'd known around her old school.

It went beyond intelligence, too -- there was something deeply insightful about him. When he began to share his hopes and dreams for the future with her, she realized that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him.

Far from the privileged rich kid, he was humble, he was caring, and he *knew* about the things that mattered in the world. She had hated talking with rich kids in the past, stuck in their little self-absorbed bubbles. But he wasn't like that.

He clapped her on the side of the head with his bo. It had a huge set of pads on the end, which softened the impact of any hit. The pads also added weight, and therefore momentum and force to any attack.

"Wake up," he said, smiling. "You're daydreaming again."

"Sorry about that," she replied, before doing a spin move that caught him on the back of his leg, buckling it and sinking him to one knee. Turning again, she got him on the back of the head, knocking him flat. "Who's daydreaming now?"

He laughed. That was one of the things she was beginning to *love* about him. She had just humiliated him, but he was good-natured enough to know that she had *succeeded*. That it wasn't about him. It was about *her*.

She returned his smile and helped him up.

Then she heard the sound of a slow clap. Sebastian stood in the door, mocking applause. "Utter crap," he said slowly, smirking towards Patrice. Lim was in tow, mockingly watching Aisha.

But Patrice, credit to him, didn't take the bait. He ignored Sebastian and returned to his fighting stance, facing Aisha.

This time, Sebastian wouldn't allow himself to be ignored. Standing between them, he faced down Patrice. "I've beaten everybody in this school except you," he said. "Because you are too scared to fight me."

"If you insist."

"Don't mock me. Don't brush me off."

Patrice said nothing, and just met the other boy's eyes. He dropped his bo, and stood straight.

"You *will* fight me," said Sebastian, his eyes icy cool. "I'll make sure of it."

Taking Lim's arm, he swept out of the room. Aisha caught her eye as they left, and Lim smiled a frozen smile.

* * *

Aisha lay in bed, unable to sleep and not knowing why. She flicked on her window and set it to show scenes from Canada.

His country.

She looked at the beautiful city of Vancouver, a city on the water with grey/green skyscrapers soaring into the sky, looking like they came straight out of a science-fiction movie. Beyond to British Columbia and the dramatic mountains. She looked at scenes of people skiing past snow ghosts, of kids playing hockey on outdoor frozen rinks.

Could this be in my future, she wondered as she slipped into a peaceful, happy sleep.

CHAPTER 14

Conflict

Mahatma Gandhi once said, 'An eye for an eye would make the whole world blind', which is a wonderful, peaceful, sentiment.

But if you aren't willing to poke out your enemy's eye, then only you will be blind, and he, fully sighted, will be encouraged and empowered to continue in his oppression of you.

So, if your enemy tries to take out your eye, don't take out his. Take off his entire head, and make sure he can never hurt you again...

HAVING PRACTICED with Patrice and Soo-Kyung, attending the fighting contests took a new interest for Aisha.

"You shouldn't," said Patrice. "Not yet. You don't want to be called out."

"Called out?"

"It's common. If you are present, and someone calls you out, you really should fight them. And while you've learned and grown a lot, you aren't yet ready."

"Can't I just say 'No'?"

"Sure," he said, pausing a little, "but if you do, you have no chance of earning any respect with the older kids. You need them on your side if you're to get around this Sebastian thing."

"Has he ever called you out?"

"Never."

"Why?"

"Because he knows he will lose."

"That's not how he sounded yesterday."

"He's all talk," said Patrice. But he didn't sound as sure of himself as he usually did.

"I still want to go," insisted Aisha.

"I can't stop you, but I can only ask you not to."

His words were on Aisha's mind all day, and she couldn't focus on her classes. Why did he want to prevent her from going to the fights? What if she took someone on, and lost? There was no shame in that. And if she put up a good fight, she'd earn a lot of respect. And just like the combat simulations with Simms -- if she only ever practiced against one person, then she'd only ever be good at combat with that person.

She resolved to go. There was open competition in the makeshift dojo that night.

Then she remembered Patrice, and his face full of concern telling her that she shouldn't. She didn't want to let him down, but--

"Wake up," said Soo-Kyung. "You're a light year away."

"Sorry," said Aisha. "I just don't know what to do."

"Do what your heart tells you."

"It tells me conflicting things."

"Then sort them out, but keep your brain focused on your proper work."

As always Soo-Kyung was right. Annoyingly so. Aisha sighed. Whatever would she do?

* * *

I'm going to regret this, she thought as she slipped out the apartment. Soo-Kyung was in the shower, so she could be at her destination before her friend suspected anything.

She'd slip in the back and find a discrete spot just to *watch*. It should be easy.

Sure enough, the room was full, and the open space was divided into four areas where students would match up against each other using the padded bos.

Sebastian was nowhere to be seen. She felt a little vindicated,

The concept was simple. Win, and you stay on the mat. Lose, and you go to the back of the challengers line. Some of the challengers

were hopelessly overmatched and barely lasted a few seconds against their attackers.

One boy, David, was amazing. His speed was unmatched. Even Patrice would look slow up against him. He also exuded calm -- watching his opponent, measuring them, and figuring out the combination that would take them down. He then executed flawlessly, taking them out of the fight effortlessly. His skills were apparent in his ability to simply apply the correct amount of force to take out his opponent. No more, no less. And he was always perfect.

Challenger after challenger faced him, and each was taken out with machine-like precision.

She must not have noticed Sebastian coming in, but suddenly he was at the front of the line. David smiled, and took up his defensive stance, treating Sebastian like any other. The other bouts finished, and all eyes were on this matchup.

Word must have gotten around the school, because more and more people poured in to watch. Aisha found herself being pushed to the front.

David and Sebastian faced each other across the mat. Diametric opposites, David stoic and focused, Sebastian pandering to the crowd and posing.

Brashly, he turned his back on David and gesticulated to the crowd, getting them to cheer. If nothing else, Sebastian was quite the showman.

His eyes caught Aisha's and he made the sign of drawing a finger across his throat. He then pointed directly at her and smiled.

Some eyes slipped her way, but when she tried to look at them, they'd look away. Nobody wanted to be associated with Sebastian's enemy. She tried to slip away through the crowd, but they pulled together, stopping her. Now his plan was apparent. He'd beat David, and then call her out.

He snarled a little and turned to instantly attack David. The surprise didn't work; David was ready for him. He parried the blow, and turned to counter. Sebastian was ready for it, and met it with a parry of his own. While David was momentarily stunned, Sebastian turned his shoulder to hit David's jaw.

David was rocked backwards, and Sebastian pressed the attack. David managed to hold him off, parrying with desperation. Finally, he got a counter blow, which hit Sebastian in the midriff. Sebastian grunted hard, and doubled up.

Don't be fooled, David, Aisha almost screamed.

David came out of his stance and approached Sebastian. "Are you okay?"

In a fluid flash, Sebastian turned his body lengthways and brought it up, hard and fast, directly into David's chin. The blow was so strong that Aisha saw David leave his feet. He was instantly out. Sebastian wasn't taking any chances, and he swung a haymaker, connecting with the side of David's head.

David hit the ground, limp. His body stiffened up, his hands forming claws. Aisha ran from the crowd and dropped and cradled his head. She reached into his mouth and grabbed his tongue, to prevent him from swallowing it.

David opened his eyes, dazed. "What--"

"It's okay," she said. "You're going to be okay."

She turned to the crowd. "Somebody call the infirmary!"

"Oh look," said Sebastian. "Someone else on my mat. I guess that means you have to fight me, Little Black Girl."

He tossed her the bo.

"Or are you afraid of your superiors? There's no shame in running back to your little hole."

"He needs help!"

"No, little girl," snarled Sebastian. "*You* do."

Even though she was still kneeling, cradling David's head, Sebastian swung at her. She ducked, but it wasn't enough to make him miss completely. The blow was like a bright light, and she fell sideways, still cradling David's head.

"Nicely done," mocked Sebastian, "but there's no second-time lucky."

He lifted to swing again, but before he could hit her, Aisha heard a voice.

"No!"

A half-smile appeared on Sebastian's face. Patrice walked out of the crowd onto the mat.

"Enough," he said. "David needs help. And I am not going to let you just hit an unarmed girl."

"The arm is right there. She can pick it up if she wants," mocked Sebastian.

"No," said Patrice, evenly. "Not today. This fight is over. Step aside."

"No way," snarled Sebastian. "And you know the rule. Step onto the mat, and you have to win it."

He tossed his Bo to Patrice, and reached to pick up David's one. He took his defensive stance. "Let's do this."

Patrice stood straight, looking into Sebastian's eyes.

"I said 'No,'" he said, trying to keep the emotion out of his voice. Aisha could hear the undertone of anger.

He took the bo and snapped it over his knee.

"I am not doing this, Sebastian," he yelled. "Stop this, now!"

"No," said Sebastian, "not this time."

He swung, catching his new opponent hard to the side of the head. Patrice staggered sideways, and Sebastian hit him again, and again. A fourth hit, and Patrice went down, dazed.

Sebastian stood over him and swung the bo down, like an axe. Patrice rolled so it hit him on the side. He tried to get to his feet, but Sebastian knocked him down again. He swung low and wide, hitting Patrice on the chest.

Aisha heard him gasp, and the cracking sound that could only be a broken rib. Patrice rolled onto his knees, gasping in pain, and Sebastian hit him on the back of the head. The force of the blow rolled him onto his back.

His eyes met Aisha's. She could see the pain there, the fear.

Sebastian saw it too. He prowled around Patrice, twirling the bo over his head. "It's so much better seeing you like this, Little Patrice," he said. "Good to see you going down, Little Canuck."

He was going to hurt Patrice. Beating him wasn't enough.

She had to *do* something.

The broken bo lay near her. A plan formed in her mind.

It felt like time was crawling. She watched as Sebastian raised his bo. Patrice lifted his hands -- part in defense, part in pleading.

She picked up the bo that Patrice had snapped. The end was splintered badly.

Sebastian began his downswing. Patrice's eyes -- those beautiful eyes that were full of intelligence and compassion -- widened in terror.

There was only one thing she could do. It might be the end of her time in the school, but she wasn't going to let Sebastian hurt Patrice any more.

With all her strength, she stabbed Sebastian in the back of the knee with the splintered end of the bo.

He screamed and broke his swing.

With all her strength she twisted the bo. She felt it splinter further, and heard the sound of tendons ripping. Sebastian screamed and twisted around to see her. She saw the snarl of hate and pain on his face. He tried to change his swing to hit her, but she twisted the bo again.

"No," said Patrice. "Aisha, don't"

But she did. Lifting the bo with all her strength, she pulled Sebastian's leg from under him. He passed out from the pain before he hit the ground.

She looked back at Patrice's eyes. She could see his pain. More than the broken ribs. More than the blows he had received from Sebastian.

It's what she had done. It's what she had gotten herself into.

"I'm so sorry, Patrice," she said. "I'm just so sorry."

His eyes rolled, and his skin went pale. "Aisha," he said weakly.

"I'm sorry, Patrice. I never knew this would happen."

"Aisha," he said again, but his eyes rolled again and he passed out.

CHAPTER 15

Recovery

Always remember that the difference between an adult and a child, or the difference between a human and an animal, is one's willingness to take responsibility.

By that I mean that you need to own your situation. For good or for ill. Too many people are extremely talented, and they think their talent is enough, and that others will do whatever is necessary for everything to be completed, freeing them up to express their talent in an optimal way.

That is not taking responsibility. My dear daughter, be responsible in everything that you do, from the smallest detail to the biggest impact.

Be more like the uneducated, unprivileged person who works hard to provide for their family, than like the exceptional person who does well at everything, but exudes disdain for everyone around them...

OF COURSE, AS SOON AS it was all over, the authorities came into the gym and started to enforce some order.

"You're too late," said Aisha, her head spinning from the blows she had received from Sebastian.

With her adrenaline surge coming to an end, she just felt dizzy. Sleepy, even. She just wanted to lie down. Soo-Kyung ran out of the crowd and cradled her head in her arms.

"Aisha," she said, urgently. "Look into my eyes."

She tried, but her friend was blurry. "Tired," said Aisha. "Just want to sleep."

"No! Stay awake, stay with me."

A medic pushed Soo-Kyung aside and started shining a light into Aisha's eyes. It hurt. It all seemed too far away, and she just decided to leave them, to drift off and be comfortable.

"Concussion," said the medic. "Bad one. Better get her to the infirmary. Try to keep her awake."

She felt a pinch on her arm. Soo-Kyung pinching and twisting. It hurt. But she didn't care.

"I'll get you for that," she said, but wasn't sure if it was out loud. After that she felt herself floating away, caring less and less, until everything turned black.

* * *

She woke in a strange bed, with a strange face looking down at her. "You got a thick skull, that's for sure."

"Where am I?"

"Infirmary. I'm Doctor Anderson. You came in last night with a doozy of a concussion. Good news is we gave you a CAT scan, and you're all clear. Nothing to worry about. Head wounds are weird like that. Sometimes life threatening, sometimes just a good night's sleep. Luckily for you, you're in the latter."

He spoke a lot, that doctor. After a while, his words just blurred in her mind. She got the gist of it. The blows from Sebastian's bo were enough to give her a concussion, but she wasn't too badly hurt.

"You'll have a headache for a couple of days, of course," said Anderson, peering at her over the rims of his glasses, "and some light sensitivity. But you'll be fine. You're made of stern stuff, Miss Parks."

"Thanks," she croaked. "My friends?"

"Which ones? The other concussions or the mangled leg?"

"Concussions."

"Ah, so the mangled leg was your handiwork, was it? I heard a girl did it to him. His ego will never live it down, but between you and me the little pillock had it coming."

She laughed a little.

"I see," he said, a mocking tone in his voice. "Remind me to play poker with you some day. You are *so* easy to read."

"The others?"

"Well, Mister Smith got the worst of it. We brought him in at the same time as you" -- he looked at his watch -- "a good eight hours ago, and he hasn't woken up yet. We gave him a CAT scan, and there're signs of brain trauma. We just have to wait. Usually these things work themselves out, but we have to wait and see."

"Oh, Patrice," she said, not realizing it was out loud. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry? Why sorry? From what I heard if you hadn't stopped that guy it would have been a lot worse."

"But it's my fault he was there."

"He's a good boy, a smart boy," said Anderson. "I've encountered him many times. If he was there, he was there because he *wanted* to be there. Don't go looking for blame. Just try to get better."

* * *

She must have slept after that, because suddenly he was gone. She turned in her bed, and saw Soo-Kyung and David sitting beside her. Soo-Kyung was asleep, head drooped down over her chest.

"Hey," said David. "You're awake."

He elbowed Soo-Kyung and she woke instantly.

Aisha was never happier to see her roommate. "Hi," she croaked.

"Hi yourself," said Soo-Kyung, smiling broadly. "How are you feeling?"

"Confused. How long?"

"It's been about twelve hours," said Soo-Kyung. "But the doctor told us you were awake a few hours ago. You need your rest, so just relax, okay?"

"Patrice?"

"He's not awake yet," said David, sadly. "But I heard what you and he did for me, and just really want to thank you."

He reached out a hand, and she took it in hers. She tried to grip him, and only then realized how weak she felt.

"Friends forever," he said. "If you ever need anything, and I mean *anything*, I am at your service."

"A café latte would be nice," said Soo-Kyung.

"Not *you*," laughed David.

"Doesn't her roommate count too?"

"Not this time."

"Boo!"

They laughed a little, and Aisha couldn't help but smile.

"Everything's going to be okay, isn't it?"

"You know that was out loud, don't you?" Soo-Kyung smiled and winked.

"Uhh."

"And yes, it is," she continued. "Everything is going to be fine, but please, just get some sleep."

She wanted to say 'okay', but her mind slipped away again, and before she knew it she was drifting off to sleep once more.

* * *

It took a few days before they let her out of bed, and the first place she went to was Patrice's room. He was still out cold.

"It's not exactly a coma," said the nurse. "It's just like a long sleep. He has woken up once or twice, and spoken a little gibberish."

Aisha sat by the bed, and when the nurse left, she reached out and grabbed his hand. Lowering her head onto the bed, with his hand against her forehead, she whispered. "I'm so sorry, Patrice. I should have followed your advice. I should never have gone there. Please wake up, so I can tell you to your face. There are so many things I want to tell you. There's so much that I want you to know. Please just wake up."

CHAPTER 16

Principal

My mother always made me read the Bible. Every day or every night, I had to do it. As a child it was really hard to understand everything in it. I focused on the stories, like Job and his suffering, or Jonah and the Whale. She insisted it was a 'big fish', and not a whale, because that's what the Bible said. She liked to take it literally, at face value, not realizing that such an approach to the book led to most of the inconsistencies.

But one thing I remember reading, because it hit me at the core of my being, was this advice: "Let your yes be yes, and your no be no, anything else comes from the Evil one."

That became a cornerstone of my life, and it, more than anything else, allowed me to become the man I am. And I pass that down to you, my dear daughter. Integrity comes from what you say as much as what you do. Let your yes be yes. Let your no be no. Speak the truth, and handle the consequences...

SHE VISITED THE HOSPITAL every day, but still there was no sign of life from Patrice. He just lay there, sometimes with his eyes open, looking at the ceiling, sometimes with his eyes closed and an expression of supreme peace on his face.

She spoke to him more in this condition than she had ever spoken to him when he was awake.

