



HUMAN FREE

GEORGE DONNELLY

Human Free

Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction Novel

George Donnelly

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Chapter 1

Onder Swart gazed at shark fins gliding in circles in the milky turquoise surf below. He toed the loose, black rock, loosened a chunk and stepped closer to the edge. He pushed the hot chunk off the edge. It landed on a shark's head and three of them scrambled to grab it, their teeth glinting in the harsh sunlight.

One step and it's done. No longer will my children die. No more will Philani nag me. No more will I lack food. No more will I fight robots just to enter my homeland. I will be in the ultimate homeland and in need of nothing.

He firmed his left foot at the very edge of the cliff, his toes curling and extending in free air. The ledge shifted under him. His right foot he extended out over the abyss. He sucked in breath and held it. He leaned forward.

A plump bird, its belly white, a black strip painted across its eyes like a pirate, alighted on Onder's shoulder. Onder stopped, stepped back and eyed it. It stood on just one leg. The other hung crooked, a dark gray blotch where it was broken. The precious creature shifted its weight to try the leg, slipped and returned to balancing on one leg.

He stepped back twice more. He reached his opposite hand across and grabbed the delicate creature. It cheeped and struggled. Onder tightened his grip. He examined it and shook his head. It won't survive.

“Onder!”

Onder closed his eyes and frowned. Food again. Do they never stop eating?

Slim and tense in her loincloth and ragged gray t-shirt, Philani slapped her sandals against the smooth rock, her teenage hips rocking from side to side in a display of feminine dominance. Her confidence impressed Onder but deep inside he laughed at her pretension of womanhood.

“The children need food!” she said.

“Give me a strip of cloth and help me tie it around this one’s leg.”

Philani narrowed her eyes and stepped closer. “We will eat it.”

“No, we will save it and eat its eggs.”

“But we need food now.” She put her hands on her hips. “I won’t do it. Your children must eat.”

“They are not my children!”

A hollow boom echoed from far away. Three dark balls rose from the scrubland a kilometer inland.

Philani screamed, her face a frozen mask of fear, acute yet fatigued. Onder pushed her to the ground and threw himself on top of her. He sheltered the bird in the soft space under his chin and looked upside down back towards the ocean.

A dust cloud scraped at his back. He jammed shut his eyes and mouth and pushed air out of his nose. Philani sobbed, her body quivering beneath him.

“This land is human-free by order of Chairperson Flora B. Harper of the Gaian Devolution. Move back now or face relocation.”

The dust subsided. Onder positioned himself in front of Philani’s prostrate body and hid the bird at his lower back. It pecked at the bare skin of his buttock and he startled.

He faced the translucent machines, their metal skeletons shadows inside their plastic bodies. They were angry, always.

The children cowered behind large boulders thirty meters to his right. Twenty-nine of them, including three infants and one teenager - Philani - who kept the last non-Gaian people of Southern Africa together and relatively happy.

Are there non-Gaians left on the other continents? Onder only vaguely knew other lands existed but he worried about this question.

Two more robots shot up into the air as balls and unfurled into four-meter-tall humanoid figures before landing nexting to the children.

The children screamed and hugged themselves, forming a mass of frantic arms, jockeying legs and exposed eyeballs.

Onder stepped forward. "Stay away from them!" he yelled.

One of the robots hopped at him and landed centimeters from Onder's toes. The cliff cracked and shifted under him. He pinched the thin young man's shoulder between his silicon fingers and lifted him.

Onder met the robot's deep green eyes. Only lenses, for the Gaians and this Flora Harper to see through. Onder passed the motionless bird to his other hand, slipped his knife from its sheath at his side and jammed the sharp steel into the monster's eye.

The beast did not react. The blade slid off the lens and Onder's hand slammed into the hard glass. He flinched but refused to let the Gaians - the people who killed his parents, everyone he ever knew - see him in pain.

The robot pinched his shoulder tighter. Onder screamed and the bird fell out of his hand. He twisted to see its fall but the pain pulled him back. The robot brought him up to his eye.

"You can not injure me, human. As you do not submit, you must be relocated." Its mechanical arm whined as it pulled him back ever so briefly towards his homeland, then hurled him over the edge of the cliff, his legs kicking, his eyes wide and the salty smell of the sea rising to greet him.

Chapter 2

Flora B. Harper, Chairperson of the Gaian System, swivel-rolled out of bed, inserted her soft, fatty feet into her new plush pink slippers and heaved her mass into a semi-erect position.

She pulled the master key from its cradle on her nightstand and hung the rough-hewn blue-purple Tanzanite gem around her neck, its platinum chain jingling. Soft lights came on from behind wall panels. Translucent orange panels retracted behind her to reveal glass wall.

Flora walked around her bed to the window and contemplated her African blood lilies. Tall and deep red, each flower was in fact a community of two-hundred or more tiny tendrils reaching toward the sky for life, no matter that their bloom lasted only two weeks. Too perfect. Neither her alone nor humanity in its entirety could match their evolution.

She tilted her head left. “Environmental Cooperation.” The line beeped in her ear.

“Yep,” said a tired male voice.

“I want the blood lilies harvested today. Cut them all down. You should have done it already. I want them on every table at the feast.”

The voice sputtered and seemed to correct its posture. “Yes, Chairperson! Anything else, Chairperson?”

Flora tilted her head right to break the connection.

Bone knocked on hard wood and a wave of stress rippled through her.

“What!” she screamed, reveling in her loss of control.

“It’s me,” a male voice said.

“I’m not ready yet!” Her voice was half buzzsaw, half drill sergeant.

“Happy Restoration of Balance Day, honey!” The voice was meek and plaintive. It disgusted her.

She waddled back past her bed and straight to the heavy, oak door. She flipped off the deadbolt and whipped it open.

A rail-thin man, his chest caved in and his head leaning precipitously forward stepped back, his mouth hanging open.

“We haven’t restored the balance yet, now have we?” She wagged a meaty finger under his pointed nose. “Close your mouth and stand up straight!”

He flashed her a thin grin and took another step back. “Didn’t you get your beauty sleep, darling? This is why we need to sleep together again. You see that now, surely?”

Her toes tensed and her lower back muscles burned. “I told you, Philip, I will inform you when I am ready!” She stepped back, slammed the door and forced her breath to slow.

Bone tapped oak again. She held her breath and opened the door, ready to snap her husband’s weak frame in two.

“Everyone is waiting...?” Philip said.

“For what?”

“Your speech. It’s Restoration Day, remember?”

A cold chill tightened her back. She blinked and looked up to activate her heads-up display. After 9? Already? And an eighty percent chance of rain. She rolled her eyes. Flora, you idiot. “I’ll be right out!”

She threw the door shut and trotted back to her closet. She pulled her sleepshirt up and over her chest, where it stuck. “God-damnit!” She kicked her feet, pulled again and a seam popped with the rat-a-tat of machine gun fire.

“Another one?” She thought back to the time before the machines when people assembled clothing. Then you could get quality. If you had the money, of course, which she always did. But now? Well, it just wasn’t important anymore. If you were going to live, you might as well do things right - or not at all. Dad was right about that!

She found the extra-wide, floor-to-ceiling mirror next to her closet and turned away from it. She snaked her head back to look at herself.

“Who’s sexy?” She raised one oversized hip, then the next, again and again, up and down in a rollercoaster of flesh. “I’m sexy!”

Philip rapped on the door again. “Darling, we need you!”

She stopped, glared at the door, raised a hip once more, then dance-thuddled to her closet, selected a black mini-dress with three-quarter lingerie sleeves, twirled and pulled the two-sizes-too-small garment over her wide head, thick shoulders and, finally, her abundant midsection.

She walked over to the mirror again and admired herself.

“Dear!” Philip pounded on the door. “We’re starting without you.”

“Just hold on!” She slipped into a simple pair of black flats, shuffled to the door, opened it and slammed it behind her.

Philip raised an eyebrow at her. She flashed him an angry look, then tilted her head back. He lowered his head, got behind her and zipped up her dress with a careful touch.

“Very good.” She gestured with her index finger to a spot a meter behind her and commenced a dignified strut down the hallway and through the open doorway into the garden outside. Chin up. Eyes forward. Back straight. You’re a sex symbol!

