



*The End.*  
*The Beginning.*

An Omnos Island Short

Odette C Nassar

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An Omnos Island Elementals Short Story

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The sirens went off, the red lights above the door spinning and the wails echoing throughout the labs. Nadia didn't even look up from her screen, going through line after line of system checks, verifying each carefully, knowing that lives were at stake. Her purple plaid shirt was thread-worn but buttoned and tucked into her faded jeans. Despite her focus, her heel tapped against the floor, the tennis shoe tapping a steady beat against the linoleum floors

Az slammed the door open and then pounded his fist against the red button that turned off the alarm systems. Someone had replaced the bright red emergency cover with a vintage Staples easy button and before the alarm turned off, it screeched, "That was easy!"

The room went deafeningly silent. "Nadia, hello? Did you not hear that?"

She lifted a delicate shoulder, cocked her scarf-wrapped head. "I knew you would come in and turn it off eventually. Who is it this time?"

Az ran his hand through his hair, clenching the long strands in a fist before letting them go to flop back, long and straight, around his face. "New group of people who claim that we're living the high life behind the barbed wired fences. Their peaceful march just turned into a riot. They're trying to get in."

Now that he mentioned it, she could make out the faint sound of shouting filtering in through the metal shutters that were cracked open over the windows. Nadia continued scanning the screen in front of her as she tsked. "I guess none of them noticed that we haven't had a food delivery since they planted themselves out there last week," she murmured, her eyes narrowing. "I take it you heard from the higher ups?"

"The save the world compendium that we supposedly work for," Az said, bitterly. "Someone leaked the news about the project."

Nadia kept scanning the screen. "I got that when I came in and everyone had cleared their desks out. Although I have no idea where they went. The safest places right now are all underground."

"With or without them, we're still launching the final two vessels. There's a larger solar flare predicted in 24 hours and the last one dropped communications between the labs down here and the vessel communication systems. Whatever happens, we have to get them out of the earth's orbit according to the schedule. I have promises to keep."

She turned to look at him, noting his deceptively lean body, the worn t-shirt that hugged his shoulders, the holey jeans he wore, and the worn hiking boots on his feet. "We both do, love," she agreed, meeting his eye with a serious stare. "You might want to check your computer. The rolling blackouts have extended to this sector and the backup generators didn't kick in. Ben said that his safety protocols would protect the last info dump to the vessels but the LAN networks have been glitching."

"Damn, piece of shit LAN," Az grumbled. "They should have updated to the dark cloud." He scrambled to his station and tapped in his password. He let out a gusty sigh when his machine turned on and the data he had been working on popped up on his screen. "What were they going to do if this last upload didn't go through? Let everyone on the last two vessels keep circling the earth in cryo forever?"

"We both know that the POC compendium doesn't have the money for that." Nadia turned back to examine her computer screen again. "Something's off."

"Yeah, something's off," Az huffed. "This generations-long project is almost over and suddenly we're having problems that haven't happened since the turn of the millennium. And *now* the leadership is trying to back out? They're completely bonkers. And those nutjobs outside are out of their minds." He strode over to stand behind her, putting his hands on her shoulder. "What do you see?"

She tapped the screen with a fingertip, her tense shoulders relaxing beneath his touch. "It says the systems were recently updated. But we were done with update checks days ago."

“Yeah.” He sat down beside her, leaning in towards the screen, too. “We’ve been following the same pre-launch plan for each vessel. Numbers One, Two, and Three all launched perfectly.”

“I know, may fate guide them true. So what’s this then?”

The alarm went off again and she turned towards the door. The window in the door was filled with a pale face staring at her and she startled. “Holy shit!”

Az turned to look and frowned. “What’s Ben doing here?”

Nadia stood up and stalked to the door. “What *we’re* doing here.” She pressed the button to stop the alarms, the scratchy “That was easy,” filling her with a sense of unease. “Last minute checks, I’m sure.”

She opened the door and faced the man in the now quiet hall. “Ben, how are you doing?”

Ben stared at her owlshly through his glasses and she wondered again why he had never used the free laser vision service to fix his eyesight.

As if he heard her, he blinked a couple of times and shrugged. “I’m fine except for all this racket.”

“Conspiracy rioters.” Az turned back to the screen and scrolled further down the screen. “They don’t get that we have as little food and water as they do.”

“We’re ready to launch the last two vessels.” Ben’s voice was hardly above a whisper. “Just ahead of those flares. And then we don’t have to think about those left behind.”

“That’s right,” Nadia glanced from Ben back to Az. “Your part of the systems checks should already be done, right, Ben?”

Ben stared at Az who was looking more closely at the computer in front of him. “You shouldn’t be looking at *those* files.”

Nadia looked back at Ben with a worried frown. “Why not?”

“I already took care of system checks. Everything’s as it should be.”

Az spun in his chair and faced them both. "Nadia and I are the last two to check things before launch since everyone's gone." He leaned back. "We're just doing our due diligence, right?"

Ben's face remained expressionless as he continued to stare at the screen behind Az's shoulder. "Everything's as it should be."

Nadia tilted her head. "Ben, are you alright?"

Ben started and glanced nervously at her and then away. "I'm fine," he murmured, turning away and shuffling down the hall. "Keep those alarms off, can you?"

Nadia didn't waste time watching him walk away. She let the door close and went back to her chair. "Did you see anything else?"

"The cryonic systems are all functioning just fine," he said, leaning in until their shoulders touched as he switched screens. "Those are the full ones. Those are the empties. One for you. One for me. One extra for Ben." He pointed at the different interface.

She scanned the systems and nodded her agreement. "And when I checked the greenhouses and seed banks, everything was primed exactly. The hydroponics systems, too. They're all fully functional and set for when the first person comes out of their pod. Plasma's full and the solar arrays are all secure. In fact, the vessels are already regenerating their fuel cells. So we know that they're OK for the trip."

Az was flipping through tab after tab, scrolling further and further down the screen until he stopped with a swift intake of breath. He scrolled up and then back down again, focusing on the screen in front of him. "What the fuck?"

Nadia looked at the open tab where he had stopped. "What happened?"

"It's the data banks, they've been tampered with. Those are the tech files for once the vessels land. And it looks like some are missing."

"Time stamp says this morning," Nadia muttered. "Only you and I were here."

"And Ben. But he's meticulous about those files. He doesn't let *anyone* touch them."

“And he’s got them encrypted.” She gripped her lips together. “Something’s not right and we need to figure out what’s going on.” She glanced back at the door. “Do you want to ask Ben to check them or should I?”