It was the end of her free period, and she had flight training next, a class that she couldn't miss under any circumstances. She squeezed his hand, and wanted to kiss his forehead, but wasn't sure if it was the right thing. So she just gently touched it, and wished him well.

"See you soon," she said. "And we'll have Soo-Kyung's famous noodles."

She left the infirmary, padding her way down the corridors towards the ladders that would take her upwards toward the hub of the station.

An adult was waiting for her. "Cadet Parks?"

"Yes, Sir."

"You are wanted in Colonel Carter's office, immediately."

Colonel Carter? The brash man that had welcomed them to the school. It was only a few weeks before, but it felt like a lifetime ago.

"What does he want?"

"No idea, Cadet. He just wants you there, double speed."

"But I have flight training!"

"Are you disobeying his orders?"

"No, Sir. No. Sorry."

The soldier nodded and went on his way.

She had no idea where the principal's office even *was*. She called up her link, and it directed her towards the first wheel of the station. Logically, it would be where administration was set up, because it was the first section put in place.

Not wanting to miss a lot of her class, she jogged to the first wheel. Then, climbing up to one of the inner sections, she was guided to his office.

It was spartan and functional. Much like him, she imagined.

She knocked.

"Come!"

She opened the door and entered. "Sir, you wanted to see me, Sir."

"Yes, Cadet Parks, come in."

"Sir, I didn't realize you were the principal too, Sir."

"I'm not, I'm just using his office."

"Sir, yes, Sir."

She stood, mimicking military attention as best she could. He smiled slightly.

"At ease, Cadet."

She relaxed a little.

"Do you know why I called you here?"

"Sir, no, Sir."

"Yes you do."

"Sir, I can only speculate, Sir."

"Then speculate."

"Sir, it's about the incident in the dojo, Sir."

"You speculate correctly. Do you know what you did to that boy?"

"Sir, do you know what he did to David? To Patrice? To me? I was only defending myself, Sir."

"You didn't answer the question."

"Sir, sorry, Sir."

"Well you don't know what you did to him, because nobody does. So I'll tell you. You damaged his leg so badly that he'll be lucky to ever walk again. He's quite useless in weightless conditions, so I had to graduate him early."

"Sir, graduate him early, Sir?"

"As in, send him back to Earth. He's been back before for bad behavior, but his father fixed things up with the regents so he could return. Now, there's no point in him returning. He'll never be able to be a cadet again."

"Sir, yes, Sir."

"That's all you can say?"

Aisha didn't know how to respond. It was clear that Sebastian was a problem, not just to her, but to the Academy as a whole. She had almost done them a favor.

"Good," he said. "If you have nothing smart to say, say nothing at all."

She stayed silent.

"Okay," he continued. "Take a seat. Off the record, tell me what went on between you two. Spare no details. This is important."

"Sir, off the record, Sir?"

"Yes, and you can drop the 'Sir' for this."

"Sir, thank you, Sir."

He smiled. "So, spill the beans."

She told him about the incident on the way up, the way he had been snotty with Soo-Kyung, and how Soo-Kyung had blanked him. His cold, icy, reaction afterwards had her fearing his behavior.

Then, she told him about the encounter in the cafeteria, and his attempt to intimidate her. How she had remained resolute, and then how she finally broke when he taunted her with racism.

Finally, the incident in the dojo -- where he had engineered a situation that would get her on the mat. His brutality with David aside, he was clearly gunning for her. And when Patrice jumped in to save her, how Sebastian attacked him.

It left her no option but to finish the fight.

"What did you say?"

"I had to finish the fight. I have always learned to never start the fight, but always finish it."

Carter almost smiled when he said, "Go on."

"I knew that if he was going to be this brutal *in front of an audience*, that if he was foiled this time by, say, adult intervention, that the possibility of him being much nastier in private was a distinct one."

"So, you stopped him."

"The only way I knew how. I knew it would probably get me kicked out of here," she said, tears flowing involuntarily from her eyes, "but if that's the price I had to pay, that's the price I have to pay."

Carter leaned back in his seat, regarding her thoughtfully. His next action surprised her. He touched his link and spoke into it.

"Heard enough?"

"Yes," came a gravelly voice on the other side. "I'm coming in."

The door behind her cracked open, and she turned to see a man walking in. He took a seat beside Carter, and despite herself, she gasped.

His kindly smile made his brown eyes light up, and his greying hair was in deep contrast to his dark brown skin.

"I'm Ezra Higgins," he said in his deep voice. "Pleased to meet you."

She reached out and shook hands.

"I'm Principal of this Academy."

CHAPTER 17

Higgins

And there's where I end my letter my dear daughter. There's where I have the last words that I will ever say to you. Someday, I know you will read these. Someday, I hope you understand them and take them to heart.

Don't obey these words because I wrote them. Take them as guidance in finding your own way around what is right and what is wrong. Choose your own path, and stick with it.

Once you've done that, I'll know that my life was lived fully, and that I can rest happy, knowing that you are going to be the only thing we can ever be: A good person.

Your loving Father.

SHE REALIZED THAT HER mouth was hanging open.

"Is it so unusual that a black man could be Principal?"

"No," she replied, hesitant. "It's just that I thought *he* was." She pointed at Carter, and then, unsure of herself, added, "Sir."

"Well, Carter is the public face because it keeps the sponsors happy," said Higgins. "But, I'm the real principal."

"Why would you hide that, Sir?"

Carter interjected, "Have you seen who sponsors this station and everything in it? They're all whiter than I am."

"But, surely, it's an international station, sanctioned by the UN?"

"Sanctioned by them, but not *paid for* by them," said Higgins. "But you're asking the wrong questions."

She stopped for a moment. What did he mean by 'The wrong questions'? She looked at both men again. Their eyes were piercing into hers, but it wasn't quite an interrogative thing. There was almost affection in them. Curious and curiouser.

But there was something *odd* in what they were saying. Why would the world's billionaires invest in a station *that they would send their kids to*? Surely, a much better investment would be something that they could make more billions off of, unless--

"There's an opportunity here for them, isn't there?"

Higgins nodded kindly. "Go on," he said, gently prodding her.

"Something that would even have Sebastian's family *making* him return here after he iced out. Some kind of opportunity?"

And then it dawned on her. The interstellar travel. They were *close*. Maybe even closer than Patrice had suspected.

"Other worlds," she said. "They'll get their family here to claim other worlds. When we landed on the moon we planted a flag claiming it for the USA. They're going to plant their family name here."

"That was the agreement with the UN," said Higgins. "They'd get *permission* from the UN to build this station and the Space Elevator and everything else, but in return--"

"In return they'd *own* space," she interrupted. "And everything in it. Every new discovery. Every new world we might find."

"Nations are already failing on Earth. The concept is dying," said Higgins. "The wars in Korea and elsewhere proved that. It's only a matter of time."

"So they're getting themselves in place for the next phase of civilization."

"Exactly," said Higgins. "And to make themselves the new royalty of humanity for the foreseeable future. Maybe forever."

"So why did they allow open enrollment, for people like *me* to come up here?"

"That's an excellent question," said Carter. "And the answer is simple. They did it because I maneuvered them into it."

"How?"

"What use is royalty without vassals? Better to have their kids commanding the best that humanity has to offer instead of just having each other."

"That's what Soo-Kyung thought. That we'd be their cannon fodder."

"A remarkably perceptive young woman," nodded Higgins.

"But why did you do it? Why did you maneuver them into getting us up here?"

"Because we thought there'd be young people on Earth who *weren't* born into privilege but who would be much *better* at what we really need up here. Who would be much better at exploring the galaxy in the name of mankind."

"And are we?"

"Jury is still out."

He smiled, and she couldn't help but return it.

"So," he continued, "we are growing something new up here. A new society, a new way of thinking. *They* might think that because they paid for all of this that they *own* it. In reality, they'll still likely own *most* of it. But we want to make sure that there's a possibility for freedom to continue as we take our first steps into space."

She heard the awe in her own voice. "A new society?"

"The concepts of governing peoples on the surface of a planet will soon be out-of-date and irrelevant. How do you have a *democracy* when people are light years apart? How do you have *communism* when you don't have closed communities? How do you ensure a monarchy can thrive across great distances?"

"So what are you proposing?"

"That good people figure it out by living and breathing up here. It's not realistic that *everybody* gets a say, so what if we choose people who are smart, compassionate and fair-minded. What if we bring them up here and make *them* the first to go to the stars? To give *them* exposure to what we might encounter out there? And let them figure it out for themselves and tell *us* what civilization should look like?"

"And you want *me* to be a part of that?"

He didn't answer, and instead his voice grew serious. "There's one more thing," he said, choosing his words carefully. "The people who do that have to be able to leave behind the

trappings of the past. You can't move forward if you are dragged back by societal baggage."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look at you for an example. When you first saw me you were shocked because I am African-American. Because I am black."

"It's just that everyone made a big deal of me being the first--"

"Everyone is not here in this room. *You* are."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to--"

"And what tipped you over the edge in your encounter with Sebastian. In your own words, it was because he used a word that should never be used."

"And it shouldn't. He was wrong to--"

"But he didn't actually *say* it, did he?"

"He intimated as much."

"And by hinting that he *might* say a word, he completely manipulated your reactions. Engineered *you* into a situation where you might have gotten seriously hurt, and Mister Patrice Smith is still in the infirmary."

"Are you saying we should just allow people to use that word, and not react?"

"Millions of people on Earth use it every day, in songs, in speech, online."

"But they are--"

She stopped, and began to see what he was getting at. If rules permitted a set of behavior acceptable for one race but simultaneously intolerable for another (leading to violence) then the baggage of society would prevent something *new* from emerging as humanity took its first steps out into the stars.

"So what are you suggesting?"

"I'm *suggesting* that if you want to be a part of this that you realize that there's only *one* race: The Human Race. I'm *suggesting* that in order to go forward there's a lot you have to leave behind. Are you willing to do so?"

"I think so. I just need to figure out what a 'blank slate' looks like. We are, after all, a product of our upbringing."

"Good," he said, nodding. "You do that."

"So," Aisha continued. "Does that mean I have to drop all the 'Sir, yes, Sir' stuff? Because that's a trapping of the militaristic past too, is it not? Loyalty of vassals had to be continually demonstrated, as they weren't expected to have the intelligence to grasp and understand a plan, and blind obedience was preferable."

Higgins laughed, and Carter smiled a little before saying, "Don't push it."

The Principal cast a glance sidelong at Carter, who returned it. He nodded. "I think she's ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Your young friend Seamus is very good at hacking records, but not as good as he thinks."

"He told me my records were locked."

"Yes, and he fell for the public story about your roommate. I assume she has told you the truth by now?"

Aisha wasn't going to betray a secret or get lulled into doing so. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Carter said, "Of course."

He reached into his desk and pulled out a paper envelope that appeared to be thickly stuffed with a paper letter.

He continued with a mild, sarcastic tone. "I suppose you don't know about your own records being locked and sealed deeper than Satan's belly button, either?"

She smiled, raised an eyebrow. "Sir, no, Sir. Of course not, Sir."

He threw the letter across the table to her. When it landed, she could see her own name, handwritten.

"What is this?"

Higgins interjected. "We served in Korea alongside a wonderful man by the name of Roman Parks. Your father."

She touched the letter tenderly. "My father?"

The handwriting on the envelope must be his. He had written it for her, but he had left it with these people.

"We made an agreement," said Higgins. "Should anything ever happen to us, that we would look after each other's children. When

you were born, he knew you were special. And he knew that all of *this* was going to happen.”

“What?”

“So we made sure that we got involved. That we came here. He was a part of it too, in the early days. It was *his* idea that we try to give civilization a new face among the stars. His idea to save the future of mankind by taking this opportunity to leave the past behind.”

Aisha couldn't speak. She held the letter tenderly in her hands. Brushed her fingers against the ink. He had touched this. He had held it too.

“He prayed that someday you could be a part of this. That you would grow up to be able to come here and thrive. And having spoken with you for the last few minutes, I can see that you can. That you are as strong, smart and independent as he was. He would be so proud of you, Aisha. Don't ever forget that, and please help us continue the work that he started.”

She felt the tears leap to her eyes as she looked at him, and then looked back to the letter in her hand.

“You should go now,” he said, gently. “And read it. We'll talk again soon.”

In a blur she left his office and made her way back to her apartment, trying not to make eye contact or speak with anyone. Mercifully, Soo-Kyung wasn't home, so she flopped on her bed and turned on her window, showing scenes of home.

She held the letter tenderly, and, being careful not to tear or damage, it she opened it. She could smell the paper, and a faint hint of cologne. His smell.

She brought the paper to her nose and inhaled, trying to remember him, trying to connect with him through the smell. Visions of warmth and love came to her mind. She was much too young to have formed distinct memories. But the instinct of being held by a parent, that safe feeling...

Opening her eyes, she unfolded the paper and went to the first page. She was scared to read it, but also determined to understand every little thing that her father had had to say.

My Dearest Aisha:

I don't even know how to begin writing this letter. I look at you now, sleeping in your crib, so small and so helpless, and I wish I could be there when you take your first steps. I wish I could see it when you go to school for the first time. I wish I could hold you when you come home crying for the first time, realizing that the world is a bigger and badder place than you could have ever imagined.

But I won't be. The disease that is tearing through my body will take me away from you soon. And I'm so very sorry. But, so that I won't be a distant and mysterious memory, I'm writing you this letter.

For you have a destiny. A bright and wonderful destiny...

PART TWO
A Step into the Darkness

CHAPTER 1

A Team of Four

It's great to have finally met her, isn't it?

Yes, and she's everything he could have hoped for.

But you didn't tell her everything did you? You didn't tell her the whole truth.

She can handle the whole truth. She just can't handle it, yet.

IT BECAME A DAILY ritual for Aisha to read at least a little of the letter from her father. Her heart fluttered every time she opened it. It was like he was there with her. Like he had been with her all along and had never left. It felt good.

After her conversation with Higgins and Carter, she also felt connected with them, like they were an extended part of her family. No longer was she alone up here but for Soo-Kyung and some other friends -- she had someone. Upon reflection, she never really had anyone in her life. Friends were transitory, and her mother was so engrossed with bringing up Aisha that there was no real connection other than that of practicality.

That small epiphany made her realize all the more how much she missed her mother. And it made her even more ashamed of her embarrassing behavior. Mother had spent her entire life scrimping to make ends meet. With Aisha qualifying for such an important school, with a full scholarship, against racial and societal odds, of course she'd be proud. And of course she'd brag about it.

Aisha felt a brief pang of shame at how she had treated her. She wished she could hold her mother right now. She remembered her frantic goodbye waving and blown kisses, and to Aisha it felt like a lifetime ago.

It's only been a couple of months. Have I changed so much in that time?

Daily, she sat by Patrice's bed, reading him the letter from her father.

"This is the most important thing in my world, right now," she said, quietly holding his hand. "And I want to share it with you. I hope you can hear it. I hope you can someday read it with me, and help me to understand everything that he wanted me to be."

As always, he lay, unresponsive, and the soft beep of the machine monitoring his heartbeat was the only sound to be heard.

* * *

After class, her link pinged her to attend a meeting in a part of the station she had never been to before. She looked at it curiously -- it was in the tenth wheel, where the rotation was set slower than hers, leading to about one-sixth of normal gravity, simulating conditions on the moon.

It could only be Carter and Higgins with the beginning of the new training they had alluded to. She made her way towards it, noticing Soo-Kyung ahead of her.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," replied Soo-Kyung. "How's Patrice? I didn't get a chance to check in on him today, though Seamus said he saw him."

"No change."

"Sorry."

"It's okay. What brings you here?"

"A weird message on my link inviting me to a meeting in wheel ten, sector two."

That was odd. Aisha assumed it was Higgins and Carter meeting with her, but why would Soo-Kyung be there too?

"Is that why you're here, too?"

Aisha hesitated a moment. "Yes," she said. "But I thought it might be something else."

"Something else? Sounds like you know what it might be for?"

"No," said Aisha. "But I thought I did."

"And what was that?"

"Long story."

"I know, are you ever going to tell me? Since you got called before the Principal for busting Sebastian's leg, you've been a bit cagey, like you have something to hide. Did they do something to you?"

"No, it's not like that. It's just....I don't know how to explain it. They have something they're working on that they gave me a peek at, confidentially."

"Ah, I see. So you thought this might be something to do with that?"

"Yeah."

Soo-Kyung nodded, satisfied. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

"No," Aisha smiled. "Sorry, I haven't been a great friend recently."

"It's okay. I don't expect you to. You have a lot on your mind."

"You have no idea."

"Then let me in. A burden shared is a burden halved."

Aisha smiled. "I will."

Soo-Kyung nodded and did that little half-bow that Aisha had begun getting used to. She almost found herself doing it on occasion.

In silence, they walked the rest of the way. When they finally reached their destination, it was a hangar populated by mean-looking fighter-like ships. A few other cadets were there, and Aisha recognized David, Ronaldo and Seamus.

"They're called Phaetons," said Carter from a balcony overlooking the hangar. Grabbing the banisters of the ladder-like stairs, he slid down to talk with them face to face.

"Each of you has been chosen to form a special task force; a team within a team in the Academy."

She saw unsure looks from the others. Seamus raised an eyebrow with an expression on his face that read 'Here it comes.'

