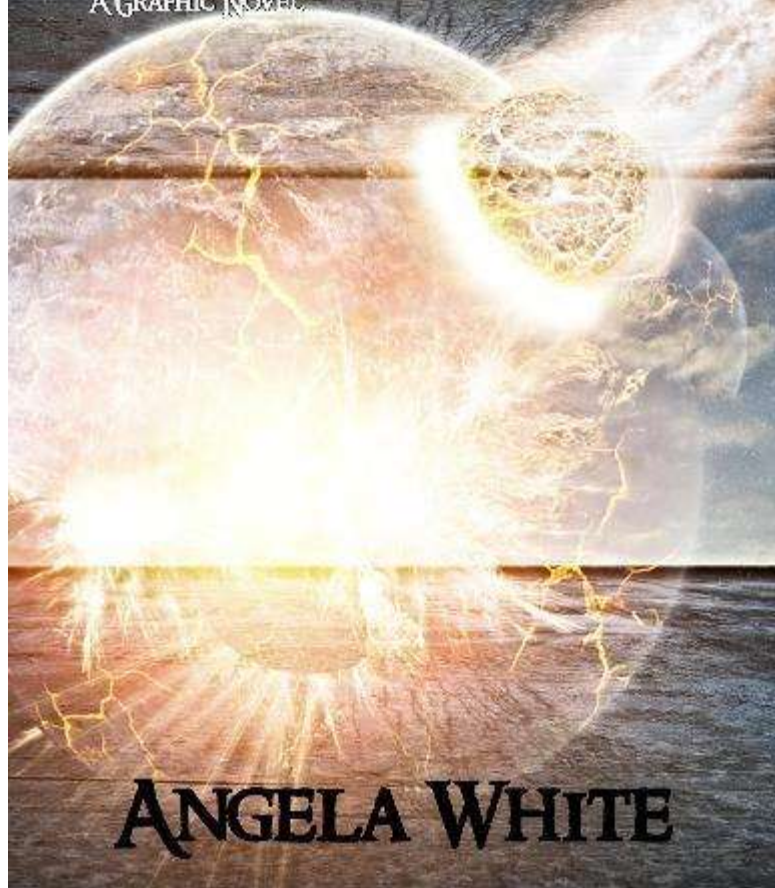


The HOP

A GRAPHIC NOVEL



ANGELA WHITE

Copyright
A Graphic novel
The HOPs
by
Angela White

Title: The HOPs

Length: 305 pages

Author: ©Angela White

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Chapter One
The HOP

1

“**G**ood morning, class.”

“Good morning, Professor Coyle.”



“We have finally arrived.” Professor Coyle gently keyed an authorization code into the main console of the sterile room. Replacing equipment while sailing through space was difficult and after so many trips, this vessel was far from prime condition. “Today’s lesson will complete your

required decade of educational service. Tomorrow, we will begin the return voyage to Eden, where you will all assume your hereditary roles as members of the Federation Council. In time, *you* will shape all the laws for our people.”

Coyle studied the respectfully listening youths for a long moment, hiding his concerns about them and the future. He wasn't impressed with this generation. “Before you go on to fulfil the roles that reproduction provided, you will be given details about the HOP worlds. You cannot decide the future of this program without first understanding what it is.”

Coyle motioned toward the screen where a blue and green planet hung in space without any idea that its sole existence was as an experiment. Now that it had outlived the usefulness that had allowed such a creation, the test subjects had to be disposed of. “Hop-17 is a failure. There were no signs of Origin, other than what we had previously documented on the other experimental worlds. Though this planet maintained isolated eras of peace through its history, the inhabitants now exist in a constant state of warfare. The true nature of humanity has once again smothered all hopes of an enlightened society forming. None of the religions implanted there were successful; the field was contaminated by piloting errors and rebels who abducted the inhabitants for their own experiments. Most of the technological advances on this world have been attributed to extraterrestrial influence. During the last cycle of

Council voting, HOP-17 was officially scheduled for A.R. You are the last students who will ever have this view.”

Many of the fourteen students murmured quietly at the revelation. Some also leaned forward to peer in fascination at the vivid ball in the magnified window of their ship.

Only those about to assume roles of importance in their society were brought to these far reaches of the universe. Over the last decade, this group had visited untold solar systems to fulfill the requirements for their careers. Some of them had gone the full decade between parental visits, which meant their young minds had been formed by the Federation; it made Coyle uneasy.

He also didn't like all of the stiff black and white uniforms glaring at his own pale gray robe of a sterile scientist. All of these kids were breeders. Science children, unless they tested positive during puberty, didn't receive this education. The breeders had made that law to weaken the scientists and it had worked. Only a few of the science kids knew what was at stake until they actually started their adult jobs and lives. Coyle tried not to hate his students for it as he continued. “Asteroid Removal is an efficient, merciful method of ending our experiments. It clears dangerous or contaminated worlds from the universe before any of them can become a threat to us. It does this without revealing our presence, as required by Federation law. The Council has chosen to remove sixteen other planets

over the last forty-thousand years. They do not end these experiments lightly. It now takes more than a century of deliberations and millions of examples as proof of their unfitness to exist.”

Professor Coyle switched carefully to the next slide. “This is the small group of people from 17 that have been chosen as re-seeders for the next HOP world. These specimens will be cleansed of physical flaws and dropped onto an empty planet, where nature will allow them to populate it naturally. Due to laws passed after the near destruction of all Asian subjects through genetic defects, it is no longer legal to clone seed couples for Origin experiments.”

“Excuse me, Professor?”



Coyle was a bit surprised to be interrupted. None of the other classes had ever questioned him. These HOP lessons were supposed to be

unmonitored, but parents usually warned their kids to be quiet. Things had gotten ugly between the two ruling factions of the Federation. Scientists, who held an equal share of the ten council seats, wanted the HOPs to continue until answers were found. The Legislators, who held a powerful advantage in their ability to breed, didn't. They wanted to launch a new program where all space inhabitants would resume living on planets. "Yes, Amanda?"

"Will they remember anything?" Amanda inquired. "The seeders, I mean."

"Only an incredibly bright light, and then a large bang. They won't be harmed during the transfer."

"Will they be trained or educated? Given anything to help them survive?"

"The pods self-activate during the first stretch of good weather and can be used for shelter. When opened, they also begin to grow a native fast-garden that will produce food indefinitely in the climate they were placed."

"Nothing else?"

"No." Professor Coyle frowned. "The Council has decided that our interference is what caused the program to fail. The next planet will not be given any technology or advanced knowledge to contaminate the field."

Coyle waited impatiently for the most intelligent of his class to ask the next logical question for someone in her position. Amanda would follow her outspoken parents into legislative affairs and disrupt things there, many assumed.

Coyle simply wanted her to come away from his class understanding that there were two sides to every story, and one of them was almost always a lie.

“Is it right?”

“What do you think?” the professor guided. The other students were mostly still eyeing the frozen seeder pods on the screens, but this was a lesson for all of them.

“I’m not sure.” Amanda shrugged without shame or defense. “I support all life being left alone to die or flourish on its own, as my family always has. I also agree with the scientists that without answers, we will never have true peace. But I also feel the rebels are right about it being a lost cause to try to control human nature at all. I was sent here to be educated on these things, but all of my original views have only grown stronger.”

Coyle turned the screens off to give them a star-filled window into space again. “It has taken much longer for the Council to declare Earth the seventeen extinction planet. We had reason to believe, at first, that the results here would be different.”

“Because the others were done without consideration of the subjects?”

Coyle was impressed to see that Amanda’s repeated questions were drawing the other students back toward the conversation. She had her father’s magnetic personality, but without his need to wield it so heavily. “No, though the first few were

destroyed sloppily. “We developed the asteroid removal system to be merciful when it was time to end an experiment.” Professor Coyle hadn’t missed the implication that he alone held the responsibility of convincing Amanda of which choice to make. He’d known that when he’d found her name on the class registry.



Amanda would join the Council as her father’s heir when this trek was over. Two years after that, she would fill his seat and likely be the most powerful person to ever control the universe. Like her parents, Amanda was expected to push through reforms that the scientific half of the council didn’t want. Coyle’s job as ranking scientist on the HOP program was to convince the girl to keep going with the next experiments that would happen under her reign. The professor had been trying the entire time

they'd been visiting these remote worlds, but with each lifeless planet, the girl's eyes had only grown more glazed with hatred. No matter what came from her mouth, she had already made up her mind.