“Happy Restoration Day, Chairperson,” a group intoned in perfect coordination.

Flora nodded her head sideways to them and gritted her teeth. Obsequious fawners. Two-faced cowards. Backbiting sellouts. How zealously they cling to their own lives knowing the time has come. And it’s Restoration of Balance Day, not Restoration Day! Idiots!

Flora turned left and climbed the steps to the amphitheater stage. Covered by three long, curved golden-orange teak beams, it reminded her of her first days there in Unity. Dad architected this whole place, together with the machines, of course.

She reached the stage, found the podium and looked out at her people. A quarter circle of benches radiated outwards from her. Their expanding ranks filled the space to overflow. Too many unauthorized babies. Too much weakness. That changes now.

Philip climbed up after her. "Darling, did you see the tigers yet? They're marvelous, don't you agree?"

Flora whipped around. The tigers. That's an important part, Flora, you absentminded enchantress, you! She giggled internally but flashed her husband an icy look. He stopped on the steps.

"How do I release them?" she asked.

Philip studied her, a confused look on his face. "Ferris and his boys are in the audience."

"You haven't fed them, correct?"

"The boys?" he asked.

"The tigers, of course!"

"No, not me. The zookeeper takes care of that." He looked left and right, then sighed.

"How do I release them!" she asked through gritted teeth. And it's nature liaison. When will they learn?

"Oh, yes, well, just pull the latch at the top. Simple as that." He raised his foot to continue upwards.

"Go sit with everyone else."

Philip scowled and lowered his head. He turned and proceeded down the steps, then turned back. "I love you, you know," he mumbled.

Flora took the podium. Yeah, yeah. I know. There was her loser son, Ferris, with his simpleton wife and their three kids. All boys, not a girl among them. And how dare they have three children? Did they forget why we are here?

Behind that ignorant bunch sat cute little Dove with her boyfriend. Now there was a woman. Refused to get married. Refused to have children. She always was a rebel and Flora did encourage her. So what if she drank a bottle of vodka every night. She imagined them all, screaming, their necks draining rich blood onto the hot geopolymers cement. She suppressed a grin.

"Come on, Mom, the feast awaits!" Ferris yelled.

Flora glared at him, then cleared her throat. She glanced back at the beasts. One looked back, its white canine teeth poking out at her, its huge claws scraping on the floor of the steel cage. She

thrilled and turned back to the assemblage. "Today, fellow Gaians," she shouted, "I am at the end of my rope!"

Her fellow Gaians quieted. All eyes examined her for clues, possibly for weakness. She was a strong Chairperson but they wanted to block the final solution. The cowards wanted to save their own worthless hides. Flora couldn't allow that, no matter what.

"Happy Restoration of Balance Day!" a jovial male voice yelled from below.

"But we have not restored the balance, have we?" Flora asked. She immediately scolded herself for asking a question. You don't do that unless you're willing to get an-

"Are we not close enough?" a deeper voice asked.

"The Gaian System stands today on the verge of failure," Flora continued, "with enough survivors on three continents to re-establish human hegemony against the planet. I will not allow this to happen."

Ferris yawned. Dove whispered to her partner. Of them all, only Philip gave her his full attention. And it infuriated her.

"People, they are crossing our southern gate! They have undone the priceless conservation work we have achieved on this very continent!"

"Our numbers, too, have grown beyond projections or expectations, such that we have run out of homes in which to put your little brats, not to mention the proper ecological disposal of their dirty diapers!"

They were used to this. They'd heard it too many times. They were immune to ranting, accustomed to scolding. She could see their eyes glazing over, feel their attention turning to other matters. Flora would do something about that.

She whirled around, imagining herself a stage diva wowing the crowd with a racy dance move, and almost tripped over her bovine feet. She found the tiger cage latches and removed each of them, three in total. She descended the stairs, turned to the crowd and bowed.

"It's time to restore some balance around here, people! Say hello

to our friendly tigers!" Flora walked backwards towards the door to her complex, watching for the first signs of what she hoped would happen, what she knew must happen, as long as that idiot nature liaison did what she told him to do, or not to do, more accurately. The sense of guilty pleasure floated in her gut like a fresh chocolate cake.

The crowd stood and cheered. Children clawed for their parents' legs, others stepped forward hesitantly. The tigers proceeded from their cages. A smaller female sauntered to the edge of the stage, glanced at Flora, then lay down and yawned. Two males jumped out simultaneously, their thick front leg muscles pulsing under shiny cinnamon fur.

One dove into the crowd, knocking Philip violently back into his daughter-in-law, her eyes wide, struggling to escape from under the weight of the beast. It slashed Philip's neck and she screamed, blood spattering into her silky blonde hair.

The second bounded forward and chased down Flora's grandson Tyler. The tiger tapped the back of the fleeing five-year-old's leg with its massive paw. Tyler collapsed, rolled over and broke out into a bawl. The tiger advanced, put his head down and pushed it into the boy's chest, the weight crushing until a thin crack sounded, then another. Tyler fell silent. The tiger moved on.

"Not the baby. No! Oh my God," a woman screamed. But Flora didn't hear her.

She ducked into the building, her heart thumping in her neck, and pulled the glass door closed behind her. A contact tinkled in her ear. Flora refused it. The nature liaison hurdled down the hallway towards her, a dart gun on his back.

Flora stepped into his path. His eyes went wide, he hit her and bounced back a meter onto his back. Flora took a delicate backwards step and put her arms on her hips.

"You will not interfere," she whispered. A tiger roared and a man let out a scream that chilled Flora. She started to shake.

The nature liaison approached her, eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth, then stepped back in a hurry.

The door behind her rattled in its frame. She turned and immediately jumped back. A wild face, eyes bulging, pressed itself up against the glass.

“Mother, open the door!”

Flora studied Ferris. First-born son. You expect one of those to be there with you when it’s time to man the parapets. To be at your right hand, in fact. To get your back from time to time. But this one was a waste of breast milk. Good riddance. She crossed her arms and shook her head at him.

Ferris looked behind him, then back at her. “Mother! You need me for—”

A spot of orange and black moved behind him. The tiger appeared above him, its giant maw open. Its paws landed on either side of his head, breaking through the glass door. The tip of its longest, hand-sized claw tore the Tanzanite master key from Flora’s neck. The great beast, its middle-finger-sized canine teeth pointing at Flora, ripped into the back of Ferris’s neck.

The man’s eyes rolled up into his head and a heavy sigh escaped from somewhere unexpected.

Chapter 3

Onder was alive. But he expected to the slick bites of the sharks to come at any moment. Would they take a leg first? Grab him by the torso, shake him and drag him into the deep? He kicked and punched out in all directions. Bubbles escaped his mouth in the aquamarine darkness. Which way was up? The light, follow the light. He swam up, his eyes on the sparkling rays of the sun, kicking, his lungs aching, desperate to breathe.

The surface was close now and Onder thrilled. To not be taken immediately, with so many sharks here, that was something. That was a story he could—

A stony head flew from the darkness and rammed Onder in the side and lower back. It wasn't panic that took him now, only the certainty of death. He made peace with it. He laughed at his earlier pride. This was his fate all along. He was but meat to be recycled into a new generation of life. The salt water burned him and a dark liquid curled around him.

But a brute, unspeaking part of him refused to give up. His stunned lungs cried for breath. His legs kicked once more. The light approached again, then darkness closed in around him. Feeling receded from his limbs and he fell, the light ebbing, sharks circling, their tail fins kicking greedily.

Onder fell and fell. A soft bed caught him. A cool evening breeze wafted over him. He sighed. Something moved to his right and he turned.

“What are you doing here, son! Get up! Your people depend on you!” The gaunt, dusty black man towered over his son. Onder scooted backwards.

“Father?” Onder studied his face. He had his father’s squinting eyes, wide cheekbones and sense of both impending doom and inexhaustible love.

“Onder!” The older man smacked him across the face and Onder

awoke under water, the pink open mouth of a shark racing towards him. Onder found himself magnetically pulled in towards its rows of razor white teeth, his head angling to slide down its cavernous gullet.

What if they are still alive? And, if not, what of my revenge? The thought energized him. Onder drew back a fist and slammed it into the shark's nose. The shark wriggled, its rough skin scraping Onder's arm, then flew off into the murk. Onder pushed himself to the surface and drank deep of the air, his chest rising and falling on its own as if someone else's heart beat within his breast.