"Don't be so surprised," continued Carter. "You've all known there was more to this *Academy* than met the eye. Some of you have been here from the beginning, some of you have just arrived after open enrollment. The important thing is that the real work of the Academy will be done in secret. And you've been invited to take part."

"What is the real work?" asked Seamus.

"I'll answer that when I get your commitment. Either you are in or you are out. Either way, you have to keep the very existence of this program an absolute secret."

"Even from others in the Academy?"

Carter almost smiled. "*Especially* from others in the Academy. The first rule about this program is that nobody talks about the program. Not now. Not ever. Whether you are in or not, any word about this program will lead to instant....graduation. You got me?"

He looked around the room. "If you are out, you are free to go now."

He waited another moment. Nobody left.

"Good," continued Carter. "I know we chose you wisely. To answer your question, my young Irish friend," he nodded towards Seamus, "the purpose of the program is simple: To explore the stars, and help humanity find our place amongst them."

Gasps went around the room.

"And before you ask," said Carter, "the answer is 'yes'. We recently perfected the jump drive. We can send people to the Oort Cloud where they can make the jump to other stars in a matter of hours instead of months. Trials are continuing as we speak."

Seamus gestured to the fighter planes around the hangar. "What are these?"

"These," said Carter, "are our primary ships for interstellar exploration. We have a carrier ship that will carry them, and you, to other stars. They have in-atmosphere capabilities, so you will be able to explore the surfaces of other planets."

"They are military craft," said Soo-Kyung. "Well armed."

"Well," said Carter. "We don't exactly know what you're going to face out there, so we need you to be well prepared."

* * *

They were split into squads of four, with Carter explaining that each ship had a three-person crew. The fourth was primarily an engineer who maintained the ship and its complex software systems. The fourth was also the primary backup for the three other roles.

Aisha was relieved when Carter announced her team. She would work with Soo-Kyung and David as her co-pilots. Seamus would be their engineer.

"Sorry," she said to him after the announcement. "But I'm happy to be working with you."

"Sorry?" asked Seamus, his voice rising in pitch with his sing-song Irish accent. "This is a dream come true! I'd much rather poke around the guts of one of these things than fly it around. You'll be my eyes and ears out there, and I'll be your heart in here," he said gesturing to the ship's fuselage. "I just wish Patrice could be here."

Her face must have dropped, because he blushed, and apologized.

The four were grouped with Simms, the flight instructor for the first-year cadets. They were happy to see a familiar face.

"You already know that young Mister Murphy will be your support engineer for this plane. Murphy, you'll learn the ropes by working with the folks that designed and built it. Your primary task, early on, will be the software systems that run it. You're not expected to understand how to repair the mechanics, but very quickly, I expect you to get at the heart of the code that runs the ship and helps adapt to the habits of the pilots."

Seamus beamed. "Sir, yes, Sir!"

"Good." He looked at the other three. "As for you, a ship like this can be operated by up to three people, hence the three pods. Any pilot in any pod can control the entire ship, but the optimal configuration is to have one gunner, one navigator and one overseer. The gunner typically takes the left pod, the navigator the right one, and the overseer in the middle. Any questions?"

They looked at each other. David smiled, his open mouth ready.

Simms put his hand up. "I know what your first question is, and the answer is this: Miss Kim will be the gunner. You'll be the navigator, and Miss Parks will be the overseer. Does that work for you?"

They looked at each other, searching for a reaction.

"Of course it works," continued Simms. "Our psych people have been analyzing you for a long time and we picked the teams according to that. So don't be embarrassed. Everybody is doing what they want to do, whether they know it or not. So let's get down to business."

CHAPTER 2

A Coffee with David

We keep using the line about psychological profiling, and they keep swallowing it hook-line-and-sinker.

It's worked so far. It helped bond them into a team.

But what happens when they find out that we're winging it?

Let's just hope they never find out.

AISHA WANTED TO SPEND all of her free time at Patrice's side, but with the new program in place, she found it harder and harder to carve out time to do so. She knew that her grades were suffering, too, but nobody seemed to care, so why should she?

She had left her father's letter in her quarters, but she didn't need it now. It felt like she had memorized the whole thing.

She held Patrice's hand tightly, and said, "He told me to always remember that the difference between an adult and a child, or the difference between a human and an animal, is one's willingness to take responsibility."

Smiling, looking at his eyes, she tried not to cry. "Thank you for taking responsibility for me, for standing in when I didn't need or want you to. Despite that you still did it, and showed that you are more an adult than anyone else around here. Now please, take responsibility one more time, and wake up. There's so much happening now that you should be a part of. You're the best of us. Please wake up and be a part of it."

She felt a hand resting softly on her shoulder. She looked up to see Soo-Kyung, standing over her. Seamus and David stood discreetly in the background, near the door.

"Is it time already?"

"Yes," replied Soo-Kyung softly. "I'm sorry."

She squeezed his hand one more time, and left, walking behind the others slightly so as to wipe the tears from her eyes.

* * *

"I never really thanked you for what you did that day," said David. She had never heard him speak so many words, and his accented English was very delicate.

"You were never the target," said Aisha. "Just the bait in the trap for Patrice and I."

"I know," he said. "And I'm sorry. If I'd known, I never would have stayed on the mat."

"If it wasn't you, it would have been someone else."

"But it *was* me, and it *was* you that rushed in to save me. The doctors said I was lucky I didn't swallow my tongue. I could have choked and died."

He put his hand on her shoulder, resting gently for just a moment, before taking it back.

"You're welcome," she said softly.

"I am happy to be your teammate," he continued. "I know you would have preferred for it to have been Patrice, and I promise that once he wakes up, I'll vacate the seat for him."

"That's kind, but no, you've earned it."

She paused a moment, and continued. "I'll just be happy if he wakes up."

"There's no *if*," he said. "There's *when*. Have faith."

"I'm trying."

"Hey," said Seamus, calling from the other side of the hangar. "It looks like we need a little more time going over the weapons systems. I have to take the ship offline and work with Soo-Kyung on this. It'll take maybe half-an-hour, so if you guys want a break?"

"Sure," said Aisha, and gave him the thumbs up.

"Well," said David. "I am sure you want to visit Patrice. I'll find something to do."

She looked at her link. It was about a fifteen-minute walk back to the infirmary. "No," she said. "I don't have time. Would you like to join me for a coffee?"

David smiled, nodded and gestured to lead the way.

Scattered around the tenth ring of the station were what the adults called 'Micro Kitchens', small areas with basic snack food and drinks. Many of those working on the various projects that were part of the program -- including the Phaeton fighter craft -- didn't have time for full meals, so they'd grab a quick in a Micro Kitchen.

David found one and gestured for Aisha to take a seat while he made coffee.

Soon, he brought it over, smelling it. "This coffee sucks, but it's the best I could do."

She took a sip. "Actually," she said. "It's not *that* bad."

"That's because you're used to American coffee, and that *really* sucks."

"So where are you from?"

"Israel."

"Ah, so I should call you King David?"

He shrugged and smiled. "If you like."

"I notice that a lot of the older kids, like yourself, don't wear flags on their uniforms. I thought it was a standard."

"It probably is, but I don't like to wear mine."

"Why not?"

"It's not a shame thing or anything like that. I love my country. But..." he let his voice trail off for a moment while he looked for the words. "But a lot of other people *do not* love my country, and I thought it would be best not to cause controversy."

"We're supposed to leave all that behind now, aren't we?"

He sipped his coffee and scowled a little. "Yes, but is that really possible? Can we leave behind everything that we are, and still be *who* we are?"

"What do you mean?"

"You are black. Can you leave behind the history of your people? The lessons that blacks in America have learned?"

"We prefer to say *African-American*."

"But that doesn't make sense. What about a person with your skin color who isn't American? Are they a different race?"

"I've always heard that Israelis were direct. I never realized how much until now!"

"I hope I haven't offended you."

She thought about it a moment. Inside was a feeling of righteous indignation. She *should* be offended. But she wasn't. Maybe that was part of leaving things behind. She told David this and he laughed.

"You are a good student," he laughed.

"Not if you look at my grades."

"But seriously," he continued. "I don't think they thought this 'leave stuff behind' through."

"Maybe they did, and maybe just asking us to do it is enough to get us *thinking* about it."

He stopped for a moment. Pondering. "Hmm. You might have a point."

She continued. "I mean things like how we describe race and how we approach race are obvious low-hanging fruit, but maybe there are cultural ingrained things that are valuable to take forward, that we shouldn't leave behind."

"And we can't sift them out unless we really think about them."

"Exactly."

He sipped his coffee and scowled again. "I can see why Patrice liked you."

She blushed. "He did?"

He put the cup down. "Isn't it obvious?"

"We never really talked about it. How well did you know him?"

"We were on the same shuttle up the Elevator, almost four years ago. He was one of the only ones that wasn't awkward around the Israeli kid. He was quiet, but when he spoke he was very passionate." He laughed, recalling memories. "I used to think he was an Israeli, too."

He looked into her eyes and she saw genuine feeling there. "I'll be honest with you," he continued. "Patrice was somebody that we

were all a little shy around. While we all come from rich and powerful backgrounds, his family were head-and-shoulders above most of ours. But he was humble, and while he never flaunted it, the fact that he is who he is made it so that nobody could ever get close to him. We were all a little intimidated, I guess."

She remembered how she had felt when he had explained it to her. How she thought he might be condescending. "I understand what you mean," she said finally.

He nodded and smiled, bringing the coffee cup to his mouth one more time, before putting it down without drinking. "You should come to Israel someday if you like this slop," he said. "But it would ruin you. You'd never drink coffee again."

She laughed. "I'll take you up on that."

"Hopefully he will come with you."

She smiled and blushed again. "David," she said, quietly.

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For the last few weeks, when I think of him, I see him lying in that hospital bed, wondering if he'll ever wake up. But now, when I close my eyes and think of him, I will see him alive again, being *him*. And I will day dream of having your Israeli coffee with him."

"Someday, that daydream will come true. Mark my word."

"I will."

"Until then, we fly together. The least I can do for him is to help keep you safe until the day he wakes up."

He reached out a hand. She took it and shook it.

CHAPTER 3

A Trip to the Moon

The goal is to expose them to everything. Let them see what their species is capable of. Let them understand and make it a part of themselves while they are still young.

The thin line between extinction and expansion.

Yes. Humanity could die on this world. Or, we could take flight to the stars and beyond.

Like a bird leaving the nest.

When some birds get thrown out of the nest by their mother, and fail to fly...

“CONGRATULATIONS on finishing your first semester of *school*,” said Simms, emphasizing the last word as if it left a bad taste in his mouth.

While the older students stayed quiet, the younger ones, including Aisha and Soo-Kyung whooped it up. Simms glared at them, and they quickly quieted down, bringing a small chuckle from the older kids.

Aisha caught David’s eye, and he winked at her before returning his attention to Simms.

“Your *reward*,” continued Simms, “is a little road trip. You’re getting out of here and hitting dirt.”

He looked around the room. Aisha felt her heart go into her mouth. “And before you ask, the answer is ‘No’, we’re not going down to Earth. We are in fact hitting grey dirt. Moon dirt.”

Her eyes widened involuntarily. *Moon dirt?*

"Yep, Boys and Girls, we are going to the moon. So pack your stuff for a couple of nights. This ain't no vacation, but I don't want you stinking up my ship. Be back here in two hours. Go."

They got back to their apartment and started packing.

"I wonder what's on the moon," said Soo-Kyung.

"You what? You wonder what's on the moon. Girl, we're going to the *moon!*"

"I know, but why there? Why now?"

"You think too much."

Soo-Kyung smiled. "You don't think enough."

Aisha had to admit it -- she had a point. Why the moon, and why now? "Well, I'm sure we'll find out soon enough."

"Yes, but it's good to be prepared. Let's not be surprised."

Aisha thought it through for a moment. "I think the odds are good that the starship is being built there. It's a lot easier to construct something big in the low moon gravity, and much easier to launch."

Soo-Kyung nodded. "That makes sense. It must be nearing completion, or they wouldn't be doing this."

"We haven't even trained in the Phaetons yet."

"Perhaps they're motivating us?"

"Do we need any more motivation?"

Soo-Kyung laughed. "Well I know that *I* don't."

"Seamus makes you happy, huh?"

Blushing, Soo-Kyung snapped, "No!"

"Mmm-hmmm"

"No," repeated Soo-Kyung quietly, "it's not like that."

"Like what?"

"Like what you think it's like."

"And what's that?"

"You know."

"No, I don't."

"Now you're just teasing me."

Aisha batted her eyelids. "No, I'm not."

Soo-Kyung punched her on the arm and laughed. Since Aisha had met her, she had never seen her so happy, so light on her feet. There was a positive glow about her, and Aisha had to admit that

she did feel a little jealous. A little lonely. Her thoughts went back to Patrice in the hospital bed, and wondering if he'd ever wake up.

Go to your happy place, she thought. Think of having coffee with him on a beach in Israel somewhere.

Soo-Kyung read her face, and Aisha figured she guessed her thoughts. "He'll wake up soon, and then we can do a double date."

"Oh, so you *are* seeing Seamus."

"No, you'd be with Seamus, *I'd* be with Patrice," she laughed, and ducked the pillow that Aisha threw at her.

* * *

Returning to the tenth wheel, they were guided to a large transport craft that was docked within the weightless hub area. David eyed the ship carefully.

"I've never seen one of this design before," he said, cautiously.

"That's because very few people have," said Simms. "And for the time being, we want to keep it that way."

Aisha wanted to ask why, but there was something in Simms' tone that suggested it would be a bad idea to do so. There was so much secret here, and she wanted to stay a part of it.

They strapped in, and when all were ready, the ship undocked from the station without ceremony.

"We'll be running blind for most of the journey," said Simms when they were underway. "We don't want Earth-side telescopes to see us, and present a lot of questions."

Soo-Kyung, as always, was first to speak up. "So we're not going to the moon base."

"That's right. We're going elsewhere."

"And that is?"

"Well, I didn't want to spoil the surprise, but if you insist -- the construction facility for the Starship is on the dark side of the moon, where she is hidden from prying eyes."

Aisha remembered the astronomy lessons -- the Moon didn't rotate relative to the Earth, so that the same side always faced us. The far hemisphere, typically called the 'dark side', faced away. It

was the ideal place to build something and keep it secret from the people of the Earth below. She couldn't help but be bothered by it. Why keep it such a secret? She figured she'd talk to Carter or Higgins one of these days to get their insight -- if they were willing to share it.

She felt the boost as the ship's engines kicked in, giving them decent thrust away from the station. They'd approach the moon quickly.

Soo-Kyung turned to David and Seamus. "Do you leave the station a lot?"

The two boys looked at each other. "First time, other than a trip home to Earth at the end of my second year," said Seamus.

"I've never left," said David, quietly. "I didn't think I'd leave the station until I graduated. Even all my flying was in simulators. Other than the snub fighters in the hub, of course."

Soo-Kyung couldn't let it go. "And now they're taking us to the moon?"

"Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

Aisha noticed Soo-Kyung sit a little closer to Seamus, and he moved to nudge his shoulder over hers. He smiled at her, and she returned the smile.

He whispered something to her, and she smiled bigger. Her eyes met his, and Aisha loved how they lit up.

She turned away from their private moment, and caught David's eyes as he watched her. Embarrassed, he quickly turned away.

She closed her eyes and tried to sleep. She could only see Patrice lying in his bed, and she wanted to think of him in a different way. How he would have loved this. How he would have loved to be a part of what they were doing. This *program*, so secret that they couldn't talk about it even on the station. It had his name written all over it, but he was stuck in a bed back in the infirmary. It wasn't *fair*. It didn't matter that the one who did it had been punished, both by the damage to his leg inflicted by Aisha and that done by the school which sent him home. None of that brought Patrice back.

She must have dozed off, because the jar of deceleration woke her.

"It's a weak one, but the moon still has a gravity well," said David. "They're hitting it to break."

"I thought you used a gravity well to speed up," said Aisha. "Like a slingshot."

"You *can*," he replied. "But it all depends on how you hit it. You can also lose a lot of acceleration by hitting it the right way, and save a lot of fuel that you'd usually need to decelerate."

Another jar was followed by another. After that, the ship levelled out, and they began to feel some of the effects of gravity.

"We're approaching the base now," said Simms over the intercom. "I'm opening the viewports and taking us out of silent running so y'all can have a look."

On cue, portholes opened behind the passengers. Aisha turned in her seat to look out of hers. They were only a few thousand feet above the lunar surface, and it stretched out to an impossibly close horizon around her. Beneath them, she could see the base where a large ship was under construction.

It was a very similar design to the station, with a central 'shaft' around which several wheels were constructed. It made sense -- this would give them artificial gravity while they were in the weightless conditions of space.

As they spiraled down towards the base, more details began to emerge. Along the shaft of the ship, she could see Phaeton fighters, like the one she was training in.

The base was approaching quickly now, and the spiral course the transport was on led them directly into a large hangar at the side. They touched down gently, and she was on the surface of the moon!

"Everybody suit up," said Simms, "helmets on, seals locked. We're stepping into an airlock, but safety protocol means that we have to be suited up before leaving the ship!"

They followed quickly, and once Simms completed his inspection, he signaled the pilot. The rear hatch opened.

"It's just one small step for an Irishman," said Seamus, mocking Neil Armstrong.

Simms clapped him on the back of the head. "I swear if I had a dime for every time someone said that!"