Coyle had also. He believed they needed answers, but by teaching their kids to search for them this way, Coyle felt like he was carrying a weight that he could never remove. If there were a God or Hell, he would surely burn for his participation in something so inhumane. Until then, he owed his life to the Council and he would do his duty. "Please turn to page one in the restricted guides. They'll open with this code: Ex16."

Eager, the students hurried to enter the code. They'd been promised that this class would reveal the inner details about the failures of the program, something nearly everyone wanted to know.

"Ronald Mitchel, please explain why this experiment is important to our species."

The blond haired teenager flushed, hands clenching into fists on the metal desktop. "We need to know if a God created us, or if we created the Gods."

"Very good." Professor Coyle smiled. "Winston Taft, can you explain why our council would approve such a controversial experiment as human seeding?"

"The consensus is that knowing our true origins will ensure harmonious societies." Winston recited it as if reading from a book. "All wars were based in religion as different cultures clashed. When we

can prove where humans come from, we will finally be able to have peace.”

Coyle gestured. “Darren Bush, how many countries participate in the HOP?”

“Only the Americans now, sir.” Darren recited the textbook copy easily. “After the plague, all other Origin programs were abandoned as those cultures just tried to survive.”

“What made the difference for us?” Coyle pointed. “Gwen Kennedy?”

“Our newly forming structure of social equality allowed half the effected people to be men and the other half to be women. If we had subjugated the females to non-work roles, as the other cultures did upon moving to space, all of our males would have been sickened in the outbreak. Because of our generosity, all but one of the other cultures—Japan—did survive. However, their programs are still non-functional after all these years as they continue to recover.”

“Straight from the book, word for word.”

Gwen smiled happily at the professor’s toneless comment. That was what they were supposed to shoot for—total, honest perfection.

“Now let’s examine the previous experiments. The first modified world, HOP-01, was seeded with members from the Council itself. They retained their memories and reported no evidence of a Superior Being contacting them. As their population grew, it mirrored our own setup and

quickly dissolved into the same unchecked violence that left our home planet empty of all life.”



The professor turned the page from the once-lush planet they'd immortalized in space with glowing markers and tours for the wealthy. “The second and third experiments were much the same. As long as the seeders retained their memories of our society, they could not agree upon a method of achieving peace, even from a small population. Both of those experiments were removed early on. The founders of HOP cited being unable to watch the awful violence happen again. The hesitance to repeat the program after three failures resulted in a long delay where space stations were the only life in the universe.”

“Then the sickness came, right?” Miranda asked. She and Amanda were cousins, though distantly.

“Yes.” Coyle was still struggling not to show his dislike for either girl or any of the other privileged few who had been sent to this class. He was glad it only took place once a generation. “Six countries managed to adapt to life in space, but the number of bases per culture was small. There were only three American stations. We numbered just thousands. Over the centuries, the Indian stations all fell to inner betrayal. The Russians were ostracized from the coalition for their cruelty, and then hunted down for their plans to destroy our air supply. As you know, the bounty for Russian spies can be enormous. We rarely have that trouble now. We all adapted to life as space beings, but we had no protections from celestial influences.”

“You mean the galactic plague?” Zoey asked.

“Yes. A hundred years after we took to the stars, Haley’s Comet smothered all the stations orbiting our Mother planet with concentrated radiation that nearly destroyed humanity. After the illness that killed 90% of all humanity and left most survivors barren, there were still three American stations, but only Eden held life. You are the direct descendants of the few survivors who emerged still capable of having children. Through your families, we have recovered, but in an effort to ensure that we never become extinct, the Human Origin Program was revived and expanded. Multiple worlds are now

seeded at the same time to ensure a human presence throughout the universe.”

“How many active experiments do we have?”
Bradly inquired from the front row.

“Over twenty. Humans not only recovered from the plague, we rebounded enough to guarantee that we will always exist. No other species on any planet that we’ve discovered has been able to do that.”
Coyle smiled proudly.

Instead of the approval he’d expected, the students seemed to frown simultaneously. Coyle felt their condemnation. He understood, but he’d resigned himself to this life a long time ago. He had been on the scientific payroll since being declared sterile. Only breeders were welcome on the legislative side, and all others were shunned unless they were heirs to those who held the scientific seats. In their society, non-breeders had no value except in their brains. If Coyle started speaking out now, he would be arranging his own termination. No one was safe, not even the girl staring at him as if he were a bug under a glass.

The Council only appeared to support the President of Eden. If Amanda’s father, who had enemies and friendships on both sides, stepped much further out of line, his daughter would find herself dropped onto one of the experimental worlds and forgotten about. It had happened before when a new President wanted to make, or fight, reforms that the council hadn’t approved. In this case, Amanda’s father wanted to spare HOP-17 and all of the other

experimental worlds. He also wanted to keep their people in space until there was a positive result from the program. Clifford Roth had opposed both sides at once. If he pushed any harder, there would be severe consequences.

Coyle broke the silence. “All of the experiments between 4 and 10 failed to flourish and were eventually removed. Over the years, they were added to the international tours to pay for the upkeep of the quarantine zones around them.”



Coyle flipped to the next image in the guide. “Experiment eleven was where the program became popular, letting it evolve into the structure that we have today. The group of seeders had trouble from the first day; only two breeding pairs survived. It took so long for aggression to take over that success was called and the program was halted for nearly a

century while we celebrated and made plans to put ourselves back onto a Mother planet. Then the first war broke out on 11, leaving the planet in chaos as brother slaughtered brother. Removal came quickly.”

Coyle glanced down to see Amanda’s hand clench into a fist, hatred flashing across her cultured face. Was she mad about the removal or the fact that there were so many more test worlds waiting to be examined and then terminated? The professor wasn’t sure. “The long time between seeding and war on 11 gave us hope. Scientists propagated two more planets, this time using only two pairs on each. We pre-bred them prior to the drop, however, and both specimens lost their young upon arrival. That led to the laws of transport and the safety system. No human, mature or embryo, has been harmed during a drop in ten centuries.”

That sent a bit of calm through the cold, lab-like classroom. Coyle breathed in of it, hating these required sessions. Spending years away from home was hard. Normally, he was on Eden station, teaching scientific kids how to record the HOP experiments.

“These two worlds were given other advantages as well, such as basic tools, but little data was recorded from either experiment. Of these planets, one was infiltrated by Russian rebels and was removed before the first war period was reached, denying us a timetable for comparison. Duplicating the results proved to be just as hard on 13, where the

surviving pairs both grieved deeply for their offspring. In their misery, they refused to mate and died of old age without reproducing. The Council denied a request to reseed 13, citing the controversial law that declares HOP worlds historical sites. These planets were added to the official galactic tour, extending that legislative program into a profit for the first time since its inception.”



Coyle switched to the next file. “These are the last three planets before HOP-17 was seeded. World 14 was designed according to the theories of Elijah Pruett, the last reform President of Eden. We dropped pairs in isolation across the planet, and gave them all connected ideologies to guide their culture. We tied them together with a central theme of creation and waited. It was a rounding success

until their populations grew too large to stay in the gardens any longer. As with our own history, these cultures almost immediately went to war with each other upon contact, sure that their version of life was right.” The teacher motioned toward a hand in the rear of the class. “Yes, Keisha Walton?”

“Was it determined that religion was also the root of their wars?”

“Sadly, yes. Origin is a necessary information, no matter the race or species. One of my other classes examines non-human seeded worlds, but the results are the same.”

“Other species?” Amanda frowned as the students murmured at this secret information.

“Yes. We’ve tried to duplicate the HOP experiments with other species, but it seems that *all* life is predisposed to destroying those around them. Anyone different is either rooted out and shunned, or simply torn apart upon discovery. We’ve seen no variances in that reaction.” Coyle pointed toward the images of three barren, lifeless planets. “Experiment fifteen was done much the same as 14, but fewer advancements and guides were provided. Those societies lasted longer, but still dissolved long before they reached our own historical age of twenty thousand years on a planet. HOP-16 was given only two couples and two gardens, but those clans eventually fell to fighting at such levels that asteroid removal was also chosen. With all three of these last worlds, war between entire families or towns was reached by year two-thousand. They

were removed at the same time, earning our scientists the nickname of Conkers. The triple removal required the first human-shaped asteroid that skimmed the first two worlds to create huge fires that covered their surfaces. It slammed into HOP sixteen with so much debris trailing it that the planet is still encased in rings of galactic dust all these centuries later. It is a highlighted stop on the tour.” Coyle nodded at another raised hand. “Yes, Kim Pruett?”