Before Az could answer, the alarm went off again. Despite the cacophony, Az pointed at her and she rolled her eyes. But she left the room to find Ben, stopping the alarm before she let the door close behind her.

## 2

Az watched her leave and then turned back to the computer in front of him. “Let’s see what’s missing here.” He rested his hands on the keyboard before tapping in sequence after sequence, searching for the missing information. “Let’s fix this for our future, right, Papa? Only two more launches and we’re done,” he whispered under his breath.

He sucked in his breath when he came upon the gaps of the missing data. All computer and communication technology past the beginning of the millennia had been expunged. “What the hell happened here?” he asked, squinting his eyes as he typed in an undo command that should have returned everything to what it had been before.

Nothing came up except an error message that read, “-250: Omnia ut oportet.”

“What the bloody hell? What the fuck does that mean?”

Vessel Four and Vessel Five, the one that Nadia had nicknamed, Mo’s Ride, were orbiting the earth, waiting for the final launch sequence. Az tried to access the databases linked to them and received the same error message. He leaned back in his chair, his hands on his head as he tried to think of how he could get the information back.

He turned around when he heard the door open again. Nadia stood in the door.

“We’ve got a problem,” Az stated at the same time that she said, “Ben’s gone.”

Before they could say another word, the alarms went off again. And both of them could hear the sound of metal screeching.



Nadia hunched her shoulders at the sound but this time when she tried to disable the alarms, they wouldn't silence. "Shit, shit, shit." She dashed to a large console that was pushed against the far wall and pressed a sequence of buttons. Within moments, the sounds of clanging metal echoed over the sounds of the alarm.

When the final scrape of metal against metal echoed down the hall, the alarm silenced leaving her leaning against the edge of the large machine, her palms hanging over the edge.

"What did you just do, Nadia?"

"I bought us time." She turned around and met his curious gaze. "This particular safety protocol has been in the works for decades, since my dad worked here. We're basically in an environmentally inaccessible bunker."

"Built to protect the second floor and higher, the brains of the operation." Az leaned his head back. "Unfortunately, that's the problem. Someone hacked into the brains and lobotomized information."

"What?" Nadia asked, moving to stand beside him, her hand resting on his arm. "Show me."

Az turned around and showed her, explaining what had happened. "Basically, hundreds of years of information has been erased. All of them tech and communication."

"What's that?" She pointed to the edge of the error message that was peeking out from behind another tab.

Az clicked on it and Nadia clenched her jaw. "That's the error message I keep getting."

"Fates curse him to eternal life on earth," Nadia ground out.

Az looked at her, noting her flushed cheeks and clenched jaw. "What is it?"

"That error message is Latin, Az. It says, *all things are as they ought to be.*"

“Wait, what? Isn’t that what Ben just said to us not more than fifteen minutes ago?”

They heard a loud banging from down the hall and Nadia narrowed her eyes as Az stood up. “Someone made it to this floor which means they breached the building. No rioting looters have the means to do that.” Nadia stood at the door.

Az followed her, moving into the hall. “Who is it then?”

As if to answer his question, they heard a bull-horn bellow, “Open these barriers. We are the United World West Armed Forces. You are being arrested for your false claims about global devastation and other crimes against this earth and humanity.”

Az released a short, disbelieving laugh. “Are they serious?”

“How would they know what we’re doing in here?” Nadia tilted her head to the side, staring into the middle distance. “Shit, Az, what time is it?”

“Seriously?” Az asked, flipping his wrist and looking at the old school analog watch that hung loosely around it. “It’s 6 o’clock.”

Nadia returned to her desk and typed the URL for the news feed. A black woman with her head wrapped in a plain gray bandeau addressed the camera in the typical voice of a newscaster. “An ultra secret sect of scientists that have been creating a supposed escape from the planet’s surface has revealed their grand plans. They have acknowledged that for over a century an undisclosed group of hand-chosen and highly trained employees have been clandestinely working on a plan to remove innocent citizens from earth. Their plan to send space vehicles filled with frozen bodies has been put to an immediate halt by authorities. The group’s leaders claim that no one has been harmed during this process but refuses to disclose any of their records. Tune in for further news and interviews with cryogenic experts who assert that the technology, halted one hundred and fifty years ago, is dangerous to all mammalian life forms.”

“That’s bullshit. Cryogenics were completely tested and approved for general use long before the current government canceled the program.”

“We know that. The people living on the streets don’t.” Nadia turned off the monitor. “And someone leaked all of our plans to the news, making all of us criminals.”

They heard the pounding again. "Open up these doors before we blast our way through them!"

"What do you want to do?" Az asked, standing beside his own computer station and looking down at the multiple tabs on his screen. "We've been shoved under the bus."

"How long will it take you to fix it?" Nadia asked, striding to the door again. She flicked the switch and the room was plunged into darkness except for the eerie glow of their computer screens.

"From what I can see, I can't fix this at all, Nadia. Those aren't just error messages. They're blocking me from accessing the databases for any reason."

"So how long?" she asked, shooting him a grin before looking down the dark hall.

"Shit. Nadia, shit." He pushed his hair back from his head again and looked down at his screen. "Maybe a couple of hours to see?"

She took a deep breath. "Probably don't have that long but start anyway. I'm going to distract them. Let you do your computer magic. See if I can get them to leave. Somehow."

"Nadia!" Az shouted as she dashed down the hall. "Dammit!" He looked at his computer, torn between going after her or doing as she ordered. He looked back towards the door and then sat down at his chair. "Ben, I know you did this, you crazy fucker."

He tapped into the network, searching for a hole to get in and find the missing information and upload it to the vessels circling unseen above them. Just like his dad before him, he had promised the new colonists the technology to start anew on another earth-like planet. And one of those colonists was his sister. No way was he going to let her down.

Nadia ran down the hall, turning off the lights that flickered on as she passed, and searching for anything she could use to distract the Army. Labs One to Five had been decommissioned already; the hoods, the incubators, the equipment, and the computers had all been wiped. Each had been cleaned out and shut down once the information and the necessary equipment had been loaded into their respective vessels circling high above the earth.

All the scientists had hoped that if they left the stuff available, someone might find it useful in the coming days on earth. Food was scarce and people subsisted on compressed food rations. Housing was just as scarce and the fluctuations of refugees that kept moving from one nature-devastated region to the next was taking its toll on every resource. At the very least, the building was standing and the ancient thick cement walls not only managed to shelter from the UV rays but kept the interior a few degrees cooler than the sweltering heat outside.