But Seamus was right. There was an ominous feeling about stepping off the spacecraft onto the surface of another planet. It was just the moon, but it was the feeling of a new beginning. How many more worlds would *she* step on? The door to the universe was swinging open, and hers was the generation waiting to step through.

CHAPTER 4

A Tour of a Ship

By all accounts the jump drive works perfectly.

It would be better to test it more.

But you've seen the readings. You've seen the spectrograph.

Is it possible?

I don't know, but we can't waste another moment.

But the children?

They are wonderful, but ultimately they're expendable.

IT WAS ODD THAT MOST of the base was built beneath the surface of the moon. Given that they had chosen to build it on the dark side, where it was hidden from prying eyes, it seemed a mystery that they would hide it further by burying it.

"Actually, the explanation is simple," said Soo-Kyung when David had pondered it. "The moon has no atmosphere to protect the surface from cosmic or solar radiation. The sun flares often, and that bath of particles could be dangerous. Instead of equipping the base with heavy radiation shielding, it's a lot easier to put it underground, and let the moon's surface protect those within."

Aisha nodded. It made sense. Although it also made sense that the under-construction ship be exposed to the surface. There was no point in protecting it -- it would receive radiation constantly when it was flying between the stars, and they'd have to launch it eventually.

Surprisingly, they were met at the entrance to the underground base by Higgins. If anyone felt surprise at his race, they didn't show it. Perhaps it was because the military was much more integrated than the supposed 'peak' of society, like the Academy's initial inhabitants. Or perhaps it was because they were already trying hard to leave the trappings of the past behind.

By the fact that Higgins introduced himself to them, it was apparent that the others hadn't met him before. This validated his story as being a friend of Aisha's father, and that he was looking out for her specifically in honor of his friend.

She tried to quell the growing self-doubt, hoping that her place here wasn't just because of that attachment, and that she deserved to be where she was.

How the others dealt with her told her that she, at least, had their respect. That would have to be enough.

After introducing himself to them, he proceeded to take them on a tour of the base. Before he could get too far, Soo-Kyung piped up with a question. He smiled kindly on her, like an old uncle. It was clear that he liked interaction.

"Why this location, Sir? Why build the base here of all places?"

"Good question," he said. "The answer is simple. Because it is a place where we found a relatively high concentration of water on the lunar surface."

"Water? There's water on the moon?"

"Not a lot of it, I can assure you," he said. "But enough, particularly in deep craters where parts are in permanent shadow and ice can form, that we can extract it relatively cheaply, and don't have to import it."

"But the main moon base imports all its water, doesn't it? I mean the one the public knows about?"

"Yes, every Space Elevator ride up carries a bunch of water which ends up there."

"Why didn't they build near a deep crater with water in that case?"

"Because their mission is different -- their goal is to be visible, to let the people of the Earth look up and see that we are beginning our walk to the stars."

Soo-Kyung again piped up. "And you need water for more than just supporting a population, don't you?"

Higgins smiled. "You're a smart one, aren't you? The answer is 'yes'. So maybe you can tell me what we use it for?"

"As well as separation into Hydrogen and Oxygen, for fuel and breathing air, I'm guessing you use water for propellant. For launching the ship from the moon's surface."

"Quite right, Young Lady, quite right," he said, clapping her shoulder. "Because the moon's gravity is much less than Earth's, it's much easier to launch a ship from. Thus, we can build a ship on its surface cheaply, and launch it easily."

They entered the base, and he brought them through an airlock that allowed them to remove their helmets and breathe real atmosphere.

The lighter gravity of the moon lost its initial interest, given that their time spent in the low-g environments on the station had conditioned them for it, and somewhat removed the novelty. They had settled into long steps that carried them around the base swiftly, if not gracefully.

The base was primarily designed as a construction site for the starship, and was built functionally. There were no frills, and the accommodations were extremely spartan. Following the similar hub-and-spoke design of the space station, the central hub of the base was at the bottom of the primary shaft of the ship. The 'wheels' of the ship were constructed above the spokes and rim of the base. It made for maximum efficiency, as the parts for the station could be flown in, docked at the rim of the base, and then added onto the ship.

He took them to the very center of the station, and to an observation deck where the engines of the ship were being finished off.

"She's almost done," said Higgins. "She'll be ready for her maiden voyage in a couple of weeks. These are her launch engines. They're not much more than great big kettles, boiling enough water to make steam to provide thrust."

"What happens once we're in space?"

"The main engines can be used for maneuvering, but they'll never be fast enough to get you anywhere interesting. Great for

shuttling between the Earth and the moon, that kind of distance. But even going to the nearest planet, like Mars or Venus, would take weeks or even months."

Aisha spoke up for the first time. "So there's a jump drive."

"Yes," he said, indicating a bulky area of the shaft immediately above the engines. "And that's it. We've done some preliminary testing, and it appears to work well. Using this, the journey from the Earth to Mars could be done in a couple of jumps. Given time to recharge and cool down the drive between jumps, you could probably do it in about half-an-hour."

They gasped. The implications of such a device were enormous. Of course, Soo-Kyung was first to ask the pertinent question. "Is that how you tested it? Have you gone to Mars?"

Again Higgins smiled broadly. "Me personally? No. But some people have. Apparently it's just like the pictures. And there are no Martians. Or should I say *were* no Martians."

"Were?"

"Yes," he said. He looked serious for a moment, and pointed at Soo-Kyung, and then himself, and some of the others. "*We* are the Martians now."

* * *

After touring the ship, they were each given their duties. For the most part, it was a case of familiarizing themselves with the ship and each of its systems. They had to learn paths from the various barracks to the launch bays for the Phaetons, and all the possible combinations thereof. They had to understand each of the major sets of systems for the ship, and should something go down, have basic knowledge in rerouting.

It was a well-designed ship with multiple redundancies and little chance of failure.

In his direct, Israeli way, after a few hours of memorization, David threw up his arms and stated the obvious. "This ship is so safe, that by the time *everything* fails, every backup, every redundancy, we'd all be long dead. So what's the point?"

Everyone laughed a little, then composed themselves under the glare of Simms, though Aisha thought she saw a little amusement on his face.

Thankfully, there was time for a break, and in the name of 'team building', each four-person squad was asked to do it together. Being on the dark side of the moon, there was no chance to see an Earthrise, which disappointed Aisha greatly. But a walk on the surface was what they all agreed they should definitely do.

Anticipation bit her stomach as they reached the airlock and checked their seals for the umpteenth time. Seamus finally pushed the control to suck the air out, and they had to check one final time. With the all clear, once the air was gone, Seamus turned the wheel to open the door.

At first, it looked like a sandy beach. But when she looked up and saw the close horizon and the monochromatic gray and white of the surface, it was clear she was in an alien environment. She had looked up at the moon all her life, but never realized it could look like this.

The base was built deep in a crater, where one side had filled in over the millennia. This gave the crater a semi-circular cliff in darkness to one side of the base, and a gentle slope to the other. They opted to take the slope, and see if they could walk up and around the crater to the top of the cliffs.

"It looks like it'll be about ten miles," said Seamus. "But we can move pretty quickly in this low-'G' environment."

They all agreed, and together they set off, at first in awe at the surroundings, then slowly beginning to talk about it.

"This is our moon," said Seamus. "A mere stone's throw from the Earth, and yet it is completely alien to us. What will it be like on distant planets? Will we really be able to make the jump like they said?"

"There's something so pure and unspoiled about this," said Soo-Kyung. "It's been here for billions of years, untouched, but every action we take changes it."

She turned back and pointed at their footprints, deep in the grey sand. "We're forever leaving a mark."

David looked thoughtful. "Is that a bad thing?"

"It can be both," said Seamus. "It's good for us to make our mark in the universe, but we also have to remember that we don't *own* it. We just live here for a little while."

"There's something that still bothers me," said Soo-Kyung. "Let's get on a local closed channel." The others touched helmets with her to establish the channel. When they were ready, she gave a thumbs up.

Seamus, as always, was looking out for her. "What's up?" Concern in his voice.

"We keep talking about going out to the stars, about exploring. But if it's so easy to go interstellar, why haven't we encountered others?"

"We discussed this--"

"I know, and I'm not satisfied with the conclusions. The odds are, if space travel is so easy, that there are many civilizations that would have discovered it *thousands of years ago*, maybe even *hundreds of thousands of years ago*. So where are they? Why haven't they conquered the galaxy by now?"

Aisha thought about it a moment. "What are you driving at? Do you think it doesn't work? Do you think we can't travel the stars?"

"No," came the response. "I think it can. I worry about--"

"About what?"

"Have you ever seen those videos of the bottom of the ocean? About the fish that are camouflaged so well that they're indistinguishable from rocks?"

"Yeah, they're pretty cool."

"They camouflage like that because there are predators who will devour them. Yet we are here screaming our existence out into space, and now going out to explore further. To perhaps poke the proverbial sleeping dragon."

"Seriously?"

"Why else do you think we're going out there well-armed?"

After that, the conversation lulled while they thought about the implications of what she said. Before they knew it, they had skirted the rim of the crater, and were rewarded with an amazing view from the top of the cliffs overlooking the base.

They stood in awe, watching the view for a while. Aisha noticed Seamus taking Soo-Kyung's hand and the two walked off together for some time alone.

David noticed, too. "Do you think we should head back ahead of them, to give them a little alone time together?"

"Not a bad idea," said Aisha. "But don't think that we are going to--"

He put his hands up to stop her saying anything further. "I understand that most guys might try something, so you might think that's what I meant, but I'm not interested, and I never will be."

Even though she knew what he meant, the words still stung. He must have seen that on her face. "No offense," he said.

"None taken," she replied, unsure if she meant it.

"It's not that you're not attractive, it's just that you obviously love Patrice, and lucky him."

She was a little stunned. Others thought that she *loved* Patrice. Did she? Really? She looked inside herself wondering if that was what she really felt, or was it just sympathy for his position?

Her silence unnerved him, and he continued speaking. "Besides," he said. "There's only one person I'll ever love."

His words broke her out of her reverie, and curiosity took over. "Tell me about her."

"We knew each other since we were this high," he said, gesturing to his thigh. "I think we loved each other before we knew what love even *was*."

He smiled, a little sadly. Something turned in her stomach as she looked into his eyes.

"Go on," she said, hoping she wasn't hurting him.

"What can I say? We went through school together, and there was never a day when we didn't see each other. As we got older, and we realized how special our relationship was, we realized that it was this thing that poets and writers and singers spend so much time describing. Yet none of them captured the true feelings that we had. None of them could put a frame around what love actually is."

He stopped, and sat on a flattened boulder.

"And then the Caliphate attacked Israel. She was on a bus headed back from school. I was at a meeting at my father's company, where they were telling us about the Academy, and my father was pushing for them to take me. The first bombs fell, and the only mercy was that she was killed instantly. She didn't suffer."

"I'm sorry," was all she could muster. It didn't feel like nearly enough.

"I didn't want to come to the academy," he said. "I didn't want to leave her, and there was no place for her here. My parents told me that it was God's will for me to come. That everything, no matter how tragic, was for His perfect will."

She put her hand on his shoulder, and even though they both wore thick padded spacesuits, she could feel him trembling.

"So I came," he said. "More to get away from *them* than anything. Then I learned about this program, and how we can go to the stars. I want to go out there. And every day I'm going to look for their so-called God, and his so-called Heaven."

He looked at her. "And if I ever find him," he said, trying to control his voice, trying not to crack. "I'm going to punch him in the face."

CHAPTER 5

A Name with Meaning

They really are a terrific bunch. It's amazing how we've been able to blend those of privilege from the plutocratic nations with those of different backgrounds.

It's more than just a social experiment.

I know, but look how a smart person like Aisha is able to forget the trappings of the past so quickly, and mesh with the likes of the Kim girl, or the Canadian boy.

They had a rocky start.

True, but look how they've bonded since then.

It's a pity our next move will break her heart then, isn't it?

FOR THE REST of the day, the work was hard but it was joyous. Drill after drill on the ship, learning and understanding its systems. At first they were tedious, but once they became second nature, Aisha and the others were able to relax a bit more and even enjoy them.

David hadn't spoken much since their walk on the lunar surface. He almost seemed embarrassed around Aisha. Like a very private thought of his had surfaced, and he didn't want people to see him 'like that'. She made a point of working closely with him, and referring to him in conversations, but that seemed to put him in his shell all the more.

Their quarters were tiny, barely bigger than the bunk bed and the small shared bathroom. They looked more like a prison cell. But it was a refuge from outside, and Aisha was happy to be sharing with Soo-Kyung again. She wanted solace more than anything, but Soo-Kyung's discretion was the next best thing.

However, discretion wasn't on her mind. As soon as they were alone, Soo-Kyung spoke up. "What happened out there? David hasn't been the same since our walk on the surface this afternoon."

"He shared something from his past," Aisha said, trying to keep as neutral as possible. "And I think he's a bit embarrassed about it. Like he doesn't know why he shared it, and he doesn't want me to know what I know."

Soo-Kyung sat on the bed. "Is it bad?"

"It's sad. But he did nothing wrong. He is angry though."

"I can't ever see David being angry." Soo-Kyung's eyebrows furrowed. "It's just so not him. One of the things I really like about him is how calm and controlled he always is."

"Don't let Seamus hear you say that," Aisha teased.

"Seamus?"

"That there are things you like about David."

"But there are."

"You don't know guys, do you?"

Soo-Kyung slumped on the bed. "No," she said quietly. "I don't."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Think about where I came from. Think about who I am. Do you think a guy my age could ever possibly be honest with me? Those that would claim they liked me were probably prodded into doing so, and maybe some that really did like me were afraid to speak up, so I never really got guys."

"You're probably better off," Aisha smiled.

"Am I? It leaves me in such doubt, I mean Seamus--"

"Seamus is one of the good guys," said Aisha, sincerely meaning it. "One of the really good guys."

"How do you know?"

"Because it's clear that he knows *how* to love. And he loves *you*."

"How can you tell?"

Aisha sighed. "I'm not exactly an expert, but there are guys who would *say* anything, and don't match it up with what they *do*. And there are guys who would *do* anything, but don't match it up with what they *say* or who they *are*."

"And neither of these types are sincere?"

"Exactly. To be honest, most of the time, when you see a sincere guy it's because he's already with someone else. When they aren't with someone, you have to be sure that they are right, and it's really hard to tell."

"So how do you tell?"

"When their words are backed up by their actions," Aisha said. "And when they're willing to wait."

"Willing to wait?"

"As in, not just trying out every girl that they can. Not just basking in the attention that relationships give them, or not just getting into one because everyone else is doing it."

"I see. And if they are willing to be patient in that, they'll be patient in many other, more important, things too?"

"Yes."

"And you think Seamus is like that?"

"I *know* he is."

"And you really think he loves me?"

"For sure. The question is, do *you* love *him*?"

"I think so. I don't know, but I think so."

"Then you probably do."

"How can you be so sure?"

"It's obvious," Aisha smiled. "Because you hesitate. You are thinking of his feelings, you are considering him. You don't want to declare that you love him when you might not, because that would possibly hurt him. And you never want to hurt someone you love, right?"

"Can't I just be compassionate?"

"Something tells me you're passionate. I'm not sure about the 'com' part!"

They laughed, and hugged a little.

Soo-Kyung asked quietly. "Patrice is like that a little bit too, isn't he?"

"I think so, but, I can't tell for sure right now."

"And how about you?"

"Like you, I think I love him, which probably means I *do* love him."

"I can see why. When Seamus talks about him, I see his eyes light up. They were really good friends, and he's hurting to see Patrice the way he is, but also proud of him for what he did."

"Yeah, me too."

They sat in silence a while longer.

"So," said Aisha. "I have a very important question for you."

"Yeah?"

"Did he kiss you?"

"On our walk?"

"Yeah. You guys went off alone for a while."

"We were wearing spacesuits. It's not exactly possible."

"But did he try?"

Her only answer was a smack in the face from Soo-Kyung's pillow, which despite the moon's lower gravity, still hit her with some force.

* * *

The return flight to the station was a quiet one. Most of them hadn't slept well with the lighter gravity, and Aisha and Soo-Kyung had spent most of the night alternating between talking and pillow fighting.

David was still quiet as they departed. He wistfully watched the moon's surface as they took off. He had been rooming with Seamus, and according to him, didn't say a word all night.

When the shuttle docked with the station, it was evening in station time. They disembarked, and Seamus and Soo-Kyung walked ahead, hoping for a little time alone before curfew. David walked ahead alone, and Aisha was left with a choice to let him go, or to spend some time with him in awkward silence.

She decided to give him a try, and she ran up to him and touched his shoulder. "Fancy some lousy coffee?"

Was that the beginning of a smile? But then his eyes and his face hardened, and he looked like he was about to refuse.

She beat him to it. "Please?"

He sighed, and resigned to do it. He gestured towards a bulkhead that led to a nearby micro kitchen.

They sat, and while Aisha sipped at her coffee, David just looked into his, swirling it gently.

"What was her name?"

"Excuse me?"

"You never told me her name. My father died when I was just a few weeks old. He was always nothing to me, just something in the past, until one day my mother told me his name. With his name came the stories about him. And then it was like he was still alive in a way. Like his death didn't sting so bad. He was still gone, she still missed him. But when his name lived on, he was more alive. I hope that makes sense."