“What earns an experiment that decision? Do they have to reach a certain level of violence?”

“Unless it is excessive, no. It’s advancement. Once they are capable of reaching space and living here, the removal clock begins to count down. They have less than a hundred years to show improvement. After that, the Council votes on their removal.”

“Do other countries have a say in the removal decisions?” Serena asked.

“Not anymore. They used to be part of the Council, but lack of hereditary stability allowed us to take away their seats and eliminate their power. Our council now makes all choices concerning space living, wars, and the HOP. Removal candidates go through an automatic series of votes and appeals, but within a century, the experiment has to be exterminated to keep our society from being discovered.”

“How is 17 different?” Mala inquired from the rear of the classroom.

“How do you know it is?” Coyle hadn’t expected this level of questioning from the legislative students, but he’d been a teacher for a long time. He knew how to handle both sides of their societal classes.

“My father used to work in this program.” Mala beamed. “He told me.”

Coyle frowned in concentration. “Hammond? John’s boy?”

Mala nodded respectfully. “Yes, sir.”

“Must have been after he retired.”

“Yes. He wouldn’t ever speak of it before.”

“What did he tell you?”

“He said ten thousand years of studying the HOP worlds allowed the scientists to discover the genes for aggression and submission. They diced it and spliced it.”

“Yes, and they also denied them some important things in the process,” Coyle muttered.

“Like what?”

“Like true empathy.” Coyle gave his students the truth. “This planet births children who have no compassion, no sympathy. We’d never seen that before the Gene Makers were allowed to restart the cloning program.”

Ronald frowned. “I thought you told us cloning is against the law.”

“It is. Scientists are prevented from using new specimens, but those still in cryo were acquired before the laws were made and are exempt.” No matter what, the Council got to play God.



“You said one planet was infiltrated by rebels. Is that also what happened here?” Heather asked.

Impressed, Coyle nodded. “Partially, yes. Rebels want all programs shut down. They paid scientists to *misplace* those genes, hoping the slaughters that came from it would convince our people to vote these experiments out of existence. Only a few of the rebels were ever brought to justice for what they’ve done. It was centuries before we knew they’d tampered with this world.”

“How did you figure it out?” Amanda hadn’t looked away from his face once. That wasn’t lost on the aging professor.

“The wars on each world before this one followed an exact pattern. This planet had war without rhyme or reason, murders with no provocation. We had to go down and take samples

every few years to monitor and study so we could verify it, and therein presented another problem. Thanks to the tests, a large percentage of this population is aware that there may be life among the stars. Their space program has flourished. They actually have people living in orbit around their world, a thousand years earlier than they should.”

“I heard a rumor that we were sighted by them during one of their attempts to explore this solar system.” Kim Pruett glanced around at the other students. “Mother works in communications.”

Speaker of the House was so far beyond a communications worker that Coyle slammed his fist onto the desk in anger at the wording. But he didn’t scold the girl for picking the PC route, even now, after it had nearly destroyed them. An asteroid had come during a time when skeptics of guarding against space were still the majority. When the asteroid hit their Mother planet, it had killed it. The drifting castaways who’d escaped into space were stunned when the remaining scientists calculated that they could have changed the trajectory of the giant rock if there had been time to put the right equipment in place. Coyle found it romantic and terrible that they now used asteroids in the HOP.

“Much like our past, the leaders of this planet often ignore the facts to suit their agendas. They mock these people as examples of insanity, but they’ve gathered enough proof of our existence that the vote from our Council was unanimous. That is

something else that makes HOP-17 unique. Never in our history has all ten seats agreed on a removal.”

“In all the worlds, there was the same lack of evidence of a superior being? A creator?” another student wanted to clarify.

“Yes, Laken Brown. On many, there were rumored miracles and fantasies, but none of them was provable in attribution to a deity of any kind. Delusions were listed as the official cause.”

“Is there any reason to think another seeding of worlds, under different conditions, might produce results?” Derrick asked in a carefully controlled tone.



“No. However, here on HOP-17, there has been a trend away from religion completely. We’ve assumed that the lack of empathy and compassion have also affected the genes responsible for

controlling faith and belief. These beings are very sure that nothing exists outside what they can determine with their basic senses.”

Mala sneered. “Isn’t that the opposite of advanced?”

“Actually, it’s the first sign that religion may not have to play a factor in a society at all. If we could watch their evolution up to lives without worship, we may have recognized some pattern that would allow us to finally rule that out as an Origin.”

“Has there ever been a partial removal?” Amanda asked.

“No, though it has been asked for. The Council refused that request by a narrow margin. They said the hardship on the survivors went beyond program guidelines.” Coyle glanced around the room, certain they all agreed that the experimenting had to stop. The rest, he couldn’t determine without asking outright. Encouraged by all the open discourse they’d had, Coyle did just that. “How many of you will encourage your parents to vote for removal of all HOP worlds?”

Almost every hand went up.

“Interesting.” The professor had expected a different tally. “How about continuing these experiments at all? Do you support that?”

Again, it was almost unanimous. They didn’t.

“Who will use their positions to get us back on a planet and out of space?”

All hands went up... Coyle frowned down at Amanda as he realized she hadn't participated in any of the votes. "Amanda?"

"You didn't offer what I intend to push."

Coyle came closer to the calmly waiting girl, scowling. "And that is?"

"I want more worlds like HOP-17. The search for our origin must be taken to the next level."

Coyle stared in horror as he realized she would be a true reform President. They hadn't had one in thousands of years. "What?"



"It's not going to work," the girl answered evenly. "The previous planets all developed their own religion, even without our suggestions, but in none of them were we able to observe any sign that a spark of life, a creator, or anything else appeared. The lack of evidence, after all these centuries and

worlds, is a clear sign that this program should be *reformed.*”

Amanda, very aware of how much her parents were hated by her professor, calmly stood up and walked toward the door. “These resources would be better spent on other directions; ones that do *not* involve the search for a deity as an answer. That, professor, has never been tried. I want to experiment with worlds where religion is forbidden.” Amanda flashed a tight smile, trying to mirror her mother’s polite assurance. “We will discover where we came from. Until we do, we have no right to abandon a mating pair of our kin on an isolated world, just to see if they need a god or if a god comes who needs them. We also have to accept that destroying these subjects when it goes bad is morally and ethically wrong. Even failed experiments have the right to live. After all, are we not a failed space experiment?”

Amanda went through the sliding door before anyone could react. She’d been in these classes for years now, traveling the universe to observe what happens when human life is recreated. She agreed they needed to know their origins, but not at this price. Unlike her parents, however, Amanda had no political motive. She wasn’t hiding anything. She just didn’t like how it made her feel to know they’d been doing it for thousands of years. So many civilizations and societies they’d encouraged and then destroyed as if it didn’t matter!

Amanda pushed the button to close the door to her room, and went to the bed, eager to lose herself in the quietness of sleep. She loved space travel, but the constant drone of the sexless computer voice gave her a headache. She often longed to reprogram it to a man's soothing tones, but their gender-neutral society frowned on things like that. Federation citizens were anonymous except for their basic traits, and even those could be bleached for a price. Everyone on Eden station tried ridiculously hard to be the same, but even the most non-offensive people had bad thoughts.

The Council had proved that with the drugs they'd used in the beginning to root out spies. Humans were not made of light. They were filled with darkness in endless wells that light could hardly pierce in even the shallowest of places. It had led their people into so many problems that they could no longer live on a planet. Every time they'd tried after losing their Mother planet, they destroyed themselves, and so the law had been decreed that they would roam space, searching for the answers to human beginnings. The survivors would never have a home again.

In rebellion of this, the great human experiment was suggested. It passed easily by people who were already sure they were too evil to recover. Now, they seeded planets and made trips to those already growing with humankind. None of those visits had ever produced positive results. Almost fifty thousand years later, they were still adrift in

stations, still searching for a creator. Amanda's parents had gone through this same voyage of war-ridden, ugly worlds that never gave enlightenment. As she'd grown, they'd been clear on how wrong it was, but she hadn't understood until now. The scientists were seeding planets with lab animals and then blowing them up when they were disappointed. As far as Amanda was concerned, the original lawmakers were correct. They were too far gone to come back. The best they could do was stop committing heinous acts in the name of searching for something that had very likely never existed.