She didn't know if the stuff left behind would be of any use now. Not if people were rioting. Once they found out that the food and water shortages that were happening outside of the fence were the same inside the research facility, she suspected that there would be mass destruction. "You can't eat lab equipment."

Nadia continued down the hall as it circled back around and she passed the metal panels that blocked the elevator shafts and the stairwells. As she ran by, the pounding sounded again.

"In the name of the United World West Armed Forces, open these doors!"

"Distraction. Need a distraction," she breathed out as she flew back to the lab in the furthest opposite corner, propping open the door. "Get them out of the building."

She took a quick look out of the window, peering between the shutters at the brightly lit courtyard outside. The large planters were empty now. Even the trees that had once circled the cement were gone; first, dried up and dead, then cut down for fuel.

She huffed out a sad laugh. The people still hadn't understood how the smoke would even further effect the state of the ozone layer.

She shook her head in a quick movement. That was years and years ago. There were no trees, no flowers, no greenery anywhere. All of it scalded by the UV rays that streamed through the too thin ozone layer.

Some of the troops were standing outside, their old-fashioned machine guns strapped to their backs. She saw the handful of them talking to the rioters who had decided to come around to the back of the building. More than a few of them were checking the dumpsters in the back. She had heard what the people on the street thought about the secure facility when she rode the public transport to and from work. They had wild stories of food, drugs, drinks, and parties that lasted for days.

"You won't find anything in those bins but dust," she whispered, scanning the different individuals. Unlike the enforcers who were completely covered in their heavy-duty uniforms, many of the rioters wore nothing more than tank-tops and shorts, trying to keep cool in the heat. Just from her cursory glance, she could see that much of the exposed skin on the rioters was covered in black spots and open lesions. Some of them were oozing and she remembered the vintage show that used to play on the vids. The people below looked very similar to the zombies. She rolled her eyes at the fanciful thought but couldn't suppress the shudder at the onset of the cancers that she could see with her own eyes.

Forcing herself to focus, Nadia ducked down low, looking through the cabinets, rifling through the empty containers searching for something that she could toss out a window to distract the enforcers and bring them around to this side of the building. She had almost lost hope when she reached into the back of a lower cabinet and felt a metal container. She reached in further, pushing her body almost all the way in, and slid a cylindrical container out.

"NH<sub>4</sub>NO<sub>3</sub>," she whispered, frowning in concentration, as she opened the lid. The container was half filled with white pellets. "NH...Ammonium Nitrate? Flammable

under the right conditions and...a perfect distraction. The fates are watching over me," she said, grimly.

She closed the lid and heard the pounding on the metal door get louder. She tucked the container under her arm and then frowned at the sound of more screeching metal from the first floor and then the shattering of glass. She crept back to the bank of windows and looked out again. The crowds had gotten bigger and she instantly changed her plans as they thronged around the building, challenging the enforcers now.

She studied the scene below. Even though the people were destined to die painful deaths from the carcinoma eating their bodies, she couldn't knowingly throw a bomb into the midst of them. They were still humans. Even the enforcers. She tapped the top of the tin and then tucked it into the front of her shirt. It would have to wait for another opportunity.

She flinched at the sound of more breaking glass and saw that the rioters were starting to break into more of the lower-level windows. She sat back down, pressing her back to the wall. "Shit."

They were out of time. She didn't know how long before they would start on the second story windows. They didn't know that the windows were shatter-proof behind the UV blocking shutters. But even then, the metal-sheeted bullet-proof protection of the lockdown code didn't extend to the windows. She and Az were locked in. Once the enforcers figured that out, she had no doubt that they would get ladders to try and breach the second floor.

She grabbed the fire extinguisher from the wall and then dashed back to the door, running back to the main offices where Az was slouched over his desk, tapping at his keyboard frantically.

"Can you work remotely?"

"Shit! Fuck! Shit, shit, shit, no!" Az tried to type faster as his screen blurred with more and more of the same error message, overlapping each other. He tried to reboot his machine in a quick move and they both watched as the screen went dead.

“What just happened?” Nadia asked, letting the door close behind her with a thud that muted the sounds of the pounding coming from the hall and the breaking glass coming from the floor below.

Az leaned back in his chair, his head back, his hands over his face. “Mo’s Ride is fucked.”

## 5

Az waited for the yelling, the recriminations, the fury to come from Nadia. But all he got was silence. He dropped his hands to lap and slowly swiveled in his chair to face her. “I fucked up. I’m sorry, Nadia.”

She tilted her head at him, eyeing his bloodshot eyes and his tousled hair. “Before you tell me why you’re sorry, what happened?”

“Ben’s the only one who could have done it.” He blew out a breath of air.

“Done *what*, Az?” she asked, putting the fire extinguisher down beside her. “We’re out of time here. So what happened? The really, *really* short version.”

“Someone booby trapped the datafiles.” Az rubbed his hands on his thighs. “I couldn’t find a backdoor and when I tried to hack in, the files started erasing.”

Nadia squeezed her eyes shut and then opened them. “You said *only* the tech and communication files, right?”

“Yeah. I’m such an *idiot!*”

Nadia reached out and gently gripped his ears, tilting his head up to look at her, neither one of them focused on the sounds of the rioters now entering the lower floor of the building. “You’re not an idiot. You’re a genius. You’re *my* genius.” She pressed her forehead to his. “But unfortunately, we’re out of time. We need to get out of here before the enforcers figure out they can get in through the windows.”

Az met her calming gaze and nodded in a quick motion. “I’ll bring my laptop and...” he stopped talking as his face lit up. “Wait. How could I have forgotten? The backup files are stored in the building.”

Nadia stepped back from him. "The networks are shut down, Az. You can't access files stored here or anywhere on the LAN."

"I don't have to use the network if I just plug straight into the data servers," he stood up, gripping her shoulders. "The *physical* servers. Those big, chunky, fates-blessed, wastes of space according to every tech person ever."

Before Nadia could respond, they heard the sounds of guns and the pinging of bullets on the steel doors. "We have to get out of here, Az." She picked up the fire extinguisher and her loaded backpack from her cubicle.

Az shoved his laptop into his own backpack along with a couple of framed pictures. He dumped an entire cup full of pens and other detritus into the bag and then zipped it up, slinging it over his shoulder. "Where?"

Nadia stood at the door waiting for him. "We need to get to the warehouse. We need to get the shuttles out and see if we can fix things at the source. On Mo's Ride."

"Green Machine's still in underground parking." Az grinned at her.

"You mean the death trap," Nadia said under her breath.

"And the server room is down there, too. Two birds. One stone."

Nadia huffed out a frustrated breath. "Fine. It's not like we have a choice, do we?"