He sipped the coffee thoughtfully and didn't squirm.

"Eliana," he said quietly. "Her name was Eliana."

"It's beautiful."

"Thanks. It means 'My God has answered me.'"

"And did he?"

"Did he what?"

"Answer her, by letting you be in her entire life."

He sat quietly, unable to answer. She saw tears welling in his eyes. She rested her hand on his, and he didn't pull away.

"I know her life was short, and was cut short unjustly. But it sounds like she was happy for her entire life. She had something in you that many of us search our whole life for and never find. Maybe her God answered her."

He looked up at Aisha, and a tear spilled down his cheek.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to."

"You're right," he replied, wiping the tear away, and drinking more of the coffee. "I never looked at it that way."

He finished the coffee cup. "Weird," he said. "It doesn't taste so bad now." His mischievous look returned. "Maybe I was drinking my own bitterness."

He gripped her hand a little, before letting go. "*Toda Raba*," he said. "Thank you, in my language."

"You're welcome," said Aisha. "You're welcome in mine."

And then he smiled again, and nodded before leaving the room.

* * *

She looked at her link, and there were still a few minutes before curfew. She really wanted to sit with Patrice and talk to him about everything that had transpired on the moon. About the ship, about David, about Soo-Kyung and Seamus and their conversation about love. There wouldn't be much time, but just a few minutes to be in the same room, to breathe the same air, to touch his hand would have to be enough.

She entered the infirmary, and walked to the room where Patrice was kept. She opened the door and walked in.

The room was empty.

Her heart raced as she ran out to the nurse's station. Was he awake? Was he better? What happened?

And then dread hit her. Was he dead? Had he passed out of the coma? Her stomach went cold, and the run to the nurse's station was the longest she had ever done.

She asked at the station, and saw the look on the nurse's face. That moment of hesitation. The putting on of the mask of professionalism. The preparation for bad news.

No! she screamed internally.

"He's been shipped back to Earth," the nurse said, evenly.

"Why?"

"His coma got deeper. He just isn't responding here, and back home he'll have much better facilities."

"So he's still alive?"

"Oh yes, he's quite alive. But the coma is very deep. The doctor felt that the only chance he had of recovering is to get the best possible care on Earth."

Aisha slumped to a seat. He was *gone*. He was still alive, and she had to be thankful for that, but, he was *gone*. She wondered if she would ever see him again.

CHAPTER 6

A Day of Training

She did a great job with David. She's a terrific leader.

Yes, and sending Patrice home will allow her to grow into her ability.

You think he was a distraction.

In his current state, yes. If he ever wakes, they may be great together.

But until then?

How she has bonded with David, Soo-Kyung and Seamus is the perfect team. Let's keep them together for the time being.

IT NEVER FAILED to give her a rush when she saw the moonscape zoom below, and the blue curve of Earth rise above it. Aisha smiled at its beauty.

Down there, girls her age were wondering about homecoming dances, and what dress they'd wear, or which boy would ask them out. She was much happier here, piloting her ship, zooming at breakneck speeds across the moon, and getting ready to break into deep space.

"I think I see them," said David, navigator and co-pilot sitting in one of the wing pods to her right. "Two-seven-zero karem one-nine-eight."

"Confirmed," came the clipped voice of Soo-Kyung, her gunner. Aisha glanced to the pod on her left and her eyes met Soo-Kyung's. The Korean girl smiled and nodded.

Aisha always wanted a visual confirmation. Comm lines could be hacked and voices faked. Soo-Kyung knew this instinctively. That's what made them a great team.

"Okay," said Aisha. "Weapons hot. Let's check them out."

She punched in the coordinates, and the ship turned towards their target.

"Visual range in five seconds," said David.

"I see them," Aisha replied. Her heads-up display started to light up with targets, squares projected on her canopy, wrapping tiny dots that could easily be mistaken for stars to the naked eye.

"That's a lot of ships," she said, awe sneaking into her voice.

"That's a bloody awful lot of ships," said David.

Soo-Kyung was business as always. "Orders?"

"Can you confirm ship type?"

"They are mostly type-three fighters. About eighty of them."

"What else?"

"A single mothership. That's the target."

"No other fighters?"

"A couple of type-ones, but hard to tell with all the movement."

The fighters were moving around the mothership, following seemingly random patterns, making it hard to get a radar lock.

"Are they moving to intercept?"

"No, Sir."

"Probe the edge of their defense shield."

"Yes, Sir"

David took the ship forward slowly, while Soo-Kyung watched the behavior of the enemy fighters. They knew from experience that these ships could turn from defense to offense in the blink of an eye. If they didn't react, they could find themselves surrounded and destroyed in seconds.

"We are at the edge of previous attack ranges," said Soo-Kyung. "Recommend that we hold at this position."

"Do it."

The ship halted, and they floated in space, watching the enemy.

"Any update on ship types, David?"

"The best I got is maybe two or three type-ones, the rest are definitely type-three."

"Turning radius of type-threes?"

"Two hundred degrees."

"Distance of fighters from the mothership?"

"Average about three hundred clicks."

Soo-Kyung raised an eyebrow. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yes," said Aisha. "Full frontal assault, all shields on front."

"If we leave our back exposed--"

"Hopefully, they won't get a chance. Maximum throttle, straight at the mothership, direct all energy to front shields."

"Including lasers?"

"Including lasers. We're on bullets and torpedoes. Soo-Kyung?"

"Done."

"Good. And fire at will."

"Roger."

"David, punch course in."

"Course, aye."

"Manual control to me."

"Roger."

"Here goes nothing!"

Aisha punched the program, and she felt the lurch as they accelerated forward. She continued its burn, getting faster and faster as they approached the enemy ships.

"Ships turning to intercept."

"Acknowledged."

She saw the enemy ships swarming to intercept. Suddenly their random patterns stopped, and they turned, almost as one, bearing down on her. They opened fire, but the forward shields held.

"Intercept in five seconds," said Soo-Kyung. Aisha marveled at her ability to stay calm, and it seemed the more strenuous the situation, the calmer she could be.

And just like that they flew through the squadrons of enemy fighters, and had a course straight for the mothership.

"They're turning to intercept."

Time seemed to slow down in her mind. The mothership approached weapons range at a painful crawl. The enemy fighters, now behind her, were turning to follow them, with a clear shot at Aisha's tail. She'd turned off their lasers, directing their energy to the shields, so they'd need to be close for ballistic weapons to be effective.

It was going to be close. Once the enemy fighters had turned around, the back of Aisha's fighter was exposed. The lead ones had almost turned, and were ready to open fire.

But Soo-Kyung had her target lock and opened up with everything she had on the mothership. Direct hits, but the ship stayed intact.

A hit on their right wing made the ship lurch.

"Now would be a good time, Soo-Kyung."

Aisha looked to her left, seeing her friends' face deep in concentration. Another torpedo launched, hitting a module to the rear of the mothership's bridge. A small explosion was followed by several large ones, but before the ship was destroyed, Aisha's ship was hit again. This time right in the engines.

Aisha felt her ship lurch. Red lights all over her console. The reactor had taken a direct hit. It was about to go critical. Her heart was beating hard. She reached for the eject buttons, just as the mothership exploded.

She looked up at it, but the moment's hesitation was enough.

Her reactor exploded, taking her fighter and her with it. Both co-pilots too.

The simulator door opened, and Simms' craggy face looked in at her.

"You're dead. All of you. Again," he said, disapproval in his voice. "I thought you guys were better than that."

* * *

"It's a bloody simulator," said David. "So it doesn't matter if we died. It's better to die in there than it is out there," he gestured to the floor, pointing towards the nearest exit to space.

"Besides," said Seamus. "We have no idea what kind of enemy we might face in reality, if any. It's hardly realistic to train like this."

"But it's the best we have," said Aisha, trying to calm them both. "We need to be ready for anything."

They shrugged, and David gulped a half-a-cup of coffee. She smiled a little, thinking about how he used to hate the stuff, and now he was hooked on it.

He caught her watching and drank a little more. "Making up for lost time," he smiled.

"We gotta pass Simms' tests or we won't be on the starship," she said. "And time is running out, so we need to keep trying."

"I think you had the perfect strategy last time," said Soo-Kyung. "You watched their tactics and you used their weaknesses against them. I don't see what more we could have done."

"I could have saved my crew," said Aisha. "Maybe the solution isn't how to beat the mothership, but how to survive the engagement."

"Knowing Simms," said Seamus, "you have to do both."

"Is there any way we can program the ship to follow the course that I laid in, and eject before we engage the enemy?"

"There might be," said Seamus. "I can look into it."

"Do it," she said. With that, their lunch break was over. It felt good to be obeyed, and Aisha knew that she fit the role naturally. She knew that she was a good commander. But what they might need out there was a *great* commander. Someone who would achieve their goals and bring everyone home safely. She wasn't sure if she had what it took, and until she knew better she would drill and drill and drill.

She only hoped she could get them through it in time. Simms hadn't given them a launch date, because he didn't want anybody coasting and then cramming at the last minute. The world didn't work like that. Either you were ready and you were on the launch, or you weren't.

She wanted to be sure she was on that launch. She wanted to be sure that she would make her father proud.

CHAPTER 7

A Jump through Space

They did it. All of them. Simms really turned them into a fighting unit.

Yes, even the adult pilots are impressed.

And Aisha?

Her squad might be the strongest of them all.

Let's hope that if there's something out there that they are the ones who will help us survive it.

When I look at her, I don't see us surviving. I see us thriving.

Her father would be so proud.

The entire world will be proud. Who would have thought that a young black girl could be the one to be the face of this generation? She'll be Columbus, Neil Armstrong and Albert Einstein all rolled into one.

Don't get ahead of yourself.

I'm trying.

THE MESSAGE CAME through the link. The starship would launch the day after tomorrow, and that made today the *cut* day. Aisha ran to the simulator room to run a few more tests, to try a few more things before the final cut, only to find them locked up.

Simms was waiting. "If you aren't good enough by now, one day won't make a difference."

Aisha's stomach fell. They had failed.

But Simms smiled. "Of course, if you *are* good enough to make the cut, then you should spend the day getting ready, right?"

"What?"

"You're in."

"What?"

"I said you're in."

"Tell me I'm not dreaming."

"You're in, Cadet Parks. You and your squad. You're going to the stars. Congratulations. Now get ready to be worked harder than you've ever been worked in your life!"

"Sir, yes, Sir!"

"Finally some discipline and respect." He smiled and winked. "Go tell your team."

The gravity must have been lower in this section of the station, because she felt like she flew back to the habitat ring where Soo-Kyung, Seamus and David were waiting. From the flush on her face, they knew the results before she could breathlessly tell them.

"We're going to the stars," she said, feeling the weight of it sink in. Looking in their eyes she saw the awe that it was finally real. "We're going to the stars!"

* * *

They had two days to prepare for the launch. Only two days to get everything they needed to take a trip to Alpha Centauri, the closest star to Earth's solar system, just over four light years away.

"What do I pack for that kind of thing?"

"It's not a vacation," said Soo-Kyung.

"Well, duh."

"So I don't think you need quite that much makeup."

"If I had *your* skin I wouldn't."

"Don't change the subject."

"I'm not!"

Soo-Kyung smiled and shook her head.

"Just kidding," said Aisha. "But seriously, other than our uniforms, and maybe a camera, there's not much to pack."

"Which is why I am done, and you are still working on it!"

"You are done?"

"Yes. And hurry up!"

Aisha shook her head and threw a few things into her bag.

"Okay, let's go."

* * *

The trip to the moon seemed to take forever. It had only been a few weeks since they last went, but the weight of what was to come was weighing on them all. Nervous anxiety bit at her stomach, but when they flew over the moon and started spiraling down to the starship, it felt even more real.

"They've given her a name," said David, pointing towards the nose of the ship. That end of the shaft that was highest above the surface of the moon, and furthest from the wheels that would provide habitation.

"Can you see what it is?"

Seamus had the best eyes. "It begins with 'E', but I can't see the rest."

"They gotta call it the *Enterprise*."

Soo-Kyung looked confused. "Why?"

"*Enterprise. Star Trek*. You haven't watched it yet, have you?"

"No."

Aisha peered. "I think it's the *Explorer*."

"The *Explorer*?"

Seamus spoke up. "She's right."

"That's a boring name."

David looked thoughtful. "But descriptive."

* * *

They were given bunks on the *Explorer* that were similar to those on the moon base. As usual, Aisha shared with Soo-Kyung, and Seamus

with David. From their group, the only other person they recognized was Ronaldo, whose skill at flying outdid them all.

Things were moving in a blur -- they had barely dropped their bags when they were summoned via the link to the launch lounges. Here they had chairs that looked remarkably similar to the ones that they had ridden on the Space Elevator, and Aisha figured this was part of the recycling of the launch vessels. As before, the chairs were deep and well padded, geared for acceleration. They strapped themselves in tightly.

Their links beeped, and the face of Captain Ferguson, a grey-haired man with an English accent, came on the screens.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, members of the scientific community, and cadets from the Space Academy, welcome to the maiden voyage of the *Explorer*."

Applause went up from around the room. Aisha noticed that, as well as the military types, there were a few civilians and VIPs around the room. She wondered how many of them were investors in the Academy.

"While this ship is a private, internationally-funded one, for the purposes of this first flight, it is under my command and the crew under me. This is not a pleasure cruise."

He paused a moment, allowing his words to sink in. "We will be launching in just a few minutes, and everyone is ordered to stay in their acceleration couches until further notice. We anticipate cruising for about 3 hours until we attempt our first jump. After that we'll give notice of further jumps as we head to the outer edge of the system. The jump drive has been tested significantly, and other than a little discomfort, it works perfectly. So for your safety, unless bound by duty, please remain in your couches."

He cut off the screen.

"Well, that was awkward," said Seamus. "Part cruise-ship captain and part autocrat."

They laughed, nervous tension making them laugh maybe a little too loudly.

Their links pinged again, and their mission brief downloaded. Aisha pulled out her tablet to read them.

"When we reach the Oort Cloud, we'll have a couple of hours while they calculate and test the interstellar jump," she read. "After we get to Alpha Centauri, we'll scramble immediately just in case. Seamus, you'll have to get all weapons systems ready."

"Are we expecting trouble?"

"No," she said, a little unsure of herself. "I guess it's just precautionary."

"But really? We show up in a new star system and start launching fully-armed fighters?"

"We sent a probe already," said Soo-Kyung, "and that's still transmitting, so why are we expecting trouble?"

"Not *expecting* trouble," said Aisha, trying to keep her voice even. "*Preparing* for it. What if there was something waiting for us, and it attacked the minute we jumped into the system."

"Wouldn't they have destroyed the probe?"

"No," said David. "Not if they were smart. Destroying the probe would alert us to potential hostility, so we'd come through all guns blazing."

"But we *are* coming through all guns blazing!"

"Okay," said Aisha. "Let's stow this and just obey orders. I'm sure it's nothing, but let's do what we're told and trust the system."

Soo-Kyung shrugged, looking a little unhappy. "I'm just afraid that if there are friendlies on the other side, and we come out armed to the teeth, that *we* might be the ones that start something."

"Maybe that's why they are sending *us*," said Aisha. "Because they trust us not to do something stupid if that happened? We're not soldiers after all, and we might see something that someone who has been training for fight for years would not see."

The chime for launch warning came on. They checked their straps one more time.

In a few moments they felt the gentle thrust as the water rockets pushed them away from the surface of the moon. As she watched it dwindle away, she saw the Earth rise above its surface, just like in the simulations. The ship accelerated and within a few minutes both the Earth and the Moon had shrunk to small, bright dots.

She felt the first jump in her stomach, kind of like the impact of really loud music. Suddenly the dots were gone, lost in the stars. She

checked the monitors, and everything was green. An announcement came over the intercom, telling them that the jump went perfectly, and that they would be jumping every few minutes without warning from here on out.

After a few more jumps, they were treated to a close-up of Saturn. Their path took them close to the ringed giant as they leapt towards the outer edge of the solar system.

Aisha watched in awe as the massive ringed giant hung gracefully in the sky.

"It doesn't look real," was all she could say, and the others laughed.

"You're right," they agreed. "It doesn't. But we're here. And we're going further!"

Captain Ferguson's voice came back on the intercom. "I just wanted to congratulate everyone aboard. You are now further from Earth than any human has ever been. Next stop, Alpha Centauri."

CHAPTER 8

The Light of Another Star

It's a fine balancing act. Motivating them as explorers while teaching them to be warriors.

I'm afraid that we are damaging them. What if there's nothing out there after all?

If there's nothing, then the discipline of preparedness will still serve them well.

But one of the major things we want -- to give them a blank slate, to effectively be the template of a new human species -- will already have been corrupted.

There are some things about us that we cannot change. It was that mentality, of being perpetually ready for combat, that brought us down out of the trees, and that made us the dominant species on this planet. We can't just throw that away.

I know, but it feels like we're missing an opportunity.

FINALLY, THEY REACHED the Oort Cloud that marked the outer bounds of the solar system. Simms ordered all Phaeton squads to their ships, and it was a relief for Aisha to finally get out of the acceleration couch. Other than their relatively close flyby of Saturn, there was nothing to see or do other than attempt to gaze through the porthole in the remote chance that she might see the pale blue dot of home.

But once she was in her pilot seat she was much more comfortable, running checks, ensuring that all systems were operational, and interacting with her crew.