"Random, after all," Amanda muttered, pulling the blanket over her head to keep from being recorded on the room's voice sensor. Privacy and freedom were myths she'd read about and mourned silently alongside her classmates. She often felt like a human inside a robot shell. Her parents had warned her that this trip would be hard and it had been.

Amanda rolled toward the wall, keeping herself covered as she let expressions of horror and hatred come to her pale face. The plan was working so far. Everyone here disliked her, and the odds that her final words would make it to Council were good. If she could withstand all of the ugliness that came next, she might find herself dropped onto one of the planets they were going to seed in the future. Thanks to her mom's liaison with a man on the security crew, Amanda wouldn't lose her memory. She would arrive on a planet armed with

information that would shape freedom from this tyranny for humans everywhere. Or it would get her killed and her body tossed into space.

Not sure which she was actually longing for, Amanda quietly concentrated, trying to gather the strength to get through the trial. Murder was illegal, but so was capital punishment. To solve the problem, criminals were cleansed of their memories and dropped onto isolated planets. Only the very worst of society was given this complete punishment—something she would be in three...two...one...



Amanda let out a shuddering sigh of fear as a huge explosion ripped through the ship, destroying the classroom she'd just been in. Warning alarms and sirens blared, jarring people from their beds and

posts as the vessel shimmied in protest against the pilots trying to save it.

Amanda stayed where she was, fingering the syringe of sleep medicine she'd smuggled onboard and stored in her mattress. Sometimes a mob would tear a rebel apart. If they were that angry, Amanda planned to inject herself. If they killed her, she wouldn't feel it. If they didn't, she would wake up in a cell on Eden station. Either way, she had accomplished her parent's goal of destroying the hold the breeders had over everyone else. These deaths would serve the greater rebel purpose, while possibly giving her the only thing she'd ever longed for—freedom.

Chapter Two
The Council

1

“I want her executed!” Avery Walton was furious. All the breeders on the Council were. Avery’s red hair bobbed furiously as he pointed to his personal security guard.



“She’s the daughter of our President!” Tyra Jones favored mercy, as did the other scientists. She shook her head at the guard who had moved toward the main exit from the plush chamber. “She’s being

decontaminated and processed. It might not even be her.” Tyra ran the Public Services sector. She knew how everything worked and how to get it repaired, shipped, billed, changed, or returned. She also oversaw the funding for the Scientists as Head of the Table for her party.

The guard returned to Avery’s side.

Tyra gave the guard a subtle smile, then turned back toward the Council. Having an enemy’s bodyguard in your bed was a powerful feeling. “Who else wishes to speak?”

Avery grunted, unwilling to admit he’d forgotten the protocols. They’d been attacked too many times during these trials to bring in someone who hadn’t been processed yet. “I demand justice. If I don’t get it, your people may get very thin and be unable to work.”

Most of the nine other Council members ignored his common bluff. Avery ran the food on Eden station—literally. Without his transport system, they would slowly run out of food and begin raiding each other like their ancestors had done. They would also stop receiving repairs and replacements for the Space Force, and for their tours, educational, and experimental voyage ships.

“I agree with Avery.” As Head of Production, Winston Taft always caved to Avery’s threats, but he’d also lost a family member; the choice was easier than it usually was. “She’s a killer!”

Tyra scowled at the grieving men. “We have laws against execution. If you want to kill her, you have to change the laws first.”

The entire council muttered at the reminder. Tyra knew how everything worked. Their laws forbade capital punishment, no matter the crime.

President Roth glared at the ten council members as he stood before them. “Our laws say she’s to be wiped and dropped; that’s what we do with criminals!”

Avery glanced at Winston, encouraging the man to keep fighting. Winston could always be counted on for a bit of aggression. And he owes me a lot of favors. *It’s a symbiotic relationship.*

Winston punched the desk, rattling papers. “She killed my son!”

“Along with my daughter! And my niece!” Kate Pruett pointed at President Roth. “She killed thirteen breeders!”

“She got my nephew!” Jack Mitchel also pounded the table, rattling drinks and notebooks. “Some of our family lines are now lost forever! She should die!”

President Roth didn’t pace the rounded chamber like he wanted to. He stood directly centered between the two lines of wide desks that separated the two sides of the council. His own black robe was soothing compared to the gray of the scientists and the royal blue of the legislators. It didn’t matter to him that all the council members tried to look alike by bleaching their features. They were the enemy.

He listened to their cries for justice with anger, but not remorse. His only regret was that he had to listen to them at all.

“If we don’t follow our own laws, how can we punish her for not doing the same?”

“Shut up, Miller!” Jack Mitchel rose, enraged. “You’re in charge of plumbing. I enforce security!”

“Then do your job.” Carlos Miller wasn’t ashamed of his role in their station. Without plumbing, it wouldn’t be possible to live here.



The other scientists were similarly proud and aware of the value of their jobs even though the legislators thought they were just menial labor. The science side of this council covered janitorial, public services, repairs, plumbing, and all laboratories, including the infamous asteroid program. It wasn’t the food, transportation, energy,

communications, or security of the breeders, but it was still invaluable to running the station.

Jack gestured at the President. “Why aren’t you offering any protests?”

President Roth dropped his head, voice a low mutter. “I want to, but we all saw the tapes. She’s guilty. As President, I can’t condone it even if she is my daughter.”

A few of the council members were soothed a bit by his words; the rest rolled their eyes or simply ignored his honorable choice.

“What would it take to change the law and allow us to execute her legally?” Kate Pruett wasn’t willing to let it go so easily. Her family had no other breeders. The Pruett line would now cease to exist. Kate was too old to breed anymore as far as she knew, but she would have to try and likely die in the attempt. Her fury was barely controlled.

“Computer, how do we change the law of criminal punishment?” The President waited with everyone else, but he already knew the answer.

The computer whirled and beeped as it found that passage in their records. “A 75% public majority vote is required to change the punishment law, as well as a unanimous vote from the council.”

“You’ll never get either of those.” Miller smirked. “There’s never been a 75% majority vote from the public on anything.” Miller would have rubbed it in further to the glowering security man, but Tyra shook her head.

Miller gave in to the public services woman. She was right. He didn't need to remind Mitchel that he wouldn't get the council vote either; the man already knew.

“Do you wish to initiate a public vote on this matter?” The computer prepared to activate the public system.

“No.” President Roth kept his voice neutral, but he longed to rub it in as well. He and Miller were good friends. They often wished for the same things. *I'll miss him after the revolution.* The public would demand hangings and those in charge would be first in line for that honor.



The computer moved on with the trial. “The defendant is now being brought in.”

Everyone fell silent as the doors opened and four guards escorted Amanda into the room.

Amanda felt naked in her red prison uniform. The thin material offered no protection from their hatred. Even the scientists, who secretly applauded her, now stared with wary wonder, unable to place her innocent façade with that of a mass murderer.

The front of each desk was engraved with that person's sector. A wide path that led to an exit at each end separated the two sides of the Council. Amanda hated all the perfectly dressed members at those desks. Their long, expensive robes and bleached features were a stark reminder that they didn't care about anything but power and control over everyone.

She also hated the chambers that were in the center of this station. The walls were golden and the floors were glittering green; it was offensive to her that so much of the station resources had been used to create a circular room where ten men and women wielded all the power in the universe. She could have overlooked the luxuries if they'd ever had good leaders.

The computer lit up again. *"This is the trial of Amanda Roth, prisoner 1194013. This prisoner is accused of fourteen counts of willful murder. The evidence is on the screens. The defendant may refute or challenge any of the images or recordings."*

Each of the council members scanned their personal monitors as the recording began to flash again. It showed Amanda working on the bomb under her blankets, though only bits of wire were

showing. The next clips were of her putting the bomb into her bag and taking it to the classroom, where she slid it under her desk. The replay slowed down to reveal her final words and then the screens went dark in the fireball.

Half of the council stared in fresh revulsion, grief, and hatred.

Amanda lifted her chin, not looking at her father.

President Roth kept his blank face as the computer continued the trial.

“Does the prisoner have anything to say?”

Amanda smiled. “I set them free of your hereditary chains.”