They both turned at the sound of whirring machinery and a grinding sound at the end of the hall. "Remind me again. How do we get out of here if the elevators and the stairs are closed?" Az asked, hitching his backpack higher and slipping his arm through the other loop.

"We go up and slide down. Right into the garage and the underground tunnels. Follow me."

"Forever," Az whispered, running after her as she ran towards the steel plates and the sounds of the enforcers trying to get in.



Nadia swung around the corner, ignoring the amplified sounds coming from behind the steel doors where the elevator doors used to be. She faced the wall directly across from them and stared at herself in the huge ornately framed mirror that stood there, a design throwback from one of the original ancient founders. She could see both her and Az's reflections and fleetingly, she wondered how they both looked so calm.

Then she stepped forward and ran her hands along the edge of the mirror, sliding her fingers between the frame and the wall until she felt the small latch. She pressed her lips together and slid it up, releasing a catch.

The mirror swung away from the wall like a huge, heavy door, revealing a set of stairs leading up to the next floor.

"Whaaaaat?" Az whispered behind her.

She yanked him forward, pushing him towards the stairs and then followed him in. She tried to pull the door closed behind her, pulling the edge of the frame towards her. But there was no handle to latch it shut again and after trying, she finally gave up and ran up the stairs after Az, leaving the frame slightly ajar.

She tore past Az who stood at the top of the stairs waiting for her and ran into the corner office, the door slamming so hard against the wall that it bounced back and clicked shut behind Az who was right behind her.

He didn't think twice, pressing the lock as they both dropped to the floor just as they heard the loud squealing of whatever saw they were using cut through the steel doors.

"It's here. They all swore it's here," she was muttering under her breath as she crawled to the huge, ornately designed desk, Az at her heels. She slipped behind it, running her hands along the high-end wood looking plastic. Then she ducked her head under the desk, sliding the chair out of the way.

On the back wall of the small space, above the spot where the executive officer probably would have rested his feet, she saw a small red button. "Got it. I just hope to the fates that it closes up behind us. Come on."

Az slid as close to her as he could. She fumbled with the button and they both heard someone shout, "Four of you check this floor. You and you, try and find a way to the next floor. And destroy any records you find."

Nadia bit her lip and then, glancing at Az for confirmation, she pressed the button.

## 7

In the moments before Nadia had pressed the button, Az had slipped his legs around hers, cradling her next to his body. When the trap door underneath them slid open, he was able to wrap his arms around her, her backpack, and the fire extinguisher she still cradled in her hands.

They slid down a narrow chute that barely fit them and their stuff. He glanced back at the opening and saw that the trapdoor was slowly lifting, blocking the chute and the light with it. He ducked his head, tucking his ear next to Nadia's, his skin rubbing against the soft cotton of her scarf.

In what felt like moments, their feet hit the closed hatch at the bottom of the chute. He braced himself with his feet, cradling Nadia between his legs as she felt around the frame looking for the release.

A soft hiss told him that she had found it. They both sat poised and listening for any sound coming from behind the door. After minutes of silence, Nadia carefully opened the door and slid out.

## 8

The garage was dark except for the soft glow of the LED emergency lights. As she stood up, cautiously, Az climbed out of the chute and stood behind her. She could

feel him crowding her back and she whispered, "I've never been to the server rooms. Have you?"

She could hear him shift his shoulders and hitch his backpack higher on his back. "No," he whispered back. "But I've got a feeling. Give me a second."

Nadia turned her head to the side, listening to what he was doing. Her thoughts were racing as she processed what he had said. This was what she had been trying to tell the leadership. Almost 75% of the people who had volunteered and passed the rigorous physical and psychological testing to colonize another planet had all described moments when they had a "feeling."

She felt Az turn in a circle and then stop when he was facing a darkened corner. "It's over there."

Nadia peered into the pitch blackness, unilluminated by even the emergency lighting. She bit back her hesitation. After her testing, she knew better to question him and, what the top scientists had dismissed as intuition. But still, she paused and he stepped out in front of her.

"I'll go get it." He stepped away from her.

"We go together, Az." She shifted the fire extinguisher from one arm to the other as she reached into her back pocket for her flashlight at the same time that he reached for his.

Az flipped it on and sighed. "Remember when we could use our smartphones for everything?"

"Remember when we found out that the media was hacking into our personal information using our smartphones?" she answered back, flipped hers on and casting the light around them. "Besides, you know that with the weird weather over the years, the majority of the cell towers went down and never went back up. Not to mention that the underground labs basically rendered our smartphones useless."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Az turned his light towards the darkened corner and they could both see a metal paneled door. "But they were still handy to have around."

She followed him as he strode confidently towards it. Az slid his finger down the latch inset into the metal frame. He hooked his finger inside and pulled, the latch clicking quietly as the door pinged open, releasing a small puff of pressurized air. He opened the door wider and Nadia shined her flashlight with his into the room.

Nadia eyed the tall, black, glass-fronted machines lined in four ominous rows that seemed to stretch back a long way. "How are you going to figure out which part of this mess has the information you need?" she asked in a low voice, cringing at the way the room sucked in the sound.

Az stepped in without saying anything. Nadia stepped in after him, pulling the door until it only stood open a crack. She turned and watched him as his eyes scanned the different rows. He took a deep breath and then closed his eyes and she swore she saw his fingertips glow, something she had never heard about before.

Then his eyes flew open. "Got it." He moved to the third bank of servers and began walking down the row. She stood at the end of the aisle and watched as he slid his fingers down the stack until he was almost one-third of the way down from the top. He tucked his flashlight into his pocket with the light pointing up at the ceiling.

Her eyes widened as she confirmed that, yes, his fingertips *were* glowing. He yanked open the glass front and carefully pulled out the server he needed, gently pulling the cords from the back to release it. He kept looking back and forth down the aisle of servers, his shadow moving eerily through the illumination of his flashlight and hers.

Nadia watched as he pulled off the back pack and shoved the server inside. The soft unintelligible sounds he muttered under his breath was sucked into the darkness around them.

"What are you saying?" she whispered, her senses tuned to their safety.

"Remember that chant the CS TAs used? About data storage?"

"Bit, byte, kilo, mega, giga, tera, beta... Yeah?"

“Peta, exa, zetta, yotta, bronta, sigma, epsi,” he continued, zipping his backpack and hoisting it on his back. “The last processor size that was ever invented was the omni.”

“Yeah? So?”

“I just remembered that it was discovered by Ben’s dad who also managed to store the server and the data storage in one compact unit.” Az lifted his shoulder as he joined Nadia where she stood. “The only problem he had with the design was keeping it cool enough. The fans had to be running all the time or there was risk of the servers catching on fire.”