Finally, they were ready. She could relax and enjoy the greater view from the cockpit of her fighter, hanging off the edge of the giant starship.

"It just looks like empty space," said Seamus, seeming to voice Aisha's thoughts. "But I guess I shouldn't have expected anything different."

David responded in his business-like clipped tones that he got once he was suited up and in the ship. "It's called a cloud because of the sheer number of objects here. They say there could be trillions of comets or proto-comets in here, many of which are bigger than one kilometer in length."

"Truth is," said Soo-Kyung, "that the volume of space they occupy is so great that it still looks like empty space."

Captain Ferguson's voice sounded in her earpiece. "Okay folks, we've found the acceleration point. Report in, all Phaeton squads ready?"

She listened as the Blue Group, the adults, reported in by the numbers. When it came to the cadets, Red Group, she waited for the countdown. She was Red One, and when she heard Ronaldo's voice "Red Two, aye," she knew it was her turn.

"Red One, A-okay."

When everyone had checked in, Ferguson started the countdown. The interstellar jump was very simple. They simply found a spot where gravity from the sun and gravity of the destination star effectively cancelled each other out. The spot was at the edge of the gravitational effects of the sun, hence it was close to the inner edge of the Oort Cloud. The process would involve accelerating into that spot in the direction of the desired star. The brain boys figured that all stars within fifty to a hundred light years could be reached in this manner. Going further would require multiple hops.

For their first journey, they'd travel to Earth's closest neighbor, the binary system of Alpha Centauri.

"You won't notice the jump," Simms had said, "or at least we don't think you will. That's why we will train you in multiple disorientation techniques. So should you be completely disoriented

by jumping through a tear in space-time, you'll still come out sharp on the other end."

By multiple disorientation techniques, she was spun, turned, twisted and every possible type of movement that would make her sick. After this, roller coasters would lose their appeal. She had come through it, but only after vomiting countless times.

It was enough, though. She was now ready. Ready for anything. Ready for--

The countdown stopped, and the ship's engines fired, pushing them forward. And then suddenly the stars changed.

"Blue Group, scramble!"

She watched as the other ships detached from the forward part of *Explorer* and boosted themselves into a rough sphere, protecting the ship from any potential attack.

"Red Group, scramble!"

She hit the boosters and launched, leading Red Group into its pre-assigned flight path. They formed a moving cylinder of ships, surrounding the rings at the back of *Explorer* and monitoring anything incoming.

"Look," said Soo-Kyung, and Aisha followed her finger. In the distance she could see a bright star. Its color was similar to Earth's sun, but it was brighter relative to how they had viewed the sun before the jump.

"Turn up your polarization filters," said David. "And check it out."

She did, and then the bright mass resolved into two stars.

They had arrived at Alpha Centauri, and were bathed in the light of another star.

"We did it!"

It was a momentous moment, the first humans to leave Earth's solar system. Before they could dwell on it, Ferguson's command staff started to issue orders.

"All ships open radar. Scan the immediate area for anything out of the ordinary."

Out of the ordinary? They were in another star system!

"Red Group, go to coordinates zero-zero-one, karem zero-nine-zero. See if you can pick up the probe. Do not engage, just locate."

"Roger that," said Aisha, and had her group break formation. There were sixteen fighters, so she broke them into squads of four.

"The probe came through here about five years ago," she said. "It was moving at about five miles-per-hour when it went through the jump. Momentum and inertia are maintained through the jump, so it should still be within a quarter-of-a-million miles of here, about the distance between the Earth and the Moon."

All directions were given relative to the trajectory of the starship. She remembered the lessons -- that it was easier than trying to set a fixed point in space, unless they were close to a planet. Three numbers were the degrees relative to the shaft's axis, with zero-zero-zero being straight forward, and one-eight-zero being 180 degrees from that, or directly behind the ship. The second set of numbers were at right angles to this, giving the 'up' or 'down' relative to the ship. In this case, zero-nine-zero was directly 'above' the ship.

She took her squads in this direction, watching *Explorer* vanish beneath them as they boosted away. Suddenly, she felt far from home. She might be able to find the jump point in the Phaeton and get it back to Earth's solar system, but the range of her fighter would never get her close to Earth itself. She needed the mothership, and as it receded into the distance, anxiety crept up on her.

"Keep it together folks, we have a mission," she said, feeling a little unsure of herself, and wondering if the others had the same qualms about leaving *Explorer* behind.

Into the darkness they flew. David frantically operated the scanner, looking carefully for any signs of the probe.

"Red Three, I think I got something. Beaming coordinates over."

David replied. "Red One, Red Three, aye. Confirmed. You have the probe. Lay in a course to intercept."

"Roger that."

"This is Red One," Aisha said, looking for the words. "Reds Five through Sixteen return to Mom. One through Four on me."

"Roger that."

She saw brief flares in the darkness as the ships turned to head back towards the *Explorer*.

"Get me a lock on the probe."

"Got it."

"How far?"

"Should be in visual range in just a few seconds."

A small dot in front of them grew steadily larger. "Got it," said Aisha. "Preparing to dock with it. Soo-Kyung, magnetic grapples."

"Aye."

"David, take us in nice and slow."

"Roger that."

"Reds Two through Four, keep an eye on us. Watch out for anything unusual."

"Aye."

"David, give me search beams. Highest intensity."

"Roger."

Two long lances of light shone out from her ship. They reflected directly off the probe as she eased the fighter to a halt nearby.

"No sign of any interference," said Soo-Kyung. "She's been sitting here untouched for five years."

"Yes," said Aisha. "Looks good, but let's play this by the book. Give me a full scan, and compare with warbook. Let me know if there's anything different from spec."

"Roger that," said Soo-Kyung as she activated the scanners.

"Red Group, do you have anything?"

"No, Ma'am. Crystal clear out here."

"Scan completed," said Soo-Kyung. "We're all clear. She's a complete match with warbook stats. Nothing has interfered with her."

"Okay," said Aisha. "Prepare grapples."

"Done."

"Fire."

Soo-Kyung shot the grapples, and the magnets at the end attached snugly to the probe.

"We got lock."

"Okay," said Aisha. "Reel her in."

"Roger that."

The ship jarred a little as the reels activated. The probe started approaching them slowly. David then altered the ship's trajectory a little so that the probe fit snugly underneath. Soo-Kyung then deployed further hooks to hold it tight.

"Probe is secured."

"Okay," said Aisha. "Take us home."

* * *

They returned and docked with the *Explorer* without incident. All of Red Group were asked to attend the captain's ready room for debriefing.

Aisha was last to enter, and as she did, Ferguson stood to shake her hand. "I've heard all about you from Higgins," he said warmly. "That was nice work out there."

"Thank you, Sir," she replied.

"I was hesitant about having you kids aboard the first journey to a star system, but now I see he was right."

She nodded and smiled.

"Our mission," he continued, turning to address the gathered cadets, "is to go deeper into the system, and check out an Earth-like planet orbiting the twin suns. We don't expect to find life, but we do want a good look at the first rocky extrasolar planet we've encountered."

"Yes, Sir!"

"You guys haven't trained in in-atmosphere flying, so our boys will handle the landing. But I expect your squad to be rested and ready for support missions."

"Yes, Sir."

"Good, dismissed."

"Sir?"

"What is it, Cadet Parks?"

"Will we get a chance to walk on the surface of the planet?"

"We'll see. When we get there, the scientists will call the shots."

It was hard to hide her disappointment. "Yes, Sir."

"Good. Now get ready. We jump in five minutes."

CHAPTER 9

The Air of Another World

It's interesting that our closest cosmic neighbor has a planet that might support life.

It's more likely that Mars would support life than that rock.

But that's not the point. Given that rocky planets with atmospheres appear to be common, there must be millions of potential Earths out there.

We just have to reach them.

And hope they aren't populated.

EXHAUSTED, AISHA and Soo-Kyung had taken the time to sleep. It would take dozens of jumps and several hours before they would reach the desired planet. And even then they may not stop, if, upon closer inspection, it appeared to be populated or too hard to explore.

A chime from the link woke them, and they went to the mess hall. Seamus was waiting for them. Excited, he had not slept a wink.

"This system has a lot of planets," Seamus said. "A *lot* of planets. At least twenty by my reckoning, and if we take the broadest parameters of what's a habitable zone, there could be two or three."

"We don't know?"

"The folks in Stellar Cartography are working hard to search now that we're here, but there's a big one that was spotted from Earth about sixty years ago. That's where we're going. A few more jumps and we'll be there."

Thankfully, now that they'd gotten used to the sensation, they didn't need to spend the entire trip in the acceleration couches.

They heard the familiar countdown, and then the momentary sensation of queeziness when the next jump happened.

Simms' voice pinged on their link. "All Cadets, get to your ships. We're going to ride the next jump out from our cockpits."

"Good luck," said Seamus. "I'll be monitoring from the bridge."

As they wound the long way up the shaft -- in weightless conditions once they left the rotating wheels at the rear of the ship -- Aisha couldn't help but feel the awe. Soon, they would be approaching another planet. The first that Humanity had ever seen. What would it be like? Would there be life there? Would there be people?

David brought her back to reality. "If there's anything alive down there, pray that it's intelligent. Because there's not much intelligence up here."

She smiled, despite herself, and climbed up and into the cockpit. David took his usual spot in the cockpit on the right wing, and Soo-Kyung on the left.

They made sure that all systems were green, and flagged Central Command. Once all ships had checked in, the countdown to the jump began.

"This is the last jump," said Seamus in her ear. "We should see the planet soon afterwards. Be ready for orders to scramble."

"Roger that," said Aisha, still feeling nervous dread. Everything was almost going too smoothly. Something had to go wrong, didn't it?

The countdown ended, and the ship shook a little as it jumped. Suddenly, in front of them, was a large, grey planet, with about one-third of its surface obscured by wispy clouds.

"Wow," said David. "Look at it!"

"No sign of oceans. No sign of life," said Soo-Kyung, sounding a little disappointed.

"Nothing coming in on radio frequencies. No sign of a civilization."

Aisha scanned near orbit. "Also no sign of satellites or other orbital construction."

"Blue Group, launch," came the order from the bridge.

Aisha watched, a little jealous, as the other ships took off. A number of stubby cylinders, almost coin-shaped, detached from the rear of the ship and boosted forward.

"Habitats," said Soo-Kyung. "I've heard of them, but never seen them."

"What are they?"

"Self-contained landing pods, each equipped with oxygen generators, heaters, everything you'd need for landing on another planet. The scientific teams are using them."

"So instead of shuttling people down there, we just drop those pods, and they're good to go?"

"Not quite," said Soo-Kyung, "and watch for the cool part."

She watched as the Phaetons from Blue Group docked with the habitat pods. They fit perfectly.

"The Phaetons are going to fly them down, and drop them where they need to go."

"That's why we're just flying escort."

"Exactly, they don't trust us with that kind of flying."

"Acknowledged."

Once all the pods had Phaetons attached and guiding them, the order came for Red Group to launch. They split up, so each was able to escort a Blue flier with its pod cargo.

"There *is* an atmosphere on that planet," said Seamus. "A bit on the thin side, kind of like Mars. It's not going to be easy to land. Prepare for turbulence and the burn of re-entry, so make sure your shields are good."

"Shields are green," said Soo-Kyung.

"All squads, your designated landing zones are being uploaded to your flight computers," came a voice from Ferguson's bridge. "Proceed when ready."

"Our course is locked with Blue Seven," said David. "We'll follow right behind them."

They took off, following the designated ship. Aisha watched as other pairs broke off, landing at various spots around the planet.

Hitting atmosphere was harder than she expected. "The Phaeton is barely able to break atmosphere," said Soo-Kyung over the

background noise and turbulence. "It's primarily a space craft, but it should be able to handle this."

Aisha was doing her best not to throw up. She concentrated on following the course that David had plotted to keep them within visual range of Blue Seven.

"Once we're out of the upper atmosphere it should get easier."

"Shields holding."

As quickly as it had begun, the shuddering stopped and visibility cleared. Beneath them, they could see a cloud layer, with a few spots showing a grey landscape beneath. The Blue ship penetrated the clouds, and they lost visibility.

"Get us closer, David."

"Roger that."

Her ship accelerated as it burst through the cloud cover. They still had their target ship on radar, so they weren't entirely blind. Finally, they were through the clouds, and could see the terrain below.

It was bleak and featureless, but had its own kind of beauty. Wind-eroded towers jutted out of the plains like skyscrapers. Loose soil was visible, but no kind of plant life was seen to bind it together, and like the surface of the moon, it just appeared dusty.

Something caught Aisha's eye, and she turned the ship to check it out.

"We should stay with our escort," said David gently.

"Roger, but check that out. Do you see what I see?"

What looked like a ravine or dry riverbed had been carved through the landscape.

"It could be wind erosion," said Soo-Kyung. "But it sure looks like a dry riverbed."

"Just like on Mars," said David. "Flagging it."

She saw the ping back from the scientific expedition in the habitat pod. They acknowledged the discovery, and would presumably check it out at a later point.

In the meantime, their escort ship had found a landing spot, and was carefully guiding the pod down. Aisha took her ship on a course circling around the landing spot, keeping an eye on it.

The pilot of Blue Seven was masterful in how he guided the pod down. It landed as gently as a snowflake. When it detached, all lights were green.

"Mission accomplished," the pilot said. "Red One, we are all green here. You can return to *Explorer*. We'll fly escort for the pod."

"Acknowledged," said Aisha, a little disappointed at being asked to return to *Explorer*. It made sense. While the pods were landing, it was good to have backup in case something went wrong. Now that they had landed safely, it also made sense for the Phaetons to return to the ship just in case they were needed. This world seemed dead, but you never knew.

She took one more pass around the alien landscape, longing to set foot on it, and turned to climb the ship towards the upper atmosphere. As she was about to punch in the course, a communique from the pod interrupted.

"Red One," it said. "Interesting landscape feature that you tagged. Can you do us a favor? There are large caves nearby and your 'ravine' appears to be emerging from them. This suggests that there might have been underground water in the past, and there may still be some now. Can you get a camera over there?"

Are you kidding, she wanted to say. "Roger that, Survey Station. We're on our way."

* * *

The caves were big, but not big enough for the Phaeton to enter.

"Atmosphere isn't breathable," said Soo-Kyung, "but it protects us from radiation doses, and is near Earth-normal. Our suits should work."

"One of us should stay on board," said David. "I will. You guys can go walk about."

"The chance to walk on another planet," said Aisha, "and you're not taking it?"

She felt a little guilty. As captain, she should be the one staying behind. But David had insisted.

"There'll be other chances." She could hear him smiling as he spoke.

They found a landing spot that looked to have an easy walk to one of the caves. Gently, Aisha set the ship down. For the umpteenth time, she checked the seals on her suit, and they were all good.

"Popping canopy," she said, as it opened with a hiss. She could see Soo-Kyung doing likewise.

She had left Earth only a few months ago and had already walked on the moon. Now, she was about to set foot on the surface of an alien planet. She would be one of the first humans to do so.

She climbed down the ladder, thinking of the words of Neil Armstrong when he landed on the moon. Less than a century before, but such a different world. She remembered watching television of that period, when people like her were treated like animals in some parts of the country, while others reached for the stars.

She wondered what Neil's generation would have felt when one of the people taking a small step onto the surface of an alien world was black.

But she remembered she had to try to leave all of that behind.

She reached the bottom of the ladder, and paused a moment. She remembered Patrice's kind face, and she longed for him to be here with her.

She took the step. She heard the sand crunch beneath her boot. Kneeling, she took some in her hands. It was like the coarse sand from beaches in Oregon she went to as a child. Grey and black like that on the moon. There were patches of redness, most likely oxidized iron, like on Mars.

She had made it. She was on another world. Looking up, she saw the binary star of this system, the larger, closer star with its smaller neighbor.

She had reached the stars. She laughed when she realized she still had her cell phone in her equipment belt.

She took it out and aimed it at herself in order to take a picture.

"Tell me you're not taking a selfie," said David. "We come all the way to another star system, land on another planet and the first thing you do is take a selfie?"

She could hear him laughing. Soo-Kyung had reached the bottom of her ladder, but, without pausing, she took a little jump onto the surface. Aisha could see her beaming through her helmet.

"Can I have one too?"

Together, the girls huddled, arm in arm, light of another star above their heads. They smiled, and took a picture.

"We have a mission here ladies," said David, trying to sound cranky, but failing.

Surprisingly, it was just like walking on a rocky beach, as they made their way towards the cave.

"Sensors detect nothing inside," said David. "No heat source. Nothing. It's just a cave. Take a quick look around, and grab some pictures. The science folks also want some soil samples."

"Roger that."

Aisha stood at the mouth of the cave and shone her flashlights in. It went deeper than her light could penetrate. She started walking forward into the cave to see if there was more. Stalactites from the ceiling would indicate that there had once been water here, but she couldn't see any.

"Wait," said Soo-Kyung. "Stop."

"What is it?"

"Don't go any further. Come back here slowly."

"What?"

She turned and saw what Soo-Kyung was doing. Turning over rocks. She had one in her hand, and held it up for Aisha to see.

Circular blotches discolored the rock. They were mostly pale grey, but some yellows and reds were mixed in.

"Lichens," she said. "There's life on this world."

CHAPTER 10

Returning Home

So they found life.