When she didn’t say anything else, The President hid his surprise. They’d planned on Amanda exposing her mother. He had no idea why she wasn’t doing it, but he couldn’t or everyone would know he’d been in on this horrible demonstration of rebel power.

The breeder members shouted, almost drowning out the computer.

“Council members will now enter a verdict.”

All of them reach for the red button.

While the votes were entered, President Roth studied the hierarchy maps of the other countries that were posted in brief detail on one wall of the council.

India

Parliamentary Republic

Hereditary Parliament

Prime Minister

1 Station
50K people
0 council seats

Germany

Federal Parliamentary Republic

Hereditary Parliament

Chancellor

1 Station
35K people
0 council seats

China

Authoritarian Republic

Hereditary Council

President

1 Station
20K people
0 council seats

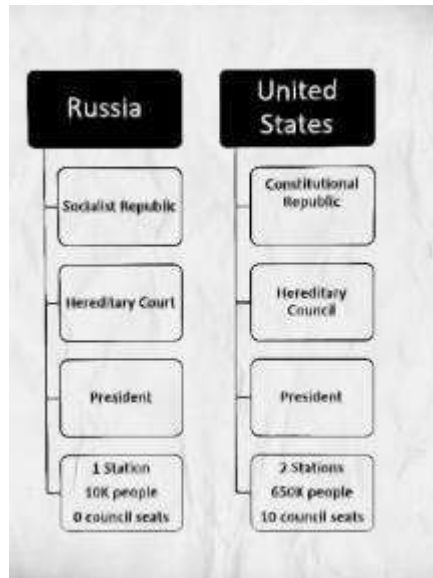
United Kingdom

Constitutional Monarchy

Hereditary Parliament

Prime Minister

1 Station
65K people
0 council seats

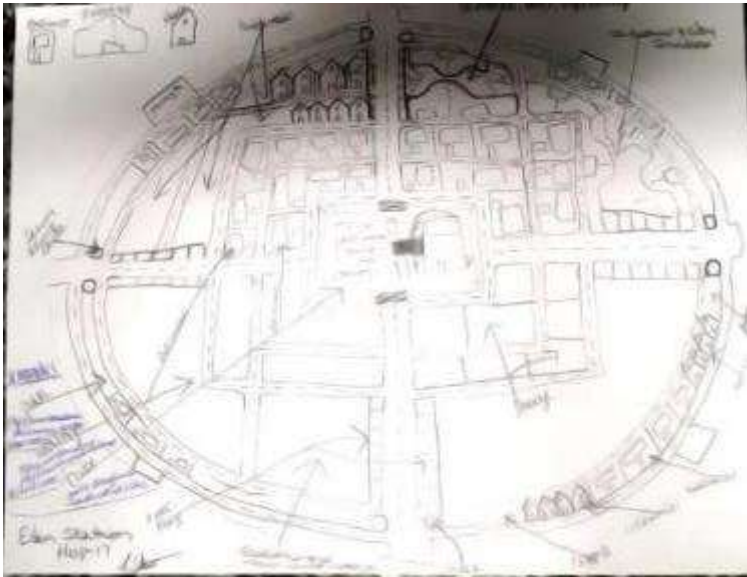


They hadn't had contact with the Chinese or Germans in his lifetime. Their monitoring crews had reported those stations to have life, but the populations were limited. Only the United Kingdom and India had any real chance of defeating them in a war and even then, the odds were slim. The US security forces were well-equipped and they trained daily on simulators even though there hadn't been an open battle in an exceptionally long time.

That's why we had to do it this way. The liberators had to come from within. The other countries held no power because their breeding lines were too unpredictable, and without seats on the Council, it would take a war to change the laws they'd agreed to right after everyone was hit with the galactic plague. They weren't allowed to return to a planet and try to recover. The Americans

enjoyed complete control over the future of all other countries. It was no wonder that the Russians had turned to the rebels for help. Their population would be gone in another five generations.

The President scanned the map of this station next. The clumsy drawing was ancient but still accurate.



The two breeder towers in the center of the station were home to the most powerful people in existence and his daughter had killed over half their heirs. There was only one way this vote could go.

“All votes have been counted.”

President Roth didn't react as the verdict was officially declared.

“The prisoner has been found guilty. She will be taken to a holding chamber until a drop is scheduled.”

The guards came forward to escort her from the room.

Amanda didn't resist. This was all part of the plan.

Jack Mitchel stood up as Amanda was escorted out. "President Roth, did you know what your daughter was doing?"

"How could he? She hasn't been near him in ten years." Miller wasn't going to let anyone take down his chosen representative.

Kate scowled. "There are communications, even during deep space travel." As Speaker of the House, Kate had access to that technology.

"I've had no contact with my daughter." President Roth glared at Steven Johnson, Head of the Science Department on this station. "Your professor Coyle is to blame for this. He filled all their heads with the desire to kill without a thought for the subjects."

Steven flushed. "There's no proof that Professor Coyle had anything to do with this."

The President shrugged angrily. "There's also no proof that he didn't."

"Stop it!" Tyra slammed her fist onto the polished table. "I will not tolerate these outrageous accusations again from either side! The trial is over. She will be sent away and we will continue to run this station in cooperation!"

"Tyra is right." Miller gestured at the huge screen in the front of the lavish room. "We must

decide what to do about the Russians and the Moderation Army.”

Most of the council nodded and turned their attention to the big screen.

Jack glared at the President a moment longer, then did the same. “I say we send an asteroid to HOP-28. We all know it’s the rebel base. The Russians and the MOD have people there. We remove it and we hurt both factions. And she’ll die, since that’s where she’s going.”

The council murmured at the reminder.

The President pointed, heart thumping. This was the most important part of the plan—where he convinced the Council to pick a different target. They needed the criminals on HOP-28 to be left alone until the coming rebel attack. Then they could take the blame if the rebels lost. “The Moderation Army is using our oldest station that is no longer functioning. Most of their people and weapons are there. We have that proof. Computer: play the tape my wife sent in.”



“Playing tape of Eden Station One.”

Everyone was distracted by the images of small space craft coming and going from the dead station. The Moderation Army was growing.

“How did your wife get this tape?” Kate was instantly suspicious, and angry that she hadn’t already seen it through her communications work. “She was supposed to be on a diplomatic mission to build cooperation with the Russians!”

“She was. The Russians gave it to her as a sign of good faith.” President Roth pointed at Kate. “You sent her out there, hoping she would die.”

Kate shrugged. “It was a unanimous decision, one that you *did not* overrule.”

The President sighed, anger fading, arm lowering. “She wanted to do her part.”

“And now, she has.” Miller lifted his voice, practicing for when he would have the highest seat. “I vote for removal of the old station. Everything

else can wait for our next meeting. Computer, bring up a vote.”

“*Computing choices...*” The main computer screen flashed to blackness for a few seconds. “*The Council will now enter a decision.*”

The President left the chamber as the Council began entering their votes. He went back to his private office. He wanted to visit Amanda before she was dropped, but he couldn't be seen talking to the killer who'd executed so many of their kids. *I'm proud of you. I truly am. And I'm also confused. What's your game?*

2

President Roth shut the door to his office without slamming it, though he used more force than necessary to keep up the image that he was upset.

“You did well.”

The President went to his control panel and shut off the cameras and the recording devices in here. His office held the barest of furnishings. The Council members were always trying to gift him with glittery décor for it, but Clifford had refused. He believed the resources should be used for keeping the station running and not used for showing off his station. He had a small desk, a small table, a long black carpet, and a wide couch for the days when he needed a nap between sessions. His private residence was plush, but that had been his

wife's doing. She enjoyed the comforts of their roles; he enjoyed their roles to provide comfort.



Evie sat on the couch, tucking the edge of her hand-made dress behind her knees. The fabric was so expensive that even only a few of the breeders could afford it. “So did she.”

Clifford Roth nodded as he poured them both a drink from the crystal brandy decanter. “I wasn’t sure if she would follow through.”

“I was.”

Clifford snorted. “I didn’t go through your training.”

“No, but you’ve still done well.” Evie thought of the lessons that had shaped her and her daughter, but she didn’t speak of them. Clifford knew everything she’d been through to become First Lady, and he’d been there to witness it happening to Amanda. He hadn’t agreed with most of it, but his belief in the outcome had kept him from interfering.

“Why didn’t she expose you? Us?”

“She thinks she’s about to get true freedom. She’s afraid of being kept here for trials or inheritance.”