“What are you getting at, Az?” she asked impatiently.

“Why aren’t the servers powered up? And the fans on? Every unit in here is a Kenntemp server from Ben’s dad’s old company.”

Nadia looked around the dark room, her flashlight flickering over the dark servers. Her heart sank and her brain started sending her warnings. She shined her flashlight on Az, keeping it out of his eyes. “They’re destroying the data.”

“If they haven’t already.” He stiffened and she narrowed her eyes as she caught the faint scent, too.

“Is that smoke?”

“Shit.” Az turned around to scan the back of the room. Both of them could see smoke starting to snake around the server racks. “Time for us to leave.”

Nadia turned to the door, turning off her flashlight and tucking it into her pocket. She nudged the door open slightly, a second sense making her cautious. She peered around the edge of the door, hearing the sound of crackling flames behind her.

She cursed in her head when she saw two enforcers standing by the open elevator doors. She tucked back into the room and squatted down, pulling Az lower. She pulled his head down and spoke right next to his ear. “Two guards by the elevator doors. Straight line of sight. When we open the door, we’re sitting ducks.”

She felt Az nod his head, his cheek brushing against hers. "We need to distract them enough so that we can get to the Green Machine." He pulled his backpack off his shoulder, opened it, and started digging through the bottom.

Nadia watched as the smoke increased, the smell of burning plastic filling the room. "Az, we've got to get out of here. What are you looking for?"

"This." He pulled out a string of firecrackers. "Leftover from the last epic prank during the company banquet. I'll toss them left, further into the garage."

Nadia sank lower, the smoke starting to gather around them now. "I shouldn't be surprised that you have illegal fireworks from five years ago in your backpack. But it works for me. When we open the door the smoke is going to come pouring out. That should distract them first." She scooted over to give him room. "Get closer to the door."

Az stepped closer to the door, his hand giving her shoulder a quick squeeze before he reached into his pocket for his lighter. She could feel the tin of the ammonium nitrate shift and she glanced back into the clouds of smoke. She could see flickers of flames now.

"Nadia Bintel-Zeki and Abdul-Aziz Camerena, we know you're down here," the amplified sound of the enforcers shout rang through the garage. "Reveal yourself to the tracer bots and you won't be harmed."

"Yeah, right. I bet they're set for rainbows and butterflies." Az shifted as he used an old metal twisty-tie to fasten a smooth river rock to the end of the string as a weight.

Nadia ground her teeth together, her mind flashing back to her mother's exhausted face, the torn look on her face like she regretted that her body was giving out when there was so much to do. The sores that covered her neck and hands growing because as a peacekeeper and nurse, those were the parts of her body she couldn't keep covered. Her mother had tried to give other people peaceful endings and had died in pain instead of dying in peace, like she deserved.

Nadia pulled the tin out from her shirt and looked at it. She wouldn't have to do anything but leave the tin here. Az began, "On the count of three."

Nadia swallowed, remembering her dad and her grandfather and the hours of time they spent on this project with the hope that humanity wouldn't die when the earth did.

"One."

She clenched her teeth as she thought of her father's last words to her, to keep up hope, to keep working hard. To preserve the history of earth and its people even though his name had been erased from every single record.

"Two."

She hung her head and whispered, "I miss you, baba." She heard the scritch of the lighter as Az lit the long fuse on the string of firecrackers. She gripped the long, thin tube tightly in her hands.

"Three," he whispered, cracking open the door and tossing the string further into the depths of the garage.

"Sorry, mama, baba," she breathed as she rolled the tin into the growing heat towards the back of the room at the same time that Az pulled the door open further. Clouds of black smoke poured out of the door at the same time as the firecrackers began popping.

The enforcers shouted and ran towards the sound and as soon as they passed the server room, she and Az slipped out and around the corner. "We need to get out of here, fast, Az." She hoisted the fire extinguisher in her arms. "Before the whole place blows."

They ran towards the electric charging units by the back garage door, unseen. "Burning servers are just going to fill the place with caustic smoke." He threw his leg over the seat of his ancient faded green electric motorcycle.

"Not when the flames hit the Ammonium Nitrate," Nadia declared, as she climbed on behind him. Nadia pulled the safety pin from the extinguisher as she tucked it between their bodies.

Az started it up, the sound as subtle as a small cough. "Are you sure you have enough power in this thing?" she whispered behind his neck.

“I would have said yes before you told me that the place was probably going to blow us all to kingdom come.” Az revved up his engine as he pulled up to the exit gate and it slowly began opening.

Nadia turned at the sound of popping, just as the enforcers rounded the corner and saw them waiting at the gate. They ran towards the bike, bringing up their guns to shoot. “Az, they’re behind us!”

The rapping sound of the guns behind them followed as Az swung the bike around and pushed through the gate. As they sped up and crested the parking garage ramp, more enforcers came running.

“Dammit!” Nadia pulled up the fire extinguisher. As Az increased his speed and the enforcers got closer, she pulled the trigger, spraying the closest ones with a fine layer of the toxic flame retardant.

Moments later, the ground shook as a large explosion rocked the building, the booming sound crumbling the walls behind them. She turned back to look at the building, trying to ignore the enforcers’ screams of pain. Further back, the rest of the enforcement units were milling around, trying to organize and battle the fire that was crawling up the building walls.

As Az began to weave the bike to avoid the shots coming at them, she noted that many of the enforcers had stopped following them and turned back to help with the fire. Nadia sprayed a few more blasts from the extinguisher at the enforcers who were still following them, their enhanced armor making them fast enough to chase a speeding motorcycle. Then she cursed as the spray sputtered out.

She and Az were picking up speed and as they neared the end of the gated compound. The enforcer standing at the gate stood in the center of the road, his gun aimed right at them. The empty cruiser shuttle that had brought the enforcers stood empty to the side.

Nadia swung her arm around, putting the extinguisher in front of Az’s chest and clutching it with both hands, using it to shield his torso. She could feel her heart rate increasing and her chest warming up as she stared at the guard. He didn’t flinch,



focusing on their speedy approach, waiting for them to get close enough to shoot without missing.

Nadia felt as if time was slowing down as she watched the guard press on the trigger and Az swerve the bike to avoid the blast. She could feel her entire body tense and then a hazy screen appeared in front of them. Az gunned the bike and almost flew by the guard who fell back as they passed, a stunned look on his face.