A strong wave propelled Onder against the rocky cliffside, his head bouncing off the dark stone. He grabbed a rough outcropping and held firm. The receding water pulled on him but he stood firm. He found footing on a boulder, stood up and put his back to the wall. His head ached and bile rose in his throat. Sharks circled meters from him. He wouldn't swim out of here.

He looked up. The cliffside was at least twenty meters tall and the robots might still be up there. He cupped his hand over his ear to hear Philani's protestations or the cries of the twenty-eight children. But the crashes of the waves at his feet tolerated no other sound to reach him.

Damn the robots. He'd climb. The water receded from his feet. Onder spotted the wave. Taller than him and but a dozen meters away, it carried a long, finned shadow within it.

Onder turned, found footing and hand over hand began to climb the mossy, slippery black rock. Don't look back. It will only slow you.

Onder looked back. The wave crashed over his legs, the body of the shark pressing his kneecaps into the harsh stone. The beast's jaws snapped, its eyes wild. Onder reached a hand back, his other fingers slipping and jabbed a finger at the shark's wide eye. It recoiled. The wave receded.

Onder climbed again. Halfway up he stopped and listened. The surf still crashed below but a scream sounded far away. Philani's scream. If the Gaian robots cannot quiet her, how could I ever hope

to?

He wouldn't have to listen to her nagging voice now. Now there would only be one mouth to feed, instead of twenty-nine. A genuine sense of relief swept over him. He was free. Now he could do what he wanted.

Guilt spilled over and wiped away his newfound independence. His father's voice spoke to him. You have a duty, son. You have a responsibility. That is your wife. Those are your children. There is no one else. You are the last Khoisan. You are, in fact, the last man in all of Africa.

But they're not my children, he screamed at his father.

They became yours when you took them in. They are yours because they are your people and there is no other father for them.

Onder's chest tightened and a weight grew within him. He reached the top of the cliff and hung just below it, waiting for the familiar vibration of the robots' heavy tread. But none came.

He raised his eyes above the edge and scanned the horizon. Far away to the Northeast a dust trail fluttered in the wind. He would track them, find them and free them. His course was set. He climbed up and crouched at the edge of the cliff, dreaming of his father's face.

And what if you must die? his father's spirit asked him.

Then I will die, for my people and my family. I swear it. "And," Onder added out loud, "I will avenge you, father, by destroying the Gaian leader, whatever it takes."

"No. You will die." The robot - the same silicon-wrapped giant now with a slashed flap hanging under its eye - stepped from its hiding place behind a rock twenty meters to Onder's right and raised its arm to fire.

Chapter 4

“You will be very weak for the first seven days.”

Astrix didn’t hear her mother’s warning. But then she didn’t need to. She’d studied physics, gravity, biology and chemistry during her sixteen years of life on Space Station Independence.

If you could call living inside a glass and metal box in the vacuum of space life.

Astrix sure didn’t.

“Will the Gaians like me?” Astrix wondered aloud. Beyond her window, the northeastern shores of the continent known as Africa exited night. She found the long Nile River and imagined that the ancient city of Cairo with its pharaohs and pyramids still thrived there.

But it didn’t. In fact, not more than ten thousand people lived on the entire, arid continent, ninety-nine point nine percent of them in Unity.

“You are a beautiful young woman,” her mother said too loudly. She combed her only daughter’s bobbed, black hair from crown to neck, again and again. “You’re a perfect example of humanity: tall, Asian, athletically inclined.” She stood back and surveyed her daughter. “Your rear end use could some padding.”

Astrix turned, her long bangs swirling into her thin, black eyes, and glared at her mother. “Small behinds are more efficient, Mother.”

“The Gaians are a queer bunch. They will not appreciate your upgrades, or your small behind. And, frankly,” she added in a whisper, “they want us all dead.”

Astrix met her mother’s eyes. “I don’t believe that!”

“Don’t be naive!” She pulled a bottle of gel from a panel in the wall next to Astrix and squirted a small bit into her fingers.

“No gel!” Astrix stood up and examined her gray jumper in the dressing table mirror. It displeased her.

Her mother pursed her lips. “The gel will give you—”

“No,” Astrix replied. “But if you can lend me great-grandmother’s orange dress...” She looked at her mother in the mirror, her eyebrows pleading.

Her mother glared at her. “Your father has already paired you, and well. Don’t get any ideas about—”

The door to Astrix’s compartment swished open. Astrix turned her body away in modesty, then prepared her sharpest glare for the only person who could possibly be so gauche as to barge in without knocking.

“Hello Astrix!”

Astrix turned her glare on the glasses-wearing, pimple-infested visage of Meridian, and added a sneer just to remind the both of them how much she hated the boy. Two years her junior, math champion since forever, he and Astrix were paired just last month at the joint insistence of their fathers.

And Meridian couldn’t wait to get things started.

Shorter than her but wider, his every smugness-exuding move caused her new agony. She turned away, her arms crossed, and stared out at the newly illuminated continent below her. Sunlight sparkled on the Nile and she took it as a sign. She must leave Independence, and never return.

“I want to wish you a safe trip,” Meridian said. “I made a tool for you. It will help you find your way on the surface of the planet.”

Astrix’s mother received the gift. “Thank you so much, very kind of you, what a dutiful and attentive pair, don’t you agree, Astrix?” She pinched the loose skin of Astrix’s shoulder and twisted.

Astrix pulled her shoulder away from her mother but the woman’s grip was steel. Astrix gritted her teeth. Fine. She turned back to Meridian. “Yes, very kind, thank you Meridian.”

He leaned forward, his cheeks puffed out and caffeine-stained teeth appeared where his smile should be. “I’ll be here waiting for you, preparing our berth for your return.”

Birth. And berth. The very sound disgusted her. The old people were crammed four to a room. The young people, six. More babies

was out of the question for the people of Independence. But they were especially repugnant to Astrix. To think, something alive, wriggling inside of her. She shivered.

Meridian set the box on her dresser, turned and left, the sliding door jamming half-closed behind him with a whirring-crunching noise.

“Mother? Please?”

Her mother walked over, kicked the leading edge of the door, swiped her hand over the control sensor twice and then smacked the wall under the sensor. The door swished closed.

“About that dress?” Astrix asked.

“No, little girl. This is a scientific and diplomatic—”

“Father said I didn’t have to accept him!”

Her mother crossed her arms and shook her head. “This is a community. And you know what that means.”

The door swished open again. Two men in navy blue flight suits stood outside.

Her mother grabbed Astrix under the armpits and pulled her up from the chair.

“Time to go? Already?” A dark fear welled up in Astrix. She turned and hugged her mother tight.

“You’re going to be fine. It’s only a year. Just remember why you were chosen, my darling gremlin. Remember your mission. Your people are counting on you.”

General Javal paraded into the tiny room, his funny gold and blue hat under his right arm, his full complement of shined medals on the chest of his matching blue uniform and his close-cropped mustache twitching more rapidly than ever.

“My dear Astrix Volkov, congratulations on your selection as Prime for the year 2205. You have demonstrated an unflinching commitment to science and—”

“Can we skip to the end? I’m ready,” Astrix said.

All eyes focused disapproving glances on the impudent teen.

Javal cleared his throat and began to pace in a line perpendicular to Astrix’s line of sight, blocking her path to the door.

“Now listen here, Ms....”

“Volkov,” her mother filled in.

“Ms. Volkov. The Gaians want you to believe that you are receiving an advanced education in biology, zoology, environmental sciences and other soft disciplines that we lack expertise in. This is propaganda!”

Astrix sighed and sat down. Her mother grabbed her and pulled her back up again.

“Vile and self-conscious propaganda! The Gaians have painted themselves into a corner down there. They wiped out ninety-eight point six percent of the Earthbound population while we watched, unable to intervene, up here.”

A mischievous energy surged through Astrix. “And why didn’t we? We have access to the space elevators. We—”

“Child, this is why you received a B in our history class, isn’t it?”

Astrix looked down.

“Before they killed off nine point nine billion of our fellow human beings, the Gaians built and co-opted from others the great production and defense systems of Earth.”