Clifford hadn’t considered that. “You planned for this.”

Evie shrugged. “I have a backup plan for it. I’ll let the rebels know she’s coming as soon as she drops. She won’t have peace or freedom unless she fights for it, and all those paths will bring her back here.”

“I hope you’re right. It will be hard to trigger a revolution without her exposing our criminal acts.”

“I love you.”

Clifford smiled at her as he handed her the drink. “I no longer believe you, but it still makes me feel good to hear that.”

Evie chuckled. “The Council would be shocked to hear you speak with such honesty.”

Clifford grimaced. “I long for the day when I finally can. Being politically correct might kill me at some point.”

“I think the citizens on this station will handle that for both of us when they discover the truth.”

Clifford sighed deeply. “I don’t fear death, no matter how ugly it is, but I worry about leaving Amanda here alone.”

Evie sipped her drink and stared at him, waiting for the rest of his common concerns. He needed to get it out and she wanted to be sure she’d covered everything. Clifford was brainwashed, but that

didn't make him stupid. *He may have caught something that I missed.*

“She doesn't have our hatred of living in space or our longing to be on a planet. She knows the lessons, but she has little interest in leading. She may not expose the truth if she thinks it will save us.”

“Yes.”

Clifford's voice lowered. “And her real father is still alive. If she makes contact with him, she'll learn all of the truth and see that we've only raised her for this mission.”

Evie didn't waste time telling him Amanda already knew or trying to placate him. She let him ramble and waited for the time to pass. Amanda's drop was an hour away. As soon as it was over, Evie was leaving the station again for a while.

Clifford sensed she wasn't listening. He frowned. “Are you worried about your next...diplomatic mission with the Russians?”

Evie shook her head, forcing a comforting smile to cover her next lies. “The Russians are desperate for an alliance. The Council has been hunting them for centuries and their population is falling faster than they can recover while fighting a war with us. They'll agree to anything I want.”

“You're set to meet with their President this time?”

“Yes. And while I'm there, I'll make sure they know Amanda's location so they can make deals to cover her return.”

“Is it all covered?” Clifford sat next to his wife and downed his drink. “I feel like we’ve missed something.”

“We’re covered.” Evie leaned back on the couch as he took the drink from her hand and set it on the table. When he began to kiss her neck, she sent her mind to other places and waited for the time to pass. It was how she’d been trained.



Clifford was used to her response. During the first years of their marriage, he’d brought her back to reality with pleasure, but even that powerful bond hadn’t been enough to sow love in her barren heart. Twenty-eight years later, he no longer cared if she enjoyed his touch. He made use of her body to relieve the stress; love didn’t enter his thoughts.

Evie was glad he no longer forced her to bond during sex. She’d been trained to give up all enjoyments for her duty and she only felt whole when she was working on those goals. Clifford, Amanda, and even her place as First Lady brought no true satisfaction, no warmth. She’d been told that would change once the rebels were in control, but

Evie no longer believed it. *I'm made of ice now. When my duty is done, only the warmth of death will appeal to me.*



Roth slid her down and moved on top of her, lips going to her ear. “Miller will be here in a minute.”

Evie lifted her hips so he could shove her dress up, wrinkling it.

Roth slid into her, shuddering at the feel.

Evie dutifully wrapped her arms around him and began to send out random, fake moans.

“Mr. President?” Miller swung the door open and entered. “You’re needed for...” Miller stopped, spotting them on the couch. “Damn. Sorry, sir.”

The President thrust faster, turned on by being watched. “Stay; wait.”

Miller pushed the door shut, eyes roaming what he could see of the woman. He'd gotten used to Roth teasing him this way, but he tolerated it because he wanted Evie and this was as close as he could get to it.

Roth thrust harder, groaning. He arched forward, lashes fluttering shut. "So good!"

Evie kissed his cheek, smiling warmly.

The President rose, adjusting clothes as he regained his breath.

Evie stayed where she was, letting Miller look at her spread open and wet with the President's seed.

Roth moved toward the door. "Keep my wife warm while I'm gone." Roth flipped the lock on the handle and left, shutting the door.

Miller knew he was being used and tricked. It was obvious that this power couple would ask something ugly of him at some point and he wouldn't be able to say no. *Just like now.* Miller jerked his robes open as he strode forward, body throbbing.

Evie smiled at him, eager to cement another supporter.

Miller slid on top of her and moved up, hissing at the contact. He sealed their lips as he began to thrust, mind a haze of lust. "So good!"

“Here’s your dinner, killer!” The guard shoved a bowl of paste through the bottom of the cell door.



Amanda didn’t move from the narrow cot. She also didn’t respond to the furious guard. Her arrival on Eden station had been met with an angry mob of citizens who’d attacked the guards trying to get her inside. Some of them had thrown things at her. The welt on her head had come from a can of food, she was almost certain.

She hadn’t been given any medical treatment and she didn’t expect any. She was a bit surprised to still be alive at all. If not for her father being the President, she wouldn’t be. The guards had dragged her from her cabin on the school ship and shoved her into a transport pod. If they’d left her there, the few kids who’d missed the class and survived her bomb would have killed her.

Maybe that's what I was really hoping for. Anyone who could do something so cruel surely wants to die.

The door to the prison block opened to admit three huge guards. The main security here on Eden wore uniforms made up of both colors. The tops were royal blue and the pants were dingy gray. They were supposed to represent both political parties, but they often sided with the breeders in hopes of being rewarded. The breeders doled out gifts more often than the scientists.

“The prisoner is being transferred.”

“Papers?” The guard on the block was glad the orders had already come down. The mob outside wouldn't wait long before trying to get in here to her.

One of the guards held out a tablet while the other two opened Amanda's cell and stepped inside.

Amanda cringed on the cot from their fury; they ignored her. She was snatched up, injected.

Amanda lost control of her body as the medication took over. She couldn't move.

“The transfer papers are legitimate. You can take her.”

The two guards in the cell hefted her up and left the block. They were transferring her now, while the public was just learning of the Council's decision. If they waited until later, they would be attacked again and none of the guards wanted to be injured for her. She wasn't worth it.

The guards took her directly to the lab and dropped her onto a cot that the technicians had ready. Then they went to stand at the only door to make sure no one got through until it was over.

The drop lab was outfitted with old and new technology, crowding the long, wide room with devices, cabinets, and desks that were covered in paperwork and tools. The technicians didn't waste time cleaning. They left that to the janitors who came in once a month.

The drop scientists wore gray uniforms and had the same bleached faces as the Council members, but they also had glasses, lab coats, and pieces of technology they used in their work. They blended in perfectly with the dull gray room.

The technicians got busy; they had been alerted to prepare for this.

“What did the Council choose?” One technician cut off the prison uniform while the other injected Amanda with the special mix they used for space travel.

“She's slated to be dropped on HOP-28.” As soon as she was naked, the technician hit a button that began to slide Amanda's cot into a small transport capsule.

“Wow. They only send the worst criminals there.”

“She deserves it. Half of the reproducing families lost a child because of her. Not to mention one of the last professors who could convince some

of these kids to keep the program going. The cost to both sides is uncountable.”

Amanda struggled to stay alert, aware of the voices and the feel of the steel cot against her bare skin.

The drop chamber was a hollow, wide tube that sealed shut as soon as Amanda’s cot slid inside it. Hoses and a mask slid over her face, attached by robotic arms that allowed the scientists to accomplish the drop without having to maintain contact with the subject.

The tube swiveled and connected to a transport pod. Amanda felt her heart pound as her cot was placed inside the pod. In a few seconds, she would be launched into space and sent out on the next leg of her ugly journey.

“There’s talk of restarting the death penalty to deal with these rebels.”

“Sending them to HOP-28 is a death sentence.”

Amanda listened to the guards talk and wondered if they knew she was alert, but then the silvery liquid began flowing in, chasing out all other thoughts.

The teenager tensed, but only mentally. All of her muscles were paralyzed. She tried to stay calm as that precious, terrifying liquid closed over her face, but it was impossible not to scream silently as she was drowned in the rest of the chemicals that would preserve her for the drop.