As they turned the corner, careening past two more parked cruiser shuttles, she turned and saw that another one was following them. "Fates damn them!" she yelled, pulling the extinguisher tank around and flinging it back, watching it carefully as it bounced over the front end of the cruiser, then the windshield. In the next moment, the glass windshield shattered. Nadia watched over her shoulder as the cruiser veered from one side of the street to the other before smashing into an abandoned building and going up in flames.

She turned back around, clutching at Az's chest as they sped down the street, the adrenaline pumping through her. She glanced at the hazy sky above them and ducked her head down, calculating the risks of exposure as they sped down the street.

## 9

Az didn't let up on the speed, traveling down empty side streets that he knew weren't on the government's camera route. A couple of times he shifted into hover mode when the street was blocked by debris from the buildings surrounding them. By the time they swung into the deserted warehouse that held the final two interstellar shuttles waiting to rendezvous with the vessels, the motorcycle was out of juice.

Az noticed that Nadia was pale but she managed to climb off the bike and close the warehouse door as he guided the vehicle into the dim warehouse.

He swung off the bike, feeling something wet trickling down his arm as he swung his backpack off his shoulders. He pressed his hand against his shoulder and when he pulled it away, he saw blood. "Well, shit," he muttered, dropping his backpack at his feet.

“What?” Nadia turned towards him

“I’m bleeding,” he said, matter-of-factly.

“What?! Az!” She pulled him closer to a patch of golden light that was seeping through a dirty window high above them and turned him around. He didn’t like the fact that she was silent as she pulled his shirt to the side.

“Why are you so quiet?”

“Nothing. Take off your shirt, love,” she said tersely.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw the grim look on her face and the way she shrugged her backpack higher on her stiff shoulders. He pulled his t-shirt off, feeling a twinge in his shoulder as he lifted his arm. He looked down at the front of his shoulder and saw something protruding under the skin. “What the fuck?” he exclaimed, pressing his finger against it and feeling a burst of pain shoot through him. “What is that?”

She swallowed, convulsively. “It’s a piece of safety glass. I guess from the cruiser?”

He could feel her pressing against the edge of the wound with her fingertips, every nudge making his muscle ache. “The cruiser shuttle that impossibly crashed after being hit by an empty fire extinguisher?”

She made a sound in the back of her throat.

“Just like the way that the guard shot at us point blank but we didn’t even see, hear, or feel the bullet?” he asked, gritting his teeth at her continued poking.

“You need to be quiet because I need to fix this, Az,” she warned, softly. “It’s probably going to be incredibly painful but you have to trust me that I won’t let you bleed out, ok?”

“Are you trying to reassure me, Nadia? Or scare the shit out of me?”

“It might be helpful if you lay down on the ground.” She rubbed her hands together when he dropped flat on to his chest. “I would offer you something to bite on but I don’t want you to break your teeth on anything in here.”

He snorted out a laugh. Then he closed his eyes as he heard her talking to herself. “OK. Pull it out and then stop the bleeding. Easy peasy, right?”

“How are you going to stop the bleeding?” Az asked, a small frown on his forehead. “Did you take the mandated first aid class?”

“Really, Az?” He felt her smoothing her palms against the wound. He heard her inhale and then incredible searing pain tore through his body before he felt her hands pressing against his shoulder.

“Fucking fuck!” he exclaimed, feeling his shoulder and then his back warm up. “Holy shit!”

Nadia didn’t say anything taking deep breath after deep breath as he felt the area around the wound get hotter and hotter. “Nadia...” he grunted through his clenched teeth.

“Just a little bit more, Az. Just...” He could feel her hands press into him. He felt the heat peak and then rapidly cool until finally, it was just the feel of her hands rubbing small circles into his skin.

Then her touch was gone and he heard a bump. He turned his head to see that she had fallen away from him, landing on her butt. He rolled over and sat up, feeling nothing but a lingering twinge in his shoulder. But Nadia didn’t look as good.

“Nadia, what did you do?” he asked, kneeling beside her and cradling the back of her shoulders with one of his arms. Her skin was so pale, he could practically see through it to the blood veins underneath.

“Just need some food,” she responded, her eyes not fully focused as they looked into his. “I have a nutrient bar in my backpack.”

Az made sure she could sit on her own before reaching for her backpack and rummaging through it. He found the bar, opened it, and handed it to her.

She took a bite as he rotated his arm. “What *was* that? My shoulder is completely healed. How did you do that?”

## 10

Ben’s eerie voice echoed from the dark recesses of the building. “It’s what I meant when I said everything’s as it should be.”

Nadia continued eating her nutrient bar, feeling it fuel her flagging reserves even as her heart rate increased. She scanned the building as she felt Az stiffen beside her and then stand up.

“Ben, you fucking lunatic, you sabotaged the data on the vessels.” Az’s hands clenched as his voice echoed around the space, too.

Ben shuffled out from behind the far shuttle. He was grinning widely, maniacally. “Dr. Bintel-Zeki, you didn’t know that *I* knew about your research, did you?”

Az scowled, not tearing his eyes from where Ben stood. “What’s he talking about, Nadia?”

Ben laughed, the sound coming from the absent-minded, eccentric scientist so strange it made Nadia flinch. “Why did you think she was on the team, Dr. Camerena? On the *screening* team. She’s not a psychologist or an internist.”

“She’s a geneticist. One of the best.” Az looked from Ben to Nadia and then back to Ben. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“It has everything to do with *everything*, you fool!” Ben shouted, his anger sudden and loudly accusing. “Dr. Bintel-Zeki discovered an interesting anomaly in the human genome. Didn’t you?” he asked her, his voice softening.

Nadia tilted her head, eyeing the scientist as she swallowed her last bite. She still didn’t feel strong but at least she wasn’t ready to pass out like before. She sighed, not wanting to have to deal with Ben and not wanting to have to explain her discovery to Az. At least not right at that minute.

“I couldn’t tell you before, Az.” Slowly, gracelessly, she stood up and put her hands on her hips, facing Ben but giving her attention to Az. “It was top secret. In fact, it was just me and my dad working on the original research from my grandfather.”

“Well, the data’s gone. The project’s gone,” Az declared, roughly. “And if I’m guessing correctly, we’re going to be disappeared as soon as the United World enforcers catch up with us. So why don’t you share, Doctor?”

She grit her teeth at his use of her formal title then lifted her shoulder in a half shrug. "Don't be angry, Az. It's going to sound crazy when I tell you but...remember all those ancient fairy tales and folk tales from centuries ago?"

"They were banned long before I started school. Before *we* started school." Az scanned her face. "We had to search for them like contraband."