Ironic that the North Korean was the first to do so, eh?

This isn't a time for levity.

I know. But given that life was found so easily and so quickly on that planet, it tells us that surely we'll find more advanced lifeforms, and soon.

The bigger question is, why was the life we found there so primitive?

FOLLOWING SOO-KYUNG'S discovery, the mission changed. The scientific pods were to stay, along with an attachment of Phaetons, but the *Explorer* was to return home and restock. Stellar Cartography was working around-the-clock to find routes to other stars, given that life being found here meant that, of course, the Galaxy must be teeming with life, and most of it must be more complex than the basic lichens they found.

Aisha was still confused about one thing. Once they had broken orbit, and were cruising back to the *Explorer*, she had to ask. "Why did you ask me to stop?"

Soo-Kyung signaled for them to close external comms. She clearly wanted to keep the conversation private amongst the three of them.

"Once I knew that it was life," said Soo-Kyung. "I realized that we hadn't sterilized *ourselves*. Every further step we took could potentially contaminate, and perhaps kill, these primitive lifeforms. We're carrying bacteria, spores, and who-knows-what-else with us that would be terribly invasive to the native species."

"So why did they let us walk on the surface?"

"I guess they just assumed that there was no life there. That it was a dead planet."

Something about it just bugged Aisha. "*They* didn't ask us to stop," she said. "*They* allowed us to walk on the surface. You'd think they'd know better. It was *you* who was smart enough to realize that we might impact any life there."

"Maybe they were too busy?"

"Or maybe they didn't care," Aisha said, realizing how ominous it sounded.

"Guys," said David. "We just discovered *life*. Don't you realize the implications? At least immediately?"

"What?"

"You think they're going to just release this broadly on Earth? Look at all the wars that have been fought over religion. Between the Caliphate and my country for one. They *can't* let this information loose on Earth. We're not yet ready."

"But we rushed into discovery."

"Now I know why they kept *Explorer* a secret, building her on the far side of the moon."

"But we've been asked to do things *differently*," said Soo-Kyung, for once having some emotion in her voice. "And one of the things I want to do differently is share information like this equally amongst all people. And yes, I understand the irony that it's me saying it, but wars like those in my country happened because of a few people keeping key information from the masses. I can't let that happen again."

"I don't think we can stop them," said David.

"What'll they do?"

"Boot us out of the Academy and send us Earth-side, of course. Anything we have to say can be easily discredited."

Aisha sighed. David was right and she knew it. She just hoped that Soo-Kyung did too.

"So," she said. "We toe the party line. We keep this all a big secret. We play along until the time is right, where *we* can take control, and do what's right for the world."

Soo-Kyung was exasperated. "Isn't that what *they* think they're doing? Doesn't that just make us the same as them?"

Seamus interrupted with an external comm. "Folks, Captain has ordered you back double-time."

"Why?"

"We're going home."

* * *

They landed and proceeded to the pilots' ready room. Seamus was waiting for them there.

Soo-Kyung got straight down to business. "What's going on?"

"They discovered more than just your lichens. More complex forms of life. Not *much* more complex, mind you, just simple organisms. It got the brass scared though. They want us to head back to Earth as soon as possible."

"Scared? Why?"

"They wouldn't say, but it wouldn't be hard to guess. If there's life here, there's life anywhere. Earth isn't prepared for that."

Before they could say anything, he continued. "And I don't mean internally. Look, we've just proven that it's easy to jump between stars, and the first star we encounter has life. Therefore the Galaxy must be teeming with life, and some of that has to be a threat. Earth, right now is wide open to a potential attack."

"It's not likely though," said Soo-Kyung. "Is it? I mean the path between the stars has been there for billions of years. Just because *we* just discovered it, doesn't mean others haven't been using it for a long time."

"Agreed," said Seamus, "but that isn't how *they* think. There's now a clear and present danger. They want to ensure that we're prepared for it. It was theoretical before."

"It's theoretical *now*," said David.

"But much more likely."

The klaxon sounded the countdown to jump.

"We're not hanging around," said Seamus. "Just jumping as fast as we can to the outer parts of the system, and from there going home. The science stations and half of Blue wing are staying here to find what else they can."

"We can't communicate with Earth from here, can we?"

"No," said Seamus. "We are over four light years from Earth, so any attempt at communication is limited to that. We can build a relay at the jump point -- one that sends light through the hole to our system, and that can get comms down to hours. It's another reason why they want us to jump home, so they can let command know what we've found."

* * *

It took almost twenty jumps to get to the outer edge of the system where they could take the interstellar jump that would bring them home. During this time, Seamus had rigged a prototype device that they'd position just outside the gravity hole. It would act as a relay for communications from the planet's surface. "We're about eleven light hours away from the inner system on this side," said Seamus. "And about another twelve from Earth on the other side. That way we can communicate, but our transmissions will be delayed almost a day. Still, it's better than four light years."

The concept was simple -- identical devices were placed either side of the interstellar hole. These beamed back to the planet on this side, and Earth on the other. They communicated with each other through the hole using light. "Light has a particulate nature, so sending a light beam through the hole should be like sending a ship. They relay messages between each other, and then to their respective planets. Simple."

"But effective," said Aisha.

The captain agreed, and liked Seamus' device. He didn't want to delay in jumping back to Earth, but deployment of the device on either side of the hole shouldn't take more than a few minutes.

They dropped it on the Alpha Centauri side, and took the jump home.

To Aisha, the feeling was incredible. In the last few hours, mankind's history had changed dramatically, and she was a part of it. They had traveled to another world. They had discovered life. And then they had come home.

As Seamus was readying to deploy the second relay, suddenly an alarm went off. The lights turned red, and they were ordered to battle stations.

Aisha ran to her Phaeton, Soo-Kyung and David right behind.

"What's going on?"

They quickly got into their cockpits and got ready to scramble. The Captain's voice came over the intercom. "All crews be ready, we're going to make an emergency jump for Earth. We just received word that a large meteor or comet has entered Earth orbit, and will impact on the surface. Military forces deployed and hit it with nukes, doing minimal damage."

"We're twelve light hours away," said David. "Anything we know is twelve hours old. It could have hit the surface by now."

"It must be big, too, if nukes couldn't stop it," said Soo-Kyung.

Without warning the ship jumped. And then it jumped again, and again.

"We're getting there as fast as we can," said Seamus over their headpiece. "They don't care if they burn out the jump drive. Be ready to scramble when we arrive. It should be any second now."

A meteor at this time? Could it possibly be a coincidence? Aisha couldn't help but shake the feeling.

Earth was under attack.

CHAPTER 11

Defending Earth

It can't be a coincidence.

There's no evidence that this isn't just a comet or a meteor.

But where did it appear from? There was no warning.

I don't know. But valor is forged in the fire of combat.

DURING THE JUMPS, Seamus helped equip their Phaeton with nuclear-tipped missiles. If it bothered them that the *Explorer* was carrying warheads to begin with, they didn't say it. They were too engrossed with the pictures coming in from Earth, delayed by a few hours.

They saw the first discovery of the object, and the learning that it was on a collision course with Earth. The space station containing the Academy had scrambled every ship and every weapon they had. Several hundred nukes hit the meteor, doing no damage.

The Space Elevator was throwing as much material into orbit as it could. Munitions, nukes, lasers -- everything they could use. Ships flew from the moon base and the space station to pick them up, to take them to the meteor and hit it as hard as they could.

Nothing.

With every jump closer, they saw video from further ahead in time. The meteor was getting closer to Earth. They had projected that by pushing the jump engines as hard as they could, they'd have a chance of getting there before impact. They'd do what they could to prevent impact.

"They've done some damage," said Seamus. "Look, there's a wide fissure that opened up from the constant nuking. I don't know if they've been able to take advantage of it, we're still a couple of hours behind real-time."

Aisha checked the tactical display he had sent her. The meteor was roughly peanut shaped, with two hemispheres joined together at a relatively narrow point.

"They've been hitting that with little effect," he said. "But, look here -- the shockwaves have definitely weakened the larger hemisphere."

Aisha looked, and saw what he was referring to. The larger hemisphere could potentially be partially hollow, and the constant pounding at the center part of the join had caused cracks throughout it.

"Our best chance," he said, "is to penetrate those fissures and potentially blow out the larger sphere. If it's hollow, we might be able to blow it up."

"Lots of smaller objects have a better chance of burning up in the atmosphere," said Soo-Kyung. "But what about the other hemisphere?"

"If we do it right, the explosion might cause it to spin. That way it *might* bounce off the atmosphere."

"It's as good a plan as any."

"Roger that," he said. "For best effect, you are going to have to get really close with your nukes. The idea is to have them penetrate the surface before they blow, as opposed to detonating them at or near the surface."

"We can handle it," said Aisha. "Right, crew?"

"Roger that."

"We'll be in range in about ten minutes," said Seamus. "That's as close as we can jump to Earth without destroying ourselves. At that point you'll launch and head full throttle for the meteor. We don't know what you'll see, so you'll have to adapt. Got it?"

"Roger," said Aisha. "Soo-Kyung, how are we doing with loading the nukes?"

"Almost all loaded. Safeties are locked."

"David, all systems are green."

"Roger. I can divert some shield power to the engines, to give us an extra boost. We won't have enough to make it back here."

"We won't need it. Let's get to the meteor as quickly as possible. They can rescue us after we blow it."

And if we fail there may be nobody to rescue us, she thought.

"Let's not fail," she said. "Let's save the world."

* * *

The final jump alarm sounded, and after the countdown they jumped. Suddenly Earth was in their viewport, looking beautiful as its blueness hung in space.

"Scramble," came the order, and all Phaetons -- sixteen from Red Group, eight from Blue Group -- scrambled. Without ceremony, they opened throttle and headed for the meteor.

Situation reports came in from Earth. They had hit it with everything they had, and it was still coming. Now the focus had changed to evacuation of major cities, and bunkering down to prepare for impact. It was presently tracked to hit somewhere in the Indian Ocean. With mercy it wasn't going to impact land, but the impact would cause a tsunami that would impact hundreds of millions of people.

"Let's stop this thing," said Aisha. "Let's take it out."

They broke into squads of four, with the Blue group attacking first. Flying as close as they could to the surface of the meteor, they dropped their missiles and hit it, hard.

It continued, unabated.

The next wave hit, and the flare from the nukes caused Aisha's screen to dim in response to protect the pilots within. When the glare faded, the meteor was still there, headed as always to Earth.

Another wave, and another. No effect.

David spoke up. "I have an idea," he said. "When it's our run, can we instruct the team not to bomb the meteor? I want to check something out."

"We're up next. What are you thinking?"

"No time to explain, but the interstellar jump point got me thinking. Destructive interference between gravitational waves

makes it so that we can jump between stars. So what about *constructive* interference?"

"Two wave fronts hitting at the same time at the same frequency," said Soo-Kyung, and Aisha heard an idea forming in her voice.

"Yes," said David. "They add on each other."

Aisha got it. "So if we can place nukes on either side of the hemisphere, and do it at exactly the right location..."

"If we blow them at the same time, the shockwave might be greater than all this individual pounding."

"It's worth a try."

Aisha spoke up. "Okay, David. Plot the optimal spots to leave the bombs. We'll have to match trajectory with the meteor, so calculate that. Soo-Kyung, program the missiles to fly at that trajectory. I'll get us in place to drop them."

"Roger that."

"How many will we need?"

"Four."

"How many do we have?"

"Uh, five."

"Okay, so no room for error. Ready Soo-Kyung?"

"Ready."

"David?"

"Ready."

"Okay, let's punch it!"

David sent the optimal course to her flight computer. There was no time to program the auto pilot, so she'd have to do it manually.

"Hold on to your butts," she said, smiling despite herself. "Here goes nothing,"

The Phaeton accelerated rapidly and smoothly. She hadn't been flying ships like this for long, but now, above all times, it felt like an extension of her being. People call it being 'in the zone', but it wasn't as conscious as that. She just *did* what she needed to do, flying in low over the meteor, avoiding the debris that surrounded it, where one wrong turn could shred them.

Matching course and speed with the meteor, she dropped the first missile. Soo-Kyung's program worked perfectly -- the missile followed the meteor, matching trajectory like it was tied to it. She

flew above and around the hemisphere, finding the second spot that David had calculated. Again, his work was impeccable, and she knew her flying needed to be the same.

"Almost there," he said. "Steady, Aisha, steady."

She watched as the targets on her heads-up display narrowed, forming a tightening circle. Turning the ship gently, she corkscrewed through them.

"Now!"

Soo-Kyung released the second missile, and like the first, it fell in formation with the meteor.

"How are they looking?"

"Almost there," said Soo-Kyung. "I just need one more adjustment."

"It's grazing the upper atmosphere," said David. "It's now or never."

Aisha pulled the Phaeton up and away. "Now," she said.

"We're too close!"

"It doesn't matter. Do it."

Soo-Kyung hit the detonators. Everything went white, the polarization filters on their canopy not quick enough to deflect the initial flash. Then the shockwave hit, and their ship was sent spinning.

Alarms blared. Aisha fought to get the ship back under control.

"All systems down," she heard David screaming. "We're headed for the atmosphere!"

Jerked around within the cockpit, Aisha thought she was going to be sick, but she fought and fought to get the ship under control. Finally, she was able to restart the engines and pull up.

"Systems rebooting," said David. "Soo-Kyung, do you have anything?"

There was no answer. "Soo-Kyung?"

Aisha looked over her left shoulder to the wing cockpit. Soo-Kyung was slumped in her seat. There was blood on her face, but her restraints had held. She had probably just blacked out. Probably.

"David," said Aisha. "Do you have anything on the meteor?"

"Systems coming back online. Clearing the canopies now."

The polarization filters turned off, she could now see out the canopy. The Earth dominated the display.

"There," she said, pointing.

The meteor was spinning wildly, parts of it dropping off.

"We damaged the larger hemisphere, but it wasn't enough. The other ships must have done their bombing runs after us."

"What now?"

"We have one missile left. But Soo-Kyung is unconscious."

"Do you have manual release?"

"I do," said David. "But you're not thinking what I think you're thinking are you?"

"Probably. Set the timer," Aisha said.

"Roger. Set. How much time?"

"Fifteen seconds."

"We won't survive the blast at that range."

"We might if we hide behind the other hemisphere of the meteor."

"That's one crazy flight path!"

"You got a better idea, David?"

"Negative. I just wish I had thought of it. Timer, aye. Let me know when to start it."

"Roger that."

She angled her ship's nose right at the meteor. They had severely damaged the larger of the two hemispheres. If they could shatter it, they just might get through this.

Hitting full throttle, she flew straight at it.

"Give me missile controls."

"Aye."

"Start the timer."

"Aye."

Fifteen seconds. In fifteen seconds the nuke beneath her feet would explode. If this didn't work...

But it was going to work. She knew it in her heart. She could feel her father's eyes on her. Of course it would work!

Five seconds had passed. They still weren't close enough. Another second. Another.

Ten seconds had passed, and the debris from the meteor was pinging their shields.

"It's been a pleasure," said David. "Shalom!"

She dropped the missile, and then boosted up and around the hemisphere, corkscrewing her ship so that it was shielded from the blast by the other side of the meteor.

At fifteen seconds, the lights on the ship went out. She could see the flare on the other side of the meteor, and then--

And then it started to shatter, thousands, millions of pieces of rock spinning up and away from it. The whole hemisphere erupted - - exploding, causing the smaller hemisphere to spin away.

"Oh my God," said David. "I think we did it."

The smaller hemisphere had been spun by the enormity of the explosion. Now, instead of falling towards Earth, it twisted, bucking in the upper atmosphere like a caged animal.

She hoped it wasn't her imagination, but the redness from it burning in the atmosphere appeared to be diminishing.

"I think it's bouncing off the atmosphere," said David. "And look, the smaller ones are falling to Earth, but most of them are going to burn up."

"Most," said Aisha. "But not all."

The larger ones hit the Earth. Most fell in the ocean, but they watched in horror as impact after impact hit western and central Africa.

"Oh my God," she said. "What have we done?"

"You've saved the world, that's what you've done," came Simms voice. His ship was directly above them and dropping grappling hooks. "Let's get you home."

She couldn't keep her eyes off the Earth below. Hundreds of impacts, as big as nukes carved a track across central Africa. Down there thousands, maybe millions were dying.

And it was all her fault.

CHAPTER 12

Rescue Mission

That could have been an extinction event, couldn't it?

Yes.

So we dodged a bullet?

Maybe.

“HERE’S THE SIT-REP,” said Simms as he dropped her ship into the docking ring at the Academy station. “You turned a giant falling object into hundreds of smaller ones. You turned a dinosaur-killer and the end of the world into a few destroyed towns and cities.”

She shuddered, trying to take it all in.

“But you have got to snap out of it,” he said. “It’s not too late for many of the people down there, and rescue isn’t coming anytime soon, unless *we* do it.”

“Rescue?”

“Yes,” said Simms. “Seamus had the great idea of using empty habitat pods. We fly them down, fill them with people in dangerous places, and take them to safe places. It’s simple, and I *like* simple.”

Aisha felt a twist in her gut. “I don’t think I can.”

“I got plenty of ships. I got plenty of pods. What I don’t have is plenty of pilots, particularly ones with the guts to do what you just did. They’ll follow you, so snap out of it and get out there.”

“Soo-Kyung?”