Time slowed, but Amanda didn’t go to sleep or pass out, though she wished for both. Having no

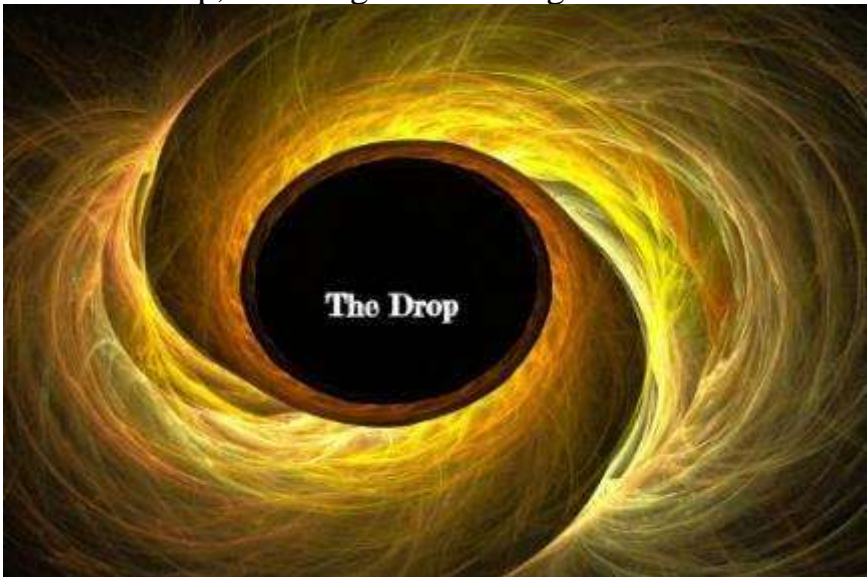
control over her body, her life, was a horror that went on for an eternity as her chamber was loaded onto the small transport ship that already held a number of other rebels who had been sentenced to the same fate. *Goodbye, Eden.*

Hello, HOP-28.

4

The drop was rough.

Amanda silently screamed herself into a migraine as the pod shot toward the flipping blue and brown planet below. She continued to yell in her mind as her thin pod breached the atmosphere and flamed up, barreling toward the ground.



As the surface neared, the parachute finally emerged to snap the pod into a higher orbit that let it float gently to the ground.

As it came to a stop and the controls lit up, Amanda kept right on screaming. The silvery liquid was draining now, running from her mouth and nose like blood as it brought her body to life in pain and misery.

Amanda choked as air was forced into her lungs, arms coming up to rip away the tubes so the vomit had somewhere to go. She felt it land on her naked skin, but she didn't care. The need to breathe came first.

The pod stayed closed while Amanda got herself together. She was grateful for the clean clothes and kit of basic supplies that she wasn't supposed to have, but the terror and excitement didn't leave her heart. She was on the worst of the HOP worlds. *Alone.*

Amanda searched the kit and pod for a weapon. The convict was forced to accept the fact that she wouldn't have one until she could make it.

Amanda watched the sun sink with a shiver. The pod only held enough power to last until morning. After that, the lid would open and remain that way. Pods couldn't be closed once the power was gone. They also couldn't be opened without power. Early drops had failed because the people tried to hide inside and died from suffocation. Many rebels had cited such failures of the punishment during their trials. They sometimes shouted at the shocked

Council and acted so rabid that they had to be sedated. Amanda had kept it simple.



The verdict had been unanimous, of course. Amanda Roth, daughter of the now disgraced President, would spend the rest of her years on HOP-28. Her mother and father would now fade from public view so when the rebels breached Eden, they wouldn't be blamed or hurt. Everyone else on that giant, life-sucking station would be removed. The only part missing would be the asteroid.

Chapter Three
The Truth

1

Dawn on HOP-28 was stunning. If not for needing to time her escape from the locals who were waiting, Amanda would have lingered to enjoy it. She'd only witnessed a few sunrises from a planet during her classes. Under the right circumstances, it was mesmerizing.



“That isn’t now, Amanda. Get it together.” She took in a deep breath and gathered her courage. Many of the criminals on this planet had been here for decades. They had their own rules, structure, a

hierarchy, and none of it would include listening to a newly-convicted teenager. Amanda expected no civility. If she wanted to be heard, she would have to first prove herself by surviving this phase of the drop.

Amanda wiped the condensation from a side window, trying to determine which way to go when the lid lifted. She wasn't encouraged to see dozens of legs and feet encased in dark fur. A lot of people were waiting for the pods to open. Newly-dropped convicts often faced gauntlets, but at least she'd been put down with a lot of other...

"Damn!" Amanda slammed both fists into the window, drawing attention, but it didn't matter. There wasn't another pod in sight. When the lid lifted, the entire group of criminals would be on her.

Is there anything I can say to them?

The timer on the small monitor began flashing.

No.

She could yank the hatch shut when it began lifting, but she couldn't lock it and even if she could, the air would run out.

The ten seconds went by in a blur.

The lid rose slowly, but Amanda didn't wait. She dove out as soon as there was room, rolling toward the small hill she'd discerned through the window.

"There she goes!"

"A runner! Cool!"

"Get on that!"

"Yes, sir!"

The criminals gave chase as Amanda took off as fast as she could go. It looked like there was a cliff at the end of the small hill. She was an excellent swimmer. If she could just get...

Amanda skidded to a halt as she reached the top of the hill, staring in shock and terror as the town of people below spotted her. There was no water in sight, just dozens of surprised people who rushed forward, sandwiching her between both groups.

Hoping it would help, she slid to her knees and put her hands on her head. Fifty was too many to fight.

Amanda didn't resist as she was shoved onto her side. Her arms were laced together in front of her with something that felt like a rope. Amanda studied the feet surrounding her, but she didn't make eye contact with anyone yet. Her mind was racing through possible actions and reactions.

“Is it her?”



“Where's her tag?”

“Make sure she doesn’t have a weapon.”

Amanda was rolled over without the roughness she was expecting. Hands quickly patted her down while she stared at the trees above them. She wasn’t ready to meet her captors yet. In the beginning, she’d hoped to be dropped onto a planet that was uninhabited, but even this wasn’t too much for her to handle. She’d known she would have to build a place before she could live in it. *Too bad I can’t stay long...*

The planet was beautiful. Covered in grass and trees, she longed to walk the surface and absorb the sensations. The warm breeze and bright sun on her skin felt amazing.

Someone rubbed the tattoo on her ankle. “It’s her. Let’s go.”

Amanda was pulled onto her feet, where she was forced to look at those she would have to share this planet with. Expecting primitive living, it was another surprise to find a quietly watching crowd of clean men and women around her. Those in charge, a group of three it seemed like, flashed friendly glances and gave her nods of respect that were confusing.

“Welcome to HOP-28.” One of the women from the small group stopped in front of Amanda. The woman had shoulder-length, natural blonde hair and a hard profile that sported intense blue eyes.



“Hope you’ve had your shots.”

Amanda nodded, scanning their clothes and tools. She’d thought spears and knives would be used, but they had laser guns! Their pants and tops were made of the same material as her own. *How is that possible?*

“I’m Reila...”

The long pause after the introduction forced the captive to respond. “Amanda Roth. Pleased to meet you.”

“Yes.” Reila studied the teenager, not impressed so far. “You’ll be in the quarantine zone for a few days. Don’t fight with the other people there and it’ll go faster.”

Reila waited for questions or demands—she’d been told to expect both—but Amanda only stared back impassively.

“Let’s go.” Reila motioned to the people behind Amanda.

Amanda was pushed; she went without verbally protesting, though she did toss a warning glance over her shoulder while working on her bonds.

Jerald wasn’t used to dealing with her kind. He stared in confusion. She wasn’t the Presidential daughter they’d planned on—he knew that already. Some of the worst criminals in the universe were sent here and emerged from their pods screaming or crying. This delicate flower had planned an escape. If not for her pod being redirected to a different location, she might have vanished in the first rush.

Amanda felt the man’s gaze sweep her slender body repeatedly in confusion and longing. She didn’t like him. “What’s wrong with you?”

Jerald gaped in surprise. “What?”



Amanda glanced at Reila. “You vetted him, right? Personally?”

Reila didn’t pause in her steps. “I gave birth to him. Does that count?”

Amanda didn’t say more, but she did wonder if the mother was as bad as the son as she looked over her shoulder at him again. She wasn’t sure why she thought he was a true killer, but the impression wasn’t fading.

Jerald scowled, shoving her again. “Eyes front!”