"Yes, well, it turns out that they were banned for a reason. The stories all carried a grain of truth about humanity's abilities."

Ben cackled gleefully. "The wicked witches and the powerful wizards...all those myths and legends were really true!"

"What?" Az asked, gripping her shoulders. "Nadia, what does that mean?"

"When scientists first mapped out the human genome, they used information they had at *that* time. Since then, further research discovered some anomalies. And with each new increase in technology, more alleles were found to have additional traits associated with them. Traits that weren't easily explained."

Az released her and took a step back. "Like what, Nadia?"

"Like your sixth sense finding things. And the way you dodge things coming at you, as if you know which direction they're heading." Her shoulders slumped. "Like Professor Martin's ability to know when the top brass were going to show up. Like..."

"Like the way my sister can tell when the weather is going to shift?" Az asked, frowning. "Is that why you added her to the colonization list last minute? What about her husband? Does he have something that you're planning to use in your studies, too? Or are they going to be taken advantage of on a new planet, like my dad was here? Are they even safe or were they just chosen for their magical abilities?"

Nadia stepped back, shocked at his accusation. "I would *never* do that, Az. Besides, you see what happens when someone uses their abilities in a focused concentration."

Az narrowed his eyes as he scrutinized her wan expression. "You. You have some of those abilities."

“And it takes a ton of energy. I could use about three more of those nutrient bars right now.”

He rubbed the scar on his shoulder as he stared at her. “I don’t get it. Why would you and your dad and your grandfather be doing this kind of research?”

“Shortsighted, just like everyone one else on this project. Just like the leadership who wanted me to find a way to weaponize your research.” Ben edged further into the shadows. “Get rid of people who are competing for resources. Exploit the special abilities that help plant growth or water management. They just wanted more power. More money. They didn’t care about the new worlds we’ve been working to colonize. Camarena, you’d be an idiot if *you* don’t see the potential for starting over with these new, sustainable human traits. Instead of using technology that only destroys as it gets stronger, people could use their own natural abilities to build new worlds. A fresh start on a new planet.”

Nadia turned her attention to him. “That’s what you mean by *everything is as it should be*?”

Az added, “And why you deleted the tech and comm files?”

Ben’s laughter rang out in eerie peals that echoed throughout the building and Nadia smelled the familiar scent of smoke. “Out with the old. In with the new. And it will *all* be better in the new worlds. *Five* new worlds if everything goes as we planned. Everything will be better without the tech we have now. I made sure of that.”

The room filled with the sound of a computerized voice stating, “Vessel Four-Eight-Seven-Seven-Five-Two-Four launching in five, four...”

“Wait. What?” Az looked from Nadia to the deep shadows where Ben had disappeared.

“...one. The vessel has launched. May fate guide them true,” the computer stated, the blessing strange to hear in the synthetic voice.

“Ben! What are you doing? Those people will have only half of the information they need to re-build!” Nadia called. There was no response from the crazed man. A

few seconds later, the fire alarm began to shriek and both of them smelled smoke on the air.

“Shit, why didn’t I see this coming?” Nadia rubbed her forehead.

“We need to get the fuck out of here before the enforcers show up along with the firefighters.” Az pulled her to the shuttle closest to them. “We need to fix Mo’s Ride before it launches, too.”

## 11

As if to mock them, the computerized voice began, “Vessel Five-Nine-Seven-Eight-Four-Three-Five preparing to launch in...”

“Computer, halt!” Nadia shouted desperately over the sounds of the fire alarms, pulling out of Az’s loose grip. She could hear the sounds of the sirens approaching in the distance as the flames rose up the walls, consuming the rudimentary lab equipment. Nadia scanned the area around the shuttle, searching for Ben.

Az had the shuttle next to them open. “Come on, Nadia!”

She reached down to grab Az’s backpack and ran to the controls on the wall, pressing the code to open the panels in the ceiling that would allow them to lift off. The flames were rising higher, snapping and crackling as they consumed more and more of the lab equipment. She looked for Ben again and, relieved, she saw him seated in the control deck of the other shuttle.

She raced to the steps. As soon as she was inside, she pressed the button to seal the door and sat in the other seat of the control deck. The smoke was filling the large warehouse and the flames were glowing red as they spread higher.

Dimly, Nadia could hear the sound of the sirens getting closer. Az started up the shuttle engine as she pulled the controller keyboards down and out.

“Do you know the sequence to get this thing off the ground?” he asked, strapping his own safety belts on.

“Off the ground, through the atmosphere, and right to the waiting vessel.” She leaned over the console. She typed in the command sequence and the shuttle responded

immediately, rising to hover above the ground while the shafts in the roof continued to slide open. She looked over at Ben and saw that he was scowling at the control panel in front of him.

“Does Ben know how to get a shuttle off the ground?” she asked, watching as Ben sat in one of the chairs and strapped himself in.

“Guess we’ll find out. Buckle up, Nadia.”

The shuttle began to rise straight up and Nadia fastened the safety straps on her chair. She leaned forward, adjusting the controls so that they wouldn’t bump the sides of the opening in the roof. When they rose high enough, she flipped a sequence of switches and the plasma engines beneath her engaged.

She kept an eye on the gauges for Xenon tanks and the Oxygen tanks, making sure that they were releasing the fuel properly. “Az, do you see what’s going on?”

Az leaned over, peering over the edge of the shuttle. “Emergency vehicles just arrived. They’re getting their hoses out. I don’t see Ben, though.”

Nadia pulled them up higher and away from the front of the building. “That should give Ben clearance when he gets out. Starting to rise.” She started the process of lifting them higher into the atmosphere. The scientists in the program had discussed multiple times how the shuttles going to meet with the vessels should rise slow and steady until they were out of sight before pushing full throttle to break out of the atmosphere. In fact, the ones who had already left with vessels one, two, and three had sent back that the method worked.

Nadia carefully kept rising and both of them were staring at the opening in the roof where clouds of dense black smoke were rising.

“He’s not going to make it,” Az said into the tense silence between them.

As if to defy his statement, they saw the shuttle rise from the smoke, bumping the side of the roof before lifting higher into the air. Nadia lifted higher and the other shuttle wobbled a little before rising and then stopping.

Nadia let the controls take over as she stood next to Az. “What’s he doing?”



Az shook his head, a concerned look on his face. "I don't know. The shuttle keeps jerking up and then stopping."

Ben was frantically working the controls on the console in front of him. Nadia leaned further and saw something jutting from underneath his shuttle. "Is that a fuel tank?"

"The yellow tank hanging off to the side?"