“They don’t—” Astrix started.

Javal looked at his wrist. “It’s time.” He turned and walked out of the room. His two officers strode in, turned sharply around and interlocked one arm each with each of Astrix’s arms. They marched as one to the door.

Astrix stopped. “Wait. Mother?”

Her mother trotted over to face her daughter.

Astrix looked up at her, her eyes wet and red. Her arms shook but she reached them out and clung tightly to the older woman. “I miss you already.”

Her mother gave Astrix a quick, tight hug. “Back in a year, yes.” The words scraped from her throat. She turned and trotted down the corridor.

“Come along!” Javal yelled.

They exited into the pristine, narrow hallway. To their right, a square shaft ran up to the top of this apartment block, so far up that Astrix never managed to actually see its end.

Javal held the elevator doors open for them. The three joined him, the doors swished closed and they rose, the g-force pulling at Astrid's feet. She looked at Javal and he regarded her severely.

"Remember your mission. We need free access to Earth for soil, seeds, water, air and other resources," he said.

The elevator burst out of the living area and into the farming zone. Greens and yellows burst around her through the transparent elevator walls. Water flowed and steam obscured her view in places.

"I still don't understand why we can't get what we need from the Moon and the asteroids," Astrix said.

"You must not speak of that! Ever!" Javal yelled.

Astrix took a step back and one of the airmen pushed her back towards Javal. "I know, okay? I know. You and my mother told me a million times."

Javal's hands shook. "If they find out, they have the weapons necessary to put a hole in the hull. What atmosphere we have will vent in minutes."

"But why? We're friends! I mean that's why I'm going, right?"

The elevator rocketed past the grow zone and slowed to a stop. Above them, gargantuan, orange strips reflected sunlight. Next to the strips, the black of space showed through in a narrow ribbon. All around them, green fields and steel structures curved up and away in a thin half-circle. Beyond that, Astrix knew that the circle completed in a tubular torus. Today she would see the complete structure that was her home for the first time.

Or so she hoped.

A shrill beep started on Javal's wrist and then seemed to come from everywhere around her. Javal tapped his wrist.

"Damn!" he muttered.

Astrix watched him, a knot forming in her stomach. How serious was it this time? Was it the end of Independence? Or a minor malfunction of a forgotten system?

The shuttle landed next to them. A transparent sphere with four seats, its four spinning helicopter blades slowed and it bounced gently to a stop next to them.

“My dear,” Javal said, his face dark and his eyes looking far away past her, “you will go on alone. I wish you alertness, strength of will and a good memory.” He turned back to the elevator, the two airmen leading the way.

“I will do my best,” Astrix said.

Javal stopped, turned and walked back to her. “I don’t want to pressure you, my dear, but you - this mission of yours - is the last hope for us, and possibly for the Earth as well.”

Last hope? Astrix’s eyes glazed over as she struggled to process what could only be hyperbole. But Javal was not known for being dramatic.

“You were not our first choice, Astrix. You were not even on our list of candidates. But then it is the Gaians who choose the student each year and not us.”

Not their first choice? “But I earner the best—” she started.

“Sir,” an airman spoke up, “Dr. Leavitt says that system-wide pressure has dropped five percent. She’s asking for a decision.”

Javal listened, his eyes still firmly on Astrix. He nodded to the airman then turned back to her. “Astrix?”

“Yes, Professor?”

“Don’t screw this up!” Javal turned and yelled into his wrist. “Get as many people out as you can but seal it off before we hit seven—” The elevator doors closed behind him and he and the two airmen disappeared into the floor.

Astrix turned and strolled towards the shuttle. She climbed up, took a seat and strapped herself in. The craft’s blades spun up with a deep hum that made her gut vibrate. The sudden urge to vomit her morning rations grabbed her. She covered her mouth and choked them back down.

The door jerked from its position behind her, rolled into place across the opening and sealed with an increase in pressure that caused her ears to smart.

This was it, really it. She was going to Earth. It was really happening. And if she didn't want to come back to this rusty deathtrap, well no one would make her. She'd run away. Maybe with a boy. Maybe on her own. She'd survive, have a garden, and that would be it. A small smile crept across her face and she thrilled at her escape plan.

The craft rose up and angled forward. She looked down on her people, her world, the only one she'd ever known. It was beautiful and frightening, a strip of steel and life-giving green between the fiery orange sun and the icy black vacuum.

She zipped through the exit hatch. The blades slowed and thrusters fired her forward, the seat biting into her back.

Vacuum all around her now, she turned to finally see the torus in its entirety, a chill passing over her before the heaters kicked into gear. It was a marvel of science, a wonder—

At the bottom of the ring, at its farthest point from Earth, atmosphere and debris vented violently. Astrix did some mental calculations. That was where— No!

She moved to stand up but the harness held her back. She flapped her hands over her torso searching for the release mechanism but her mind could only think of him.

He worked in that section. He maintained the atmospheric scrubbers. And the water treatment plant. He was the Chief Engineer for Life Support. If there was trouble, he would be the last to leave.

The craft fired reverse thrusters. But Astrix's eyes were on her home. She strained to distinguish the form of the debris that still exited through the hull breach. He might still be alive. He might be in a suit. He could exit once the section depressurized, then re-enter through the port.

Her craft slowed and entered the dispatching tunnel of the Gaian-controlled space elevator. The craft latched onto the two guide cables. The door closed behind her, cutting off her view of Independence. Red lights flashed. The compartment twisted around her.

“Remain still and calm. The mandatory inspection is underway. Resist or attempt to flee and your craft will be destroyed and discarded.” The voice was female but there was no courtesy in it, only a dead metal threat.

Her thoughts returned to the hole in her home. He was safe. He had to be. They have protocols for these things.

“Approved. Welcome to the Gaian System, Astrix Volkov. Stay in your seat until the door opens.”

The craft bounced as air filled the tube around her. The bottom retracted and the walls moved past her. Slowly, she felt gravity tug at her feet and pull her deeper into the chair.

Now she could see. Below her, deep green land decorated with a deep blue lake and two thin rivers stretched out to meet yellow-brown desert, then the deep blue ocean.

Braking began. She lost her view again.

The craft slowed to a stop, bounced and the door next to her opened. She stepped out and a rail-thin man greeted her.

“Ms. Volkov?”

She nodded. The air was heavy, hot and wet. A fresh smell, like soap only softer permeated the air. She stepped forward, tripped on nothing at all and fell to her knees.

“Ms. Volkov, welcome to the Gaian System.” He paused, looked away, then back again. “We just received word from the space station. I’m sorry, but your father has passed on.”

Chapter 5

Onder jumped forward and rolled, the craggy surface jutting into his back, his heart pulsing in his neck.

A bolt of fire flashed from the arm of the injured robot. WAAAZZZ-PAAAAA. The flap of silicon skin under its eye jumped as it surveyed the small cloud of rock and dust that hung in the air where Onder had been.

Onder crawled behind a low, black outcropping, turned himself around and surveyed the damage.

WAAAZZZ-PAAAAA. Another blast landed in the same spot as the first and a sharp pop sounded. A long fissure opened in the ground. The cliff edge arced forward then stopped, stuck on something.

The robot strode out of its hiding spot and fired three times in a tight burst. Onder rolled and closed his eyes but the robot's beams of fire moved faster than his own eyes could see them.

The shots impacted centimeters from the frazzled boy's face. Knife-like bits of dirt and rock scraped his nose, cheeks and forehead. The flash remained. Onder forced his eyelids open and rolled his eyes in all directions but it was no use.

He was blind now.

Onder scampered backwards, got to his feet and sprinted. His instincts told him to stop, or at least slow down, but he pushed through. He hoped he was actually running in the right direction. Behind him was the unstable cliff, the rough surf and the hungry sharks. To his left and right were more ocean, just farther away. Ahead was his ancestral land.

It was harsh land, arid with little game even now that the Gaians had tried to restock it. But it was where he must go.

Onder's imagination wandered to vivid images of his father hunting, the warm blood of an antelope—

Onder tripped and flew head first into something hard. He felt

no pain and knew that was the worst sign. He reached up and felt. A rock, a big one. He touched his head. Wet, slippery, hot.