"I'm fine," came her friend's voice. "Smacked my head on the console, but I'm okay. He's right, Aisha. You saved the world, now let's go and save some of the survivors."

"Roger that," said David.

"Enough chit-chat," said Simms. "There's an empty fighter in the bay next door. Get to it."

They quickly got out of their cockpit and ran to the launch bay. As Simms had promised, an empty fighter awaited. They got in and took their assigned positions.

"You're clear to launch," said Simms. "Go!"

The Phaeton dropped out of the station. Through the canopy, she could see the dark smoke of the fires where the meteors had carved huge gouges in Africa. She could see the waves of the tsunamis caused by those that fell in the ocean.

"Focus on the job at-hand," said Simms. "Dock with that habitat pod."

A pod lit up on her heads-up display. "Got it," she said, and flew to intercept.

They docked with it, and the orders came in.

"Angola was hardest hit, it seems," said Simms. "Several large ones went down maybe a hundred miles inland from the city of Luanda. It's a densely-populated area. Fortunately the tsunamis are looking to hit further south of there, in relatively unpopulated areas."

"Our orders?"

"Simple. Land, find anyone you can, and evacuate them to the coastal areas north of Luanda."

"That's it?"

"That's it. No time for finesse. People are dying down there, and more of them will die every second we're chatting up here. So let's do this. See you on the other side!"

The Phaetons broke formation and dove towards the planet.

"David, plot us a course."

"Roger," he said. "One particularly big one went down near a town called Uige according to the maps. It's small, but very densely-populated."

"Do it. E-T-A?"

"Four minutes."

"Get us down there!"

"Roger that."

They hit atmosphere hard, and the turbulence felt like it was going to shake Aisha's teeth out.

"How's the pod holding?"

"Rock steady," said Soo-Kyung.

Suddenly the turbulence stopped, and they were into the lower atmosphere. Instead of clear skies, they were surrounded by thick, black, smoke.

"Altitude?"

"Fifty thousand feet."

"Get us out of this smoke trail."

"Working on it," said David. "Give me control."

She did, and he expertly piloted them northbound, taking them low, and escaping the thick smoke.

At 10,000 feet, above the canopy of trees, they began to see the damage. Some small fragments had gotten through, gouging trails through the forest, but larger ones had created huge, burning holes in the landscape. Around them, trees had been flattened for miles. The impact would have killed anything remotely close by.

"How far to that city?"

"Five miles, we should see it soon."

Aisha saw the smoke rising from the city first.

"Electric lines overloading and going down," said Soo-Kyung. "It would cause fires all over. And most of the construction there is probably wood."

But it was worse than that. One of the largest pieces of the meteor had hit right in the center of town. Buildings were toppled like toys.

"Oh my God," said Aisha. "I did this."

"No," said David. "You did not. Focus."

"Over there," said Soo-Kyung. "Look to the west. There's an airstrip."

"I see it," said Aisha, as she turned towards it.

"Flashing emergency lights."

From this vantage point, they could see refugees pouring out of the streets of the city toward the airfield.

"There's maybe a couple of hundred people there."

"That's all that's left?"

"It's a wonder there's that many!"

"Okay," said Aisha. "Get ready to drop the pod. Signal the others that if they are looking for refugees, we have some here."

"On it," said Soo-Kyung.

She took the ship as low and slow as she could toward the airfield. From below, she could imagine how terrified the locals might be. First their town was destroyed by a rock falling from the sky, and now an alien-looking ship was circling towards them.

"Now," she said, and she felt the change in the ship's weight as the pod was dropped.

"Kicking in landing thrusters," said Soo-Kyung. "It's touching down, smooth as a baby."

"There's a problem," said David.

"What?"

"They're not getting in. They're afraid."

"Can you blame them?"

"No," he continued. "But what do we do."

"Take us down there," said Aisha. "I'm going to talk to them."

"I don't think they speak English."

"Maybe not, but when they see my face, the same color as them, they'll trust me."

"Are you sure? Maybe they'll mob you."

"I'll take that risk."

"I can't let you do that," said David. "It's too risky."

"David," said Aisha. "I'm not giving you that choice. That's an order. Get me a landing spot down there."

"Okay," said David. "But can I have Soo-Kyung have the guns ready, just in case? You know, some warning shots over their heads?"

"Not a chance. If we don't trust them, they'll never trust us."

"I hope you're right."

"Me too!"

She guided the ship to a flat spot near the end of the runway. The air was thickening with soot from the burning buildings.

"They won't last long out here," said Soo-Kyung. "Do what you can."

Aisha popped on her helmet, and climbed out of the cockpit. Running towards the crowd of people, she started yelling for them to get into the habitat. At first, a few looked at her suspiciously. But

either without a choice, or trusting in a familiar-looking face, one-by-one they turned, coughing and staggering towards the habitat.

The soot and smoke were thickening. Aisha saw people drop to their knees, struggling to breathe. She grabbed an older man, and put him on her shoulder, dragging him toward the habitat, where she put an oxygen mask over his face. Soon she was joined by David and Soo-Kyung, helping to drag people towards safety.

Some men, having breathed clean air in the habitat went back to help others.

It was too thick to see now. Even through her helmet and filters, Aisha began to gag and choke.

"That's all we can get," said David. "We have to lock the habitat."

"We've gotten so few!"

"We can't get any more. Another few minutes and they would all have been dead. Let's save the ones we have!"

She had to agree. Pushing the last few men into the habitat, she used her link to seal the doors. Then she ran back to the Phaeton. As soon as they launched, she docked with the habitat's ring and started flying it westward.

"We've got a problem," said David.

"What?"

"The impacts have caused volcanic and tectonic activity."

"Plain English, please?"

"Earthquakes, volcanos, all kinds of activity. We need to fly above it."

"Not with that habitat."

"We've got no choice."

"Not until I get them to safety."

"I'm not sure *anywhere* is safe right now, Aisha."

"The coast?"

"Maybe."

"Then let's go there."

"This is crazy."

"The quicker we get them to a safe spot, the quicker we can go back to save more."

"We're going back?"

"We're going back."

"You *are* crazy," he said. "But the right kind of crazy. Let's save these people."

Turbulence caused by the superheat from the fires and the gouges in the Earth's surface were rocking them hard, and getting worse.

"Safest way is west, towards the shore."

"Got it," said Aisha. "Full throttle."

"I found a safe landing spot," said David, a rock of calm in the storm. "We're about two minutes out."

"Turbulence ahead," said Soo-Kyung. "Low ceiling."

"Roger," said Aisha, lowering the joystick. The Phaeton turned smoothly, and glided lower. In the distance, on the horizon, she could see the shoreline churning as waves battered it.

"Doesn't look very safe."

"Best we can do," said David. "There's plenty of high ground."

Suddenly the ship rocked, and before Aisha could adjust, there was another jolt, and another, larger than the first. It felt like they hit a brick wall.

"Clear air turbulence," said David. "Get us above it!"

She pulled back on the yoke—but with the pod attached, the Phaeton didn't have its full aerodynamics. It was like flying through soup. It was beginning to stall. A few more moments of this and they'd—

"We're going to crash," said Aisha. "Can't pull out of this!"

She knew what she had to do. She couldn't eject the pod -- that would kill everyone in it instantly. She'd have to crash-land. And only she needed to go down with the ship. David and Soo-Kyung could be saved.

David had the same thought. "Don't do it," he said, but he was too late -- Aisha ejected his and Soo-Kyung's pods to safety.

The ship was rocked again. And again. She turned inland, towards some flat scrub she had seen earlier. That's where they would have to go down.

CHAPTER 13

Aftermath

Have you seen the reports?

Yes, and I find it hard to believe. Let's corroborate before we--

There'll be mass panic the likes we've never seen.

All the more reason to delay.

IN THE MOVIES, a crash landing was usually an epic encounter between the pilot and the conditions around them. But in reality it was much less dramatic. She plotted a course that leveled off her ship, and aimed it at the flat landing area.

After that, all she could do was count off the seconds until impact.

At first it seemed easy -- the ship hit the ground at a narrow angle, and her stomach lurched as it bounced skyward. This impact took most of the inertia out of her path, so she hit the pre-programmed routine to drop the pod. Its controllers would hopefully land it relatively smoothly.

The procedure went perfectly, and she saw the green light as the pod was dropped from a safe height. Then, she was thrown into the controls as it landed again, this time skidding in the dirt and rocks before bouncing skyward.

The ship hit the ground again, this time the nose pushing forward into the dirt. Her restraints held tight, but her head snapped forward, hitting the glass. Everything blurred for a moment, and she passed out.

* * *

It might have been hours, or it might have been days. Everything blurred. There were sensations of being cut out of her cockpit. A familiar face. Patrice. He was on a video monitor in the rescuer's faceplate. She zoned out again. Then, a young girl, smiling. "I can see why he likes you. You're brave. You're bold. You're beautiful." More blurriness. More daze. The sensation of time passing. The unmistakable feeling of a launch. Of moving back into free fall. Gravity falling away. *What's happening to me?* The beeping of medical equipment.

The gruff voice of Simms. "I don't care how much damage she took, you save her or your butt is going back to Earth!"

"He would be so proud of you."

Then silence. Blackness. Days passed? Weeks, maybe? Who knows, maybe even more.

Her eyes snapped open. A lowered head, resting on arms, sleeping at the bottom of her bed. Silky black hair.

"Soo-Kyung?"

The girl snapped awake. She practically jumped to the top of the bed, crushing Aisha with a hug.

"Aisha!"

It hurt everywhere. "Ouch."

"Sorry," said Soo-Kyung, smiling. Aisha could see tears in her eyes. Soo-Kyung never cried. "I thought I was going to lose you."

"David?"

"He's fine, thanks to you. You shouldn't have done that, we would have been--"

Aisha couldn't talk, couldn't argue. Just raised her hand a little. Soo-Kyung understood the signal. She pushed the call sign for the doctor. "Sorry," she said. "And thank you." She smiled a little. "I have some news for you. While you were out--"

"How long?"

"Oh," said Soo-Kyung. "Yeah, I guess you'd want to know that. Just over two weeks. Fifteen days to be exact.

"The pod?"

"That was a brilliant piece of flying. A few bruises and scratches, but they're all okay. The women want to name their children after you. The men, they just want to *marry* you."

Aisha smiled. It hurt.

"Anyway, before the docs come, there's something you should know--"

"What?"

The doctor entered, gently pushing Soo-Kyung aside as he checked the instruments and read Aisha's vitals. "No, not yet. Something's happening on Earth. We'll explain more later, but for now, you need to rest."

He turned toward Soo-Kyung. "And *you* need to let her rest."

Soo-Kyung nodded. She smiled a little at Aisha and touched her hand gently for a moment. The demure face was back. She bowed a little and left.

"What did she mean?"

The doctor ignored her.

"What did she mean?"

"You'll know soon enough." He stopped, and turned away.

"Doctor?"

"All in good time. Now you should rest."

"I don't want to, I want to know what's going on."

In response, he pushed some medication into her IV. Almost instantly, she felt a warm glow, and began to sink into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER 14

Last Hope

We were given a gift, it seems.

You were always such an optimist. How can you call this a 'gift'?

Because there's enough of a remnant to look for a solution. And in so doing, we're given the perfect opportunity to explore the stars, and follow our desired mission without hiding it from the world.

Are you sure you aren't deluded?

Are you sure I am? Think about it. What if this was done deliberately for that very purpose?

By whom?

By those that are out there. Those that might want us to take our place amongst them.

SHE HATED THAT THE DOCTOR kept putting her under. But every time she woke it was for longer periods, and every time she felt a bit stronger. It also hurt less. Progress.

Each time she keenly watched Soo-Kyung. Clearly her friend wanted to tell her something, but the doctors kept ensuring that Aisha would get her rest and not stress herself out.

On the sixth morning she woke up, feeling refreshed, and other than a few aches and pains, she felt sharper than ever. Only the doctor was with her.

"So, what's the big secret? What's going on?"

He peered into her eyes, reading her. "I suppose you're okay now," he said, and pinged his communicator.

To her surprise, Higgins showed up. His gentle smile warmed her.

"What's going on, Sir?"

He sat beside her bed and took her hand in his.

"You likely saved the world from a dinosaur-killer, you know that?"

"Yes," she said. There was something in his voice that disturbed her.

He sighed, looking at her. "Not many people know this yet, but--"

"But what?"

"But the asteroid was more than just an asteroid. It was seeded with something."

"Seeded?"

"With a plague. A disease. Viruses. Top people are working on it now, trying to stop its spread. But it eludes us."

"What?"

"Somebody tried to wipe out mankind. You stopped them. But only for a time. We don't understand it. Some of the people first infected died in hours. Others have the disease dormant in their system, ready to infect on a moment's notice. We have no idea what triggers it."

"But how?"

"It appears to have been intelligently designed. "

"What?"

"It appears to be a biological weapon. One that's impossible to contain or quarantine. It's already spreading like wildfire across Africa. And it's only a matter of time before the entire world succumbs to it."

"I don't understand."

"It's the random dormancy, you see. There's no way to tell if someone is infected or not. It has evaded blood tests and other screenings."

Her mother. Her sister. She saved them, but it was all for nothing. Sooner or later this disease would reach home, and then--

"But all hope isn't lost," said Higgins. "Indeed, hope springs eternal."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll be doing a briefing for the station shortly," he said. "You should come."

* * *

They were packed into the briefing room. Older students, adults and cadets alike. She recognized some of the crew of the *Explorer*, and they nodded and smiled in her direction. Simms had given her the option to sit, but she wasn't having it. She needed to be *here* standing, along with the rest of them.

Matter-of-factly Simms began. "Earth is under quarantine," he said, peering around the room. "Nothing gets in or out. The asteroid that Cadet Parks destroyed wasn't random. It was fired at us deliberately, and if it didn't destroy our civilization on impact, it had another way."

The screen behind him changed to a map of the Earth. Highlighted in red were the impact sites of the asteroid pieces that hadn't burned up in the atmosphere. "It started at the impact site. People dying, seemingly at random. We started to investigate too late."

Yellow dots lit up the screen. They were concentrated in the areas near the impact sites. As Simms advanced the time, it was clear that the deaths were as a result of the impact.

"We have no idea what is causing it," he said. "Autopsies of the bodies showed no infection. No recognizable viruses. Nothing out of the usual. They took on the symptoms of the very sick, and then, within hours, they died."

"It's clear that we are dealing with a very sophisticated virus. A *stealth* virus that avoids detection entirely. Blood tests of those going through the symptoms showed nothing out of the ordinary. It has our best researchers completely stumped."

"As a result, we cannot quarantine the affected areas. Even if we could detect the virus, it's probably too late."

He looked around the room, taking it all in.

"Sir?" Soo-Kyung.

"What is it, Cadet Kim?"

"How do we know it isn't aboard this station?"

"None of us have been on Earth since the impact."

"One of us has," said Soo-Kyung. Her eyes met Aisha's. Others did too. Aisha felt a flush of anger, why was her friend doing this?

"Cadet Parks was in a full isolation suit when she crashed, and was recovered in it. The suit was destroyed and she went through the most rigid decontamination procedures we could think of."

Aisha realized what Soo-Kyung was doing. Better have the question out in the open now, than have thousands of whispers behind her back. She smiled a little, nodding towards her friend, showing that she understood her wisdom.

There was a flicker of recognition in Soo-Kyung's eyes before she looked back to the front.

"Besides," said Simms, "nobody up here has died yet. And until that happens, or we discover the source of the infection, we can assume that it hasn't made it up here, onto the *Explorer*, the moon base or anywhere else."

A voice from the back of the room. "How long? How long before everyone on Earth is infected?"

"At the current rate of transmission, we believe the entire world will be exposed within three years, even with safeguards put in place. And after that, who knows how long until they all...well, let's not let that happen, shall we?"

Just three years. In three years Mother could be gone. Jackie could be gone. Everyone could be gone.

"So," he continued, "starting now our primary mission has changed. It is up to us to discover the source of the infection, and learn what we can about it. We *know* that it is extra-terrestrial in origin. There's no other possible explanation. It's too much of a coincidence that the asteroid appears *now*, when we make our first interstellar jumps. If we find the source of the asteroid, we find the source of the plague. And maybe, just maybe, we'll also find a cure.

"You'll be receiving your assignments in the coming days. In the meantime, call home. Talk to your family. Tell them you love them, and you're doing everything you can to save them. Because you are. You're their greatest hope. Look around. See those people in the

room with you right now? All of history is on their shoulders. All of history is on your shoulders with them. So learn to get along. Learn to work together, and we *will* beat this."

* * *

As they left, she felt Soo-Kyung link her arm. There wasn't much to say. They walked back to their apartment, and sat, sipping coffee as the Earth rotated into view across the windows.

"Three years," said Soo-Kyung.

"Three years," repeated Aisha.

Soo-Kyung's intense gaze returned. "We're going to do this. We're going to succeed, and we're going to save them all."

"Not *all* of them," said Aisha sadly. "But as many as we can."

The Earth continued to rotate across her view. She saw the great frozen north of Canada, and realized that Patrice was down there. Sophie was down there.

I'm here she thought, and someday soon I will be down there with you. We will be together, and we will build the world we dreamed of. We will build a new future for mankind. A future in the stars.

She reached her hand up and touched the glass, watching the Earth beneath.

I promise.