Their shuttle continued to rise and they watched as Ben's shuttle lurched to a stop, hovering just above the roof top. "That is not good. He's got to get out of there. He must have jerked the tank when he bumped the roof. He needs to get out of that shuttle."

She moved to the control panel, tapping the contact code to the other shuttle.

"He's looking around. I don't think he knows how anything in the control panel works, Nadia." Az looked at her. "The fuel lines look like they're loose."

"Oh, no. Az, if the gasses mix, the whole shuttle will go up in flames." She turned her attention back to the console in front of her. "He's not picking up."

Az returned to watch the scene below him. "The emergency shuttles see him. Oh, shit." He turned to her with a panicked expression on his face. "They're going to shoot at him."

Nadia didn't think twice. She quickly tapped out the sequence of controls and their shuttle began rising faster even as a bullet pinged against the body of the shuttle. "Are they idiots?"

Az was glued to the scene playing out beneath them. "Nadia, the fuel tank is definitely leaking. Ben's just sitting there. Either the Xenon is leaking into his shuttle and he's strangling to death or else, he's given up."

Their shuttle lifted straight into the sky and both them watched the building below them surrounded by enforcer and emergency service shuttles. The building got smaller and smaller as they quietly rose higher. As they shot up through the haze, a loud boom sounded and they saw the flash of flames and black smoke as the shuttle exploded.

They continued to rise, the hazy layer beneath them now, and Nadia leaned back in her chair, slowly strapping herself in. "May the fates guide him true."

She slumped as she pressed the final sequence and they bumped through the atmosphere, the shuttle pressurizing automatically. She turned to look at Az and found that he was studying her.

## 12

Az met Nadia's eyes. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't Az." Nadia pushed her headscarf off, releasing the dark hair underneath. "The top brass threatened both me and dad if we revealed anything. And after dad died, when I *did* talk to some of the other researchers, they thought I was insane."

His eyes scanned her face and she turned to look at the sun fading over the horizon of the earth. "I didn't want you to think I was crazy. too."

He huffed out a laugh. "Nadia, if you didn't want me to think you're crazy, you should never have given me the time of day. Only a crazy person would choose to be with me."

She turned back to him with a scowl on her face. "Abdul-Aziz, stop that right now. I'm *lucky* to be with you."

His eyes roamed over her face, familiar and yet new every time he looked at her. "No, Nadia, I failed my papa and now I failed my sister and her husband." He rubbed at his still bare chest.

"Az, you did no such thing." She unstrapped her seat restraints as the gravity settings kicked in.

Az did the same and when she landed in his lap, he wrapped his arms around her. "I promised my papa to take care of my sister. And now she and her husband are going to be traveling in cryo for years and when they get to their new home planet, they won't have the tech they need to survive."

“Just because they don’t have the technology that we have right now, doesn’t mean the planet won’t thrive and grow without it, love.” Nadia smoothed her hands over the closed scar on his shoulder. “And in the end, we’ll both be there with your sister and her husband; all of us making a brand-new start. With the other people on Mo’s Ride, we’ll be able to build a better world.”

“A better world together.” Az pressed his forehead to hers.

“Together, love.”

### 13

Az looked into Nadia’s eyes and saw the confidence in them. “You really believe it.”

“I really do.”

They both felt the slight bumps when the shuttle attached to Mo’s Ride and soon after the computer announced, “Docking to Vessel Five-Nine-Seven-Eight-Four-Three-Five. Vessel launch halted.”

“Let’s go,” Nadia said with a nod. “We need to check on the ‘pods and then restart the vessel launch process.”

They picked up their backpacks. “Shouldn’t we try to find the missing data?”

“I honestly don’t think we have time, Az.”

He followed her into the central part of the large traveling vessel, noting that, as per protocol, all the lighting was dimmed to conserve as much energy as possible.

Nadia opened the hatch into the main bay.

The row upon row of pods held the mere 1,500 people who were meant to restart a new earth somewhere in the galaxy. At a quick glance, all the pods were lit green, indicating that they were functioning. Nadia turned to check the screens embedded in the vessel walls and Az made his way to the end of the last row where he could see the last three empty crypods.

His eyes scanned the names etched on each nameplate. Cyrus Creighton. Leila Jamili. Ravanander Singh. Yusuf Wolf. Fernando Rurik. The people represented the

best, strongest, brightest of what was left on earth. He stopped in front of the second to last cryopod.

Yasmina Camarena.

Yaz. His sister. Az ran his finger over the nameplate. "I tried to keep my promise, papa. She's as safe as I can possibly make her."

He glanced at the 'pod beside her, dimly registering the sound of the hatch sealing shut. Lee Diamente. His sister's newly-wedded husband.

He felt Nadia slip her arm around his waist. "You kept your promise, Az." They both felt the vibrations beneath their feet as the vessel powered up. "We're cloaked and everything's set. We've got an hour. Enough time to get us settled into the 'pods before the vessel launches."

"I love you, Nadia. And I always will." Az turned and wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug. After he let her go, it didn't take long for them to stash their backpacks into the storage beneath the 'pods and settle into the form-fitting machines.

"You ready?" Az asked, looking up at the metallic ceiling, his head braced.

"I'll see you on the other side, love," Nadia responded.

The last thing that Az heard for a long, long time was Nadia's commanding voice saying, "Computer, close and seal the final cryopods."

Epilogue

The span of time in space is hard to determine. As is the measure of distance. What earth scientists determined as the closest viable earth-like planet was detected, scanned, and rejected by each of the five vessels traveling from earth.

In fact, the most earth-like planet that Mo's Ride eventually found was uncannily reminiscent of post-Pangea earth. And far more distant than anyone could have known. Or so the scientists on board recorded years after the fact.

The vessel's auto-alighter managed to find an optimal spot on the largest continent and after landing, began the painstaking task of starting all the systems. Including reanimating the colonists in the cryopods.

The colonists named their new planet Thani Dinya, Second World, and soon began to build their community using the resources they had brought with them. First settler Az Camarena was never able to rebuild the data that had been erased. But most of the colonists agreed that humanity was versatile and intelligent enough to reinvent whatever they needed.

His wife, first settler Nadia Bintel-Zeki, never mentioned her research. But as new generations were born on Thani Dinya, the uncanny abilities that would have been labeled intuition before were recognized as magic. Unusually, each new generation possessed magical prowess that grew and spread with the size and breadth of the different communities.

Their lack of communication technology left them ignorant about what happened to the other vessels that had been sent. But on their own planet, after years of population growth, the final settlement landed on the small island of Omnos, the central point of the entire planet.

And so the stories of Omnos Island begin.