This was bad. But Onder got to his feet and walked into the rock again. He let himself fall over it, then huddled behind it.

Onder listened hard for the clomping feet of the Gaian robot. There was no sound, no vibration.

Onder tensed. It should be chasing him. It had the advantage. Why would it stop now?

A hot breeze burned Onder's eyes. Cold slivers of metal pushed on the boy's chest. His shoulder blades dug into the rock and his breath did not come.

"Thought you could run away from me, human?" The compassionless voice echoed inside its metal skull.

Onder nodded.

It pushed harder. It brought its other hand up and rubbed it into the gash on Onder's head.

Onder screamed. The pain sparked desperation in him and he tried to breathe.

Nothing came.

The robot moved the hand from Onder's neck to his chest and pushed. His sternum cracked and he took breath.

"Your leaders will want me alive," Onder croaked. "I know things."

The robot removed its now bloody hand from Onder's head and moved it to his neck.

"You are to be terminated, as are all humans outside of Unity."

"What..." Onder struggled to speak. He moved his neck and found the robot's hand slipped from side to side. "... my people."

"Your people are gone. And now you will be as well."

A cone of light materialized at the center of Onder's vision. The robot's scraped and slit eye stared at him. Onder leaned right. Ten meters ahead, a robot scooter hummed, water droplets leaking from its tailpipe.

His vision darkened. He struggled for breath. The robot pressed harder on his chest and something snapped. Onder's back arched

involuntarily. He wanted to scream but nothing came.

Onder reached up to his forehead and mopped blood with his hands. He grabbed the metal fingers that pinched his neck and spread his blood over them.

Onder kicked his right leg up and into the robot's side. It twisted away. The pressure lessened on Onder's throat. He breathed deep and slipped his bloody neck out of the robot's grasp, his own blood serving as lubricant.

Onder hung there between sitting and standing, his eyes on the robot's unyielding face, watching for the hand to strike out again.

It didn't.

Onder ran forward, tripping, falling, his knee impacting a rock, the pain screaming up his leg. He limped forward, found the scooter and got on.

The clomp-clomp of the robot sounded behind him. Onder's spine tingled with the fear that the robot hand would land on his shoulder. That would be it. The boy had no more tricks.

The scooter control panel was a simple thing. There was a red switch in between the steering handles and foot pedals to increase or decrease acceleration.

Onder pushed the bottom of the red switch. It clicked but nothing happened. He flexed his ankles to push the pedals forward and down. The engine screamed but the scooter refused to budge even a centimeter.

The clomp-clomp of the robot grew louder and more frequent. Onder turned. The robot stretched out its hands, its finger grabbing.

The scooter vibrated under him. Onder pushed his feet forward and it took off. Relief flooded over him. The Gaian robot could run but not as fast as the scooter could fly.

Too fast. He lost his grip on the handles, slipped backwards and fell off the back of the scooter. The vehicle slowed and drifted.

The clomp-clomp of the robot grew closer. Onder picked himself up again, his chest aching, his knee not responding, threw himself onto the scooter and took off once more, this time his hands firmly gripping the overly wide handles.

A storm whipped up the sand and rock around him, it cut into his face, his eyes narrowed against it as he flew. After an eternity, he turned his head back.

The robot was gone, nowhere to be seen.

Onder kicked the accelerator up higher and pushed into the approaching storm, the pores of his facing burning, sand clogging his throat but free and safe, for the moment, from the Gaian System.

Chapter 6

Flora Harper sat in her teak-paneled office at the highest point in Unity. Behind her, the solid rock of Mt. Kilimanjaro protected her. Ahead of her lay the decreasingly lush African savanna. Beyond that, the dark rising waters of Lake Victoria troubled her.

Flora Harper was having a bad day.

“It’s so crystal clear, I shouldn’t even have to explain this to you, Dr. Herczfeld. You will analyze these twenty-nine specimens. You will discover how they resisted our remediation vectors. Then you will create new remediation vectors that actually work! Is that clear, Doctor?” Flora yelled, her eyes wide and blinking unnaturally fast.

“What you don’t understand is—” Dr. Herczfeld started.

She angled her head to cut the connection.

The Chairperson of the Gaian System stood up with some difficulty and hefted herself to the wide picture window that occupied the wall perpendicular to the perfectly cleared surface of her desk. The desk was all show, of course. A renewable resource manufactured into a decoration that spoke of her commitment to the environment. In reality, everything of importance was on the network.

The network was powered by solar, wind, hydro and geothermal energy. With nuclear backup, of course. That last part was a secret best limited to the Gaian High Command.

Which was now just Flora.

The tigers took care of the last remaining council member and the others were too weak to speak up. Flora was a strong woman and she’d shown the others their places - some just below her, others much deeper, six feet underground to be exact.

Flora grinned and returned to her desk for her herbal tea. They didn’t bury people anymore. Too damaging to the environment. Too many chemicals in these bodies. We spread their ashes to the winds. In that sense, her enemies who couldn’t shut up were now above

her.

That thought irritated her. She was Flora Harper, Chairperson. She shouldn't feel irritated anymore. There was no greater power for her to aspire to.

Men. The stronger sex? The conquerors, military heroes and alpha males? I killed five billion of them. She snorted.

But now there were only these stragglers left. Children. Misfits. Pathetic waifs who survived only by the luck of their genetic code.

Flora Harper would break that code. Mother Earth would be human free very soon. But first it would be man free. The women could go last.

She tried to imagine her own death. No, for her to go too soon would be a waste of talent. The rest of these bumbling idealists would screw it up. They lacked the mettle. And then it would all be for nothing.

She thought of the nearly ten billion she'd pushed off the cliff so far. Their deaths didn't trouble her. It was just that they were so close. The stakes were too high now. If they didn't finish the job straightforwardly—

Her ear buzzed. "What?" she responded.

"Damian here. Chairperson, my most sincere apologies for disturbing you but the student from the exiles is in Unity."

Rage piled upon rage as Flora counted the reasons why she should not have received this call. She took a deep breath. Damian was a loyal servant. He did everything his Chairperson told him to do. He'd even castrated himself when she mentioned it. But still.

"Is this the level of incompetence I can expect from my staff now? That you bother me with such a minor matter? You know what you need to—" Flora started.

"Apologies, Chairperson. The girl - Astrix - is violently ill. She cannot walk on her own. She has an irregular heartbeat. And, well, her father just passed away on Independence and she is—"

"I don't care! Stuff her in a room near Herzfeld and be done with it!" Flora twitched her head to cut the connection.

Herczfeld. Her rage broke and she connected to him. “Doctor, do you have any idea of the context of your work?”

“Listen, Flora—” Dr. Herczfeld started.

“That’s Chairperson to you, bub!”

Herczfeld guarded his silence. If there was anything Flora hated more than someone who picked a fight with her, it was the someone who refused to escalate the fight!

“Doctor, you are aware that the global warming situation is worsening, correct? Temperatures continue to rise. Grassland continues to turn into desert. We’re still losing plant and animal species!” Flora yelled.

“Yes.”

Flora waited, her fingernails tapping on the hard wood of her desk.

“Yes, Chairperson,” Dr. Herczfeld said.

“These remaining humans in South America and East Asia are responsible for this. And we need—”

“Chairperson, it’s time to consider that the cause of global warming may not be human activity.”

“How dare you!” screamed Flora. “How could—” He’s a traitor. Saboteur! He’s been lying to me this whole time. He wants to subvert the Gaian System. I knew it. I just felt it! A new awareness dawned on her and her skin tingled with goosebumps.

He wants to overthrow me. Me! Chairperson Flora B. Harper!

Another realization hit her like a chunk of barbecue fried chicken to an acid-scorched gullet. She groped for her desk chair and plopped into it, the metal and plastic shrieking its protest.

There must be others! He would never be so bold alone. There are collaborators.

And they could be anywhere!

“Chairperson?” Dr. Herczfeld said. “If there’s nothing else—”

“Just do your job, Doctor,” Flora whispered. She cut the connection.

The world contracted around Flora. Just moments ago, she presumed that her power extended to the borders of Unity and even

beyond, with the exception of the stragglers. And that trash heap in the sky.

But now she was vulnerable. The subverters could bust in at any moment and feed her to the tigers. And they would feel justified in doing it! She shivered.

They were smart up there. She mentally reviewed the intelligence reports of the last few years on the so-called space rationals. They were desperate for resources. Desperate to return to the planet. And this girl. Astrid? Astrin? Who cares what her name is. She would be part of the plot.

And Flora you idiot, you put her and Herczfeld together!

Flora strode toward the door. I won't be a prisoner. I'm in charge here!

She stopped and connected with Robot Command.

"Yes, Chairperson," came the deliciously precise synthesized voice.

"These stragglers you brought in. Are they the last ones on this continent?"

"Yes, Chairperson."

"Good, very good." Finally, someone is doing their job. "That's—"

"Unless," the disembodied voice continued, "they are hiding more than fifty meters underground."

"Hiding underground? Is that a possibility?"

"And with the exception of one male adult who evaded unit KB-89431, stole a transportation unit and is currently in the preserve."

Like a roast chicken bouncing off a rubber wall, the words of Robot Command were unable to penetrate Flora's mind.

"Repeat that last part."

"One adult male evaded unit KB-89431, stole a transportation unit and is currently in the preserve."

Flora's heartbeat pounded in her ears and she swayed. "He evaded one of our killbots?"

"Yes, Chairperson."

"And then he stole its scooter?"

“Correct.”

“And now he is in the preserve?”

“Sensors show that he has penetrated seven-hundred and forty-seven kilometers into the preserve. With a heading that would take him to Unity.”

“How the hell did that happen!” Flora screamed. “Why haven’t you caught him?”

“There—”

“And why wasn’t I notified!” Enemies within, enemies above and now a new enemy approaches and they don’t even tell me? Her guts quivered.

“There is a severe sand storm. The male drove straight into it and disappeared. KB-89431 was unable to maintain visual contact. We did not notify you because it is not protocol.”

“It is now. Confirmed?”

“Confirmed,” the voice replied.

“Speaking of protocol, confirm my instructions once the stragglers are eliminated on Earth.”

“Robot command will execute Space Rational Omega: we will strike Space Station Independence with one-hundred standard missiles.”

“Make it one thousand.” Better safe than sorry.

“Yes, Chairperson. To continue, after receiving final confirmation from you, we will then deploy poison gas to Unity.”

Flora calmed. “Good. Is the scooter still moving?”

“No, the male’s scooter stopped four hours and thirteen minutes ago.”

Flora smiled. “Good. He’s probably dead. Once the storm lifts—”

“We will recover his body, Chairperson.”

“You had damned better well! It’s only the future of the planet that is at stake. It’s only your primary mission!” Flora cut the connection, sat down and drank deeply of her herbal tea. The damned concoction was ice cold now but she forced it down.

Thank Gaia the little cretin is dead. Men could be persistent little buggers, especially these Africans. Some of them knew how to

live from this fouled land. The last thing Flora needed was an alpha male sticking his nose into her business.

Three sharp knocks sounded at the door. It opened. Damian walked in and bowed. "Chairperson—" he began.

Three others followed after him, a thin, balding man with a crooked cane and two younger women.

"Flora," the man started, "we've come to talk to you about this business with the tigers."

Flora slouched to her feet. Finally, a plotter shows his scrounging face.

"Now, we've all talked, and we know what we came here for, the mission we pledged our lives to. But there is such a thing as a death with dignity."

"Damian, arrest them," Flora said.

Damian fixed her with a confused stare. He looked at the visitors, then back to Flora again. "Where should I put them, Chairperson?"

"The tigers escaped into the preserve, correct? Put them into the old tiger cages."

"Now, listen here, Flora, there is no provision for arrest of expedition members in the bylaws—"

"There is now!" Flora yelled.

"Your powers do not extend—"

"Oh, they do now! I won't allow you to subvert or sabotage our mission here, Raymond. No matter your expertise."

Raymond tilted his head and squinted at her. "You need me to keep the field active, Flora. I have trained no—"

"Robot Command will take over your function. Damian!" Flora sat back down, the chair squealing. Her mug was empty now and she was getting hungry. But lunch was at least an hour away.

Damian swiveled and put his arms out to push the three protesters towards the door. Raymond crossed his arms and refused to budge. Damian paused then pushed him hard. Raymond fell backwards in a heap, his cane clattering to the floor and sliding out the door.

The old man pulled himself up and stepped outside, ahead of the approaching Damian and the two women.

“How dare you. How dare you, indeed!” Raymond cried.

Damian pulled the door closed behind him.

The elderly protester inserted a stick-thin arm and tiny fist in between the closing door and its frame. “This is not the last you’ll hear on this, Flora Harper!”

Damian pulled the door closed on the man. He yelped, retracted his arm and Damian slammed the door behind him.

Chapter 7

Astrix sat in a corner of the tiny room. There were no windows. She rubbed her arm where her gyroscope used to be. It was gone now.

On the Independence she used it for sport. She felt her ears. Those upgrades were gone too. She hoped the holes in her ear canal didn't fill in. It took three months for those things to settle in properly and heal. She didn't want to go through that again.

But now she would have to. Thanks Gaians!

She changed the magnification of her eyes then recoiled. I should know better than to try that in a small room. Thank goodness they didn't find those. These are the last people I want operating on my eyes.

There were also fresh holes above her knees and behind her elbows. They cleaned her out. She was just human now. Only human, in this box. Not even a bed, not even a pillow. Smooth cement floor, hard white walls, no windows, just one bare lightbulb in the middle of the ceiling. Not even the door permitted anything to pass.

Astrix picked at her wounds and thought of her father. To die like that in the freezing vacuum. Not even able to say goodbye. Did it hurt? How long did his lungs beg for breath? How long did his hands reach for something to hold onto before they froze stiff? Did he feel betrayed that we didn't come for him in time? Did he worry about my future?

A tightness formed between Astrix's eyes and her vision blurred. Hot, salty tears poured down her cheek and onto her tongue.

He was her inspiration every day she woke up in that other box above the Earth. She doubted that she would ever escape. She buried herself in the books and the math problems and the physics puzzles. She skipped two grades ahead. No friends, no playing: she lived in a fantasy world up there. She refused to admit that she wasn't on Earth.

And now she was. And she was in a box again.

But this box had no view, period, much less one of Earth. In this box she had no mother and no father. And this one was smaller.

In fact, now she had no father anywhere.

The tears dripped down her face again and she sobbed, her chest spasming uncontrollably, the cries jumping from her throat. She had no control.

She'd made it her goal. Sixteen years of single-minded concentration. Dad told me the Gaians would pick me. He believed in me.

But now he's gone and I'm in another box and I don't like this box. If I have to choose a box, I choose the one in space with my mother. If I knew it would come to this, I would've lived more, had friends and found fun instead of unending and practice.

Something clacked to the hard floor behind her and she turned. A round metal plate with something brown and wet sat in front of the door. How did they get it in here? She crawled over, leaned down and smelled it.

It's smelled of the recycling room on Independence.

She pushed it away and retreated to her corner. She knew the Gaians were a hard people. She knew they hated her people. But they invited her here. She didn't expect this kind of treatment. In fact, her friend Marcus was the student last year and he said they treated him very well.

Maybe that was a lie. Maybe it was true they brainwashed you. Maybe Marcus was a spy. Maybe Marcus caused the explosion that killed Dad.

No. She stood up and paced forward two steps then turned and took two steps back.

I am the master of my fate. They can't brainwash me. I will stand up to them. I will stand up for Independence. I will be a good student again. I will study all they offer me but they will not turn me against my own people.

She stopped pacing and walked to the door. She pounded on it with both fists. "Let me out of here. Open the door!"

Footsteps echoed on the hard concrete floor outside her door
“What is it?” a male voice asked.

“I want to get out of here. You invited me here. Why am I a prisoner?”

Metal ground against metal. A screech and then a crash that came from inside the door. It creaked open. Astrix pushed her way out and stepped to the side.

The hallway was narrow. It ran out ahead of her. Windowless metal doors on both sides and, at the end come a bright light. She covered her eyes against the light.

“My dear, I am under strict orders to keep you under lock and key. You had many small machines in your body. I’m afraid our distinguished chairperson is in quite a tizzy.”

“What is your name?” Astrix asked. She did her best to appear meek, cute and fascinated by the graying old man that stood half a meter lower than her.

It wasn’t difficult.

“I am Dr. Hieronymus Herczfeld.” He put his hand to his belt and bowed ever so slightly. “I’m afraid I had no choice but to remove your little machines. We strive to live very naturally here and our leader is feeling a bit paranoid right now.”

“I need to speak to my family right now. My father...,” she paused, looked away and sniffled. “My father, he was killed just as I was getting onto the space elevator and...” She broke out into sobbing again and collapsed to the floor.

“My dear, my dear...” Dr. Herczfeld stepped forward and tried to pull her back up. He grabbed his lower back and stepped back. “I’m just not as young as I used to be,” he mumbled.

Astrix looked up at the old man. The sobbing came easy but she knew she was manipulating him now. It came to her easily. It was unconscious. She didn’t need a strategy. For everything else, she needed one. But not for this.

“Doctor, please. I must speak with my mother. They don’t know if I arrived safely or not and my family... It’s only my mother, my father and myself right now. She’s worrying— Maybe she thinks

she lost her whole family today. Please, just let me call and tell her I'm okay."

"Young lady, I have so much work to do. Please just go back into the waiting room and be patient. I'm sure our distinguished chairperson lowercase this allow you to roam this city freely within a few days." Dr. Herczfeld turned, looked back, fiddled with his mustache and then sighed. "Now if you will please standup."

"I feel really sick. Can I go to the bathroom?" Astrix let her body slump and she looked up at her warden, her mouth open and her eyes sad. If this doesn't work, I'll have to knock him down and run outside. But I don't know if I have the energy for that. "Please?"

Dr. Herczfeld rolled his eyes. "Oh, yes alright." He pointed towards the light. "Last door on the right. Be quick."

Astrix crawled towards the bathroom.

"Good God, young lady! Surely you are not in such bad shape. Stand up already."

Astrix sobbed, coughed and used a nearby door handle to pull herself up. Her shoulder banged the door and from inside came a deep howl. The door banged back at her. She fell away from it and looked up at the doctor, her eyes wide.

Something changed in the doctor's face. He smiled down at her and shook his head. "You really are quite hopeless, aren't you?" He walked over to her, crouched down and helped her to her feet.

Her legs unsteady, she bumped the door next to her and a screeching sound came from within. She recoiled and bumped into the doctor, almost sending them both to the floor.

"Relax, my child. They're only our experimental apes. They're securely locked in. In any case, I thought you were interested in learning about animals. Isn't that why you are here?"

He escorted her to the bathroom door, reached in and flipped on the light and pushed her into the tiny cement block lavatory. "Will you be alright from here?"

"Those are animals? May I see them?" She stood in the doorway. This water closet was luxurious compared to anything she'd found on Independence.

The doctor looked away, annoyed. "All in due time. All in due time." He pulled the door shut behind her. His steps echoed away.

Astrix inspected her face in the mirror. She'd never seen herself so clearly. Dark circles under her eyes, her face swollen. Her skin, too white, sickly. She ran cold water. It refreshed her hands. She leaned down and splashed it on her face. Her strength was returning.

She opened the door and walked towards the light. She found a light wooden door, pushed it open and stepped out into the bright midday sun. She closed her eyes and angled her face up at the sky. The warmth soaked through to her insides. Her stomach began to calm and then a ravenous hunger returned. The trees spun around her and her stomach clenched. She fell to her knees.

A pair of sandals appeared in front of her and she vomited green goop on them.

"What--" the owner of the shoes cried.

Astrix fell backwards and looked up. It was the same man who met her when she got off the elevator. He wore an angry expression now and stared at his shoes.

"You are supposed to be in quarantine," he mumbled to Astrix. "Dr. Herczfeld!" he yelled.

"I need to speak to my mother. Please." Astrix vomited again and Damian took a quick step backwards.

"You will speak to her very soon indeed. You'll be returning to Independence within the hour," said Damian.

"I need to speak to my people now. They know how to restore my strength. Unless you want me to continue vomiting everywhere?" Astrix looked up at him with her sad eyes but she didn't think that would help. These were hard people and they didn't like her.

"Dr. Herczfeld!" Damian yelled. He pulled a handheld radio from his pack and held it out to her by its long antenna. "Be quick." He climbed the steps to the house.

Astrix knew these devices. They used them several times on Independence when the power systems failed. She hit the transmit

button on the side of the black box. "Astrix Volkov calling Space Station Independence. Please come in." She took her thumb off the transmit button and waited, only static reaching her ears.

Inside the house, Damian and Dr. Herczfeld yelled at each other. The animals echoed their mood.

Astrix hit the transmit button again and a voice broke through. She took her thumb off the button.

"This is Gen. Javal of Space Station Independence. Who is calling?"

"They're sending me home."

"Astrix? What do you mean?"

"I don't know. They removed all my upgrades, they put me in a windowless room and now they said they're sending me home."

"Listen very carefully, Astrix. I'm very sorry to tell you that your father is dead. There was an explosion. You remember Marcus? He was lost, too. We still don't know if... but it doesn't matter. We need access to the planet. Remember where you come from. You cannot come back home."

"Represent us well. Plead for our problems. We're running out of food and clean air. We lost an awful lot of water to that explosion. People are dying up here and you are the only one who can do something about that. We must have access to the planet."

"If they won't listen to reason. If they won't do the right thing, tell that new chairperson that our radioactive power sources could fall out of orbit and crash to Earth, effectively polluting the environment across millions of square miles."

Astrix closed her eyes and lay down in the soft grass. A bug zipped around her ear but it barely registered. She just wanted to go to sleep, wherever she could - be it Earth or Independence.

"Astrix! Did you hear me? You cannot allow yourself to be sent back. If you return now, you'll be the death of us all. Astrix, do you copy? Astrix?"

Astrix opened her eyes and pushed herself up onto her elbow. She found the transmit button and pushed it. "They're sending me right now. I'm so weak. I've never been this sick before. I don't know

what to do.”

“Tell them we will drop radioactive waste on the planet, in the middle of their precious animal preserve. Unless they allow us to use the space elevator to replenish our supplies of soil, water and air. Do you understand?”

Astrix pulled herself to her feet and walked towards the building. She pushed through the creaky screen door. She found a seat across the room next to a small window and let herself fall into it.

“She’s not ready to travel!” yelled Dr. Herczfeld.

“The chairperson considers her a security risk. And in any case, the final days are approaching,” whispered Damian.

“Guys? Can I get some food?” asked Astrix.

Damian and Dr. Herczfeld turned to face her. “I’m taking her right now,” said Damian.

“General Javal, you know the guy in charge of Independence?” She looked up from the floor to make sure the pair of men were giving her their full attention. “He says that if you send me back and if you don’t allow us to come down and get soil and the water and other stuff, that he’s going to bomb the animal reserve with radioactive material. So maybe we can go and talk to that lady again?”

“Excuse me?” said Damian.

Astrix closed her eyes and slouched down in the chair. “I really... don’t have... the energy... to say it again.” Her breath came harder now and she could barely hear what Damian said next.

“Put her back in quarantine,” said Damian. “I have to talk to the chairperson right now.”

Chapter 8

Onder pushed himself up from a prone position, sand falling from his body in clumps. He kneeled, closed his eyes and shook his head from side to side. Sand flew all around him. He was hungry and he was thirsty but there would be no game for hundreds of kilometers due to the sandstorm.

The scooter gave up at least ten kilometers ago. Sand clogged the intake vents or it ran out of power. Onder didn't know which. The machine was foreign to him.

When he couldn't take the storm anymore, when his eyes and his nose and his mouth and his ears were full of sand, he threw himself to the ground and fell dead asleep. Now that it'd passed he had just one priority. Eat. Drinking would be impossible he knew that. He had no tools with which to dig. The scooter carried no water. There were no wells here. And the storm covered everything in parched sand.

A line of termites crossed the loamy turf ahead of him. He quickly scooped up five or six of the tiny beasts, stuffed them into his mouth and chewed until they ceased struggling.

The taste didn't bother him. He'd had much worse, like the raw rats in Cape Town and the spoiled meat they'd found in Durban. Even Philani accepted that.

The termites changed direction away from him. But a grasshopper crossed his path - fresh, bright green, stroking its own legs and very much alive. Onder wanted to reach for it. He wanted to make a fire and roast it. He wanted to roast a dozen, dozen fine grasshoppers just like him, over a small crackling fire made of twigs and dry grass.

But the robots would be looking for him. They can sense heat. In fact, when night fell, they would detect him, unless he did something about it.

But he couldn't worry about that now. He grabbed a grasshop-

per, its legs fighting, its mouth spitting, and shoved it whole into his mouth. He gulped down the sour, meaty mass but it didn't satisfy.

A figure moved in the distance, atop a dune. Onder hugged the ground, sand blowing into his mouth and down his throat. He narrowed his eyes and blinked. That figure was familiar.

That's Philani!

Onder scanned a hundred and eighty degrees. He rolled over and scanned the other direction. No sign of robots. Philani disappeared behind the dune. Onder scampered to his feet and chased after her.

He crossed a flat section almost falling as he went. He started to climb the dune and fell flat on his face. He picked himself up and began to climb again, this time on all fours. But he slipped once more.

"Philani! Children!" Onder paddled up the dune. It was tall and he seemed to not make progress. But he was convinced. Just beyond the peak were Philani and the twenty-eight children. They were waiting for him. They needed him. They wouldn't survive without him.

And he loved them.

But still he couldn't climb the dune.

Robots appeared around him. They zipped in from every direction on their scooters, their dead eyes, their pounding, slow walk.

"Philani, watch out! Run! Save the children!" Onder made one last attempt to climb the dune. He got to his feet. He stepped, drunkenly, fell sideways and rolled down to the bottom, stopping with one leg on top of a cactus.

The spines dug into his calf. The stench of rotten meat sickened him, but his stomach jumped. Flies rose in a swarm and harassed his eyes and ears.

A faint memory came back to him. His father told him of this plant. Remove the spines. It has water. It will sustain you. So many miles still to walk. Find Philani and the children he must. Of his duty there was no question.

Onder pulled a broken chunk from his leg. He slipped his knife

from its sheath on his waist and expertly sliced off the skin of the cactus, including the spines. He stuffed one chunk in his mouth, stripped another and chewed as fast as he could.

It stuck in his esophagus. Not enough liquid. But strength was returning.

He looked behind him. The robots would come over the dune any moment now. He had to be ready. His father struggled before him to keep their people alive. Onder could do no less.

He closed his eyes, steadied his breath and readied the knife. He gripped it, blade-down, and flexed his fingers on the handle, feeling, loving the familiar striations. Convinced his grip was firm, he sprang up the dune, knife raised above his head and ready to strike.

But there was no one. The rolling sand dunes stretched for miles. No lights, no movement.

Onder was losing his mind.

He collapsed to the ground. If he couldn't trust his senses, how could he be sure he was even moving in the right direction? He knew that the Gaian city lay to the northeast of him, beyond the river-like Lake Malawi but far south of the great Lake Victoria. Beyond that his course could be off by hundreds of kilometers.

He pulled the compass from his back pocket and checked his location. The sun was down now. It'd fallen behind the horizon, its orange rays reaching out from so far away, struggling to guide Onder despite the late hour.

But it wasn't enough.

Onder would have to spend the night here. In the morning, he'd start again, this time with a full supply of his father's cactus. What did he call it again?

The air cooled and a peace came over him. He knew he was severely dehydrated, but all he could do now was sleep.

Onder bolted awake. Searchlights surrounded him, each brighter than a morning sun. Voices spoke to him but through the daze he understood none of them.

He got to his feet, his knife at the ready. The lights fluttered

then moved to his right. The chattering stopped and was replaced by the sound of a dozen robot scooters.

Onder's eyes adjusted to the midnight darkness. The scooters numbered many more than just a dozen. They were here for Onder and there was no escape. He would be taken just like Philani and the children, just like his father was and his mother and his brothers and the sisters and all his people.

But Onder knew at that moment that he would not be taken. He was different. His will was indomitable. They could not take him. Never. He would slash their skins. He would sever their eyes. He would outsmart them.

Or he would die.

But they would not take him.

Onder ran to his right, climbed the sand dunes next to him, and leapt, his knife hand outstretched. He hooked the blade into the soft plastic case of the searchlight drone and levered himself up onto its tiny top.

Kneeling, he barely fit on top of the flying beast. It dipped under his weight, crashing into the sand dune. The other drones circled around him, each with four large propellers that hung, one each, underneath the chassis at every corner.

Onder pulled a panel from under his knees. He crouched on his tiptoes, one hand grasping the edge of the chassis between the buzzing propeller blades. With the other, he found the power settings and turn them up to high.

The drone jumped straight into the sky. A robot flew towards Onder, its abandoned scooter just ten meters away. The robot, the skin under its eye ripped, got its silicon fingers on the edge of the drone and the flying platform tipped forward, throwing Onder into the air, feet flying over his face toward the approaching scooters.

Onder landed on his back on hard rock. He struggled to draw breath. The land shook from the vibration of the approaching scooters. Onder wanted to give up. Something within him said this was a fight he could not win. He lay there, like a fish whose water has been sucked away by greedy invaders, feeling sorry for himself

for the life he'd been dealt.

The voice of his father came through to him, as clear as if the man stood above the boy.

"Son, you are given but one life. For the coward, for the man afraid of his own shadow, who dares not venture into the unknown, an infinite number of lives is too little.

"But for the man who knows his principles and his purpose, who finds within himself the courage to fight even the most unwinnable battle one life is more than enough."

Onder jumped to his feet. Just a few meters away was the attacking robot's scooter. Onder jumped on it, turned and bolted off into the night.

Onder felt the robots at his back. Their cold, slimy fingers grasped at him. He wanted to look back but dared not. He pushed the scooter as hard as it would go. His mind quieted. Speed was his only thought. He maintained maximum pressure on the pedal.

The sun's rays reached back around for him. Morning was near. His throat and mouth cried out for liquid. The land was smoother now, flatter. Desert gave way to scrubland. Perhaps ahead there would be water. But not here. He'd lost the cactus chunks in the night somehow. His strength failing, his eyes closing, he caught himself falling asleep.

He dared a glance backwards. Somehow, in the confusion, he'd lost them. He'd eluded a squad of robots.

And searchlight drones.

A rush of pride filled him. It was not a bad substitute for food, not at all.

He looked down at the control panel. A red dot blinked. He was heading straight into the rising sun now. But that's not where he wanted to go. He grabbed controls and turned southeast. The controls turned but the scooter continued straight on. The undulating orange morning sun peeked above the horizon, momentarily blinding Onder.

He raised his hand to shield his eyes and that's when he spotted it.

The searchlight drones hung in the sky like tiny flies, floating perhaps a half kilometer ahead of him, their camera eyes surely focusing on him.

The Gaians knew where he was. They controlled the scooter. More robots would be upon him any moment now.

And he was even weaker than before.

Onder pinched the control panel and zoomed out. A few minutes flight time ahead was Lake Malawi. He was so close! He could slow the scooter, jump out and hide in the lake. The robots might not even notice he was gone.

It was insanity. They could just as well fish him out of the lake, or let him drown.

But it was his only chance.

A new blip appeared on the map. It was crossing the lake now. He tapped it. A video feed played. More robots. At least two dozen.

Onder thought of his father. Would he be proud of him? A wife and twenty-eight children. That was something his father never had.

But am I the father? Or just the twenty-ninth child?

Onder had yet to make his father proud. He needed more time. He prayed for it and promised not to squander any further time he was granted.

The lake appeared on the horizon as a shimmering blue apparition. The squad of robots waited for him, his last obstacle. They'd formed a roadblock, between him and the lake. If Onder crashed at this speed, his body would fly a kilometer before crashing to earth, nothing more than a bag of bones left.

Onder grabbed the controls and turned. They didn't respond. He took his foot off the pedal and hit the brake. The scooter did not respond.

Onder brought a foot up to the seat of the scooter. It shook. He brought up the other and stood up, carefully balancing himself. The roadblock was near now. This was it.

The scooter crashed into the assembled robots and he flew, headfirst over the explosion.

The river was narrow. It was shallow from lack of rains. Onder passed over it. His momentum expended, The air resistance too much, Onder fell into the water, unconscious.

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