Amanda was sure that she shouldn’t permit any abuse, but the man and his short dark hair had also already earned her ire. She slowed a bit, waiting to feel the gun butt moving toward her spine again... Amanda whirled around and snatched it from his careless grip, rope falling to the dirt. One quick turn had it pointed at his chest.

“How did you get free?!”

“My mother taught me to escape any bonds.” Amanda slowly lowered the weapon, aware of the other criminals now rushing back toward them. “She also taught me to skin a carcass. Bet it isn’t that hard on a person. Wanna volunteer to try it with me?”

A bit shaken, Jerald snatched his gun back. “No.”

Amanda turned toward his mother, voice icy. “Touch me again and you won’t have to volunteer.”

Ahead of them, Reila chuckled. “Maybe first impressions aren’t accurate here.”

Amanda shrugged. “Maybe some respect is deserved.”

“Oh, I do respect you, my murderous little guest. But I respect your family even more.” Reila gestured. “That’s why you’ve been brought here instead of being hunted for sport like most of the other dropees.”

Amanda knew to heed that warning, but she was distracted from their verbal sparring as the small town came into view again. Built in an old style she’d only read about, Amanda thought they were called cabins. There were dozens of them, some on top of others to create a wooden city that even held corner towers and a gate made of hundreds of upright logs lashed together. It was so civilized that Amanda laughed.

“What’s wrong with you?” Jerald demanded from her side. He didn’t like walking behind her for some reason.

Amanda kept walking, not in the mood to try to explain her mixed up thoughts right now. She’d anticipated having to make her own shelter and hunt her own food before she could start her next plans. This was going to be too easy.

“Look out!” Jerald shoved toward his mother to protect her. “Ambush!”



“Save the girl!” Reila ordered, but it was too late.

A long spear went into Amanda’s chest with an awful thump that made her feel like a balloon that had been popped.

She held onto life, awareness, for a second longer, and then blood gushed over her lips in crimson agony as her soul disconnected. She didn’t feel it as her body slumped to its knees, propped up by the spear.

2

“I’m dead!”

There was only light around her. It was terrifying.

“Yes.”

Amanda tried to spin and failed. “Who is that?”

“I am He.”

“He, who?”

“He who, indeed.”

Amanda tried to concentrate, but she had no sight, no sense of touch, and no smell. It was disorienting and scary.

“You have passed over.”

That powerful voice was in her mind. *No, it has to be in my soul. I died. No mind anymore. Or maybe...now I'm all mind? Either way, I felt it happen. I'm dead.*

“Yes.”



“Why did I have to die?”

“Why does everyone have to know that?” the mysterious voice complained. “No one ever asks if I’ve had a good rest cycle or if I’m happy to see

them. It's always: Why did I die? Can I go back? I still have so much to do! Blah. Blah. Blah."

Amanda winced at the bitterness, starting to realize what was happening. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to die, you know."

"No one ever plans on it. Even those who take their lives want it back at the last second, when it is far too late. Liars abound in all levels of life and death."

"Even this one?"

There was a thoughtful chuckle. "No. I am pure. I do not cover myself in the rags of the wretched."

"Why do you talk like that?"

Another soft chuckle came. "Older souls often cannot speak at a moment like this, but a rebellious, willful child can be counted on to open their mouth and let their tongue roll right out."

Amanda wisely mashed her lips together. *Wait. I don't have lips. Just be still, don't think about anything. ...but I died! I did still have so much to do! I was born and raised for the sole purpose of bringing down the Council. My entire life was spent in training to carry out this plan. I can't die after only three minutes!*

"The odds are often stacked against those who seek to accomplish great things," the voice comforted.

Amanda tried to roll her eyes and settled for mentally growling at herself for forgetting she no longer had eyes. "Is this normal? I feel like I'm going crazy."

“No. You were pulled from absorption, which has no awareness. You have a further value.”

Amanda felt her soul begin to cry as she accepted that her death was now a reality. Her clock had stopped.

“The mourning period. It’s right on time,” the voice praised. “I’ve been waiting for someone like you to cross over.”

Amanda tried to pull out of her misery. “For what? An example?” She hadn’t forgotten that she was a mass murderer.

“I have a duty for you to perform. If you do it well, there may be forgiveness at the end—if you are humble and repentant.”



Amanda thought of that definition and slowly shook her non-existent head. “What if I say no?”

“YOU WILL NOT!”

Amanda cowered mentally, more terrified than she'd even been. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

The Being calmed, returning to the first, comforting tone. "I will answer your questions and you will fulfill your duty to the Creator who gifted you with life. These debts must be paid."

Amanda tried to nod, sobbing from the unfairness of it all. "I will."

"Good. Once the self-recrimination begins, we will take a break and let your fragile mind rest. Do not fear the darkness, for it is mine and I have dominion over all things here."

Amanda wasn't comforted, but she was too busy exploring those new words to worry over the future. Right now, there was only this second of looking back on her choices to see if she had a reason to lament them.

Amanda slowly dried her mental tears and tried to face her Maker. "I would do it all over again. I'm not sorry."

A harsher chuckle came this time. "That is partly why I chose you. Murderer. Killer of my children. Liar. Blasphemer. Infiltrator. Betrayer."

Amanda wilted before the titles as if she were being struck.

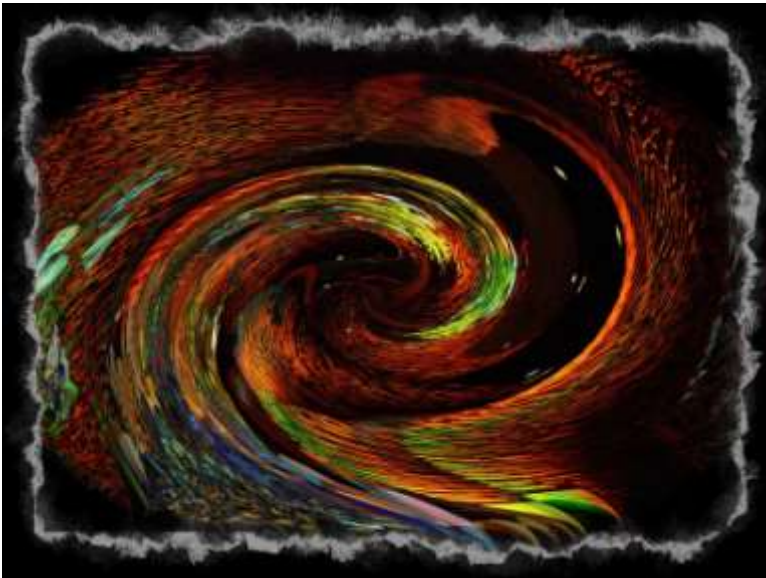
"You will wear all of those chains until you repent of the sins against me," the Creator warned. "Take your leave of me now, for I am wearied by the very feel of your stained soul."

Amanda felt the darkness closing in on her mind and fought to get out a quick question. “What was the rest of the reason that I was chosen?”

The Creator sighed heavily, revealing a hatred and bitterness that easily eclipsed her own. “Because you were born and raised for the sole purpose of bringing down the Council. Your entire life was spent in training to carry out that plan. You cannot die after only three minutes.”

Amanda wanted to ask more, to swear she would do anything for another chance at that goal, but the darkness swallowed her and then there was only the great, black nothingness.

3



“You will wake now, murderer.”

Amanda snapped into alertness so fast that she cried out from the new sensation. The nothingness had been comforting.

“A sleep cycle allows no negative thoughts,” the Creator stated.

Amanda thought he sounded more tense than when they’d first spoken. “Are you okay?”

There was a long pause where Amanda waited nervously. *I’m supposed to show caring, right?*

“That depends. Do you care if I’m okay or do you care if it scores points to ask me such?”

“Both,” Amanda answered. While in the sleep cycle, she’d dreamed of being young and unaware of the future waiting for her. It had been nice. She almost felt like she could handle things now.

“Honesty is good. Your duty must begin today. The asteroid has been sent.”

Amanda tried to stare in shock and managed to annoy herself again. It was hard getting used to not having a physical presence.

“You’re doing remarkably well, if that can be a consolation.”

“It is,” she answered gratefully. “A little. Wait. An asteroid removal choice takes a long time, even once scheduled. How long have I been gone?”

“A year in your time.”

Amanda struggled not to lose the good vibe she’d just had. “Oh. Well. I uh... Is the AR for HOP-17?”

“It is for me.”

“Here? I mean, the planet where I died?”

“Yes.”

“You said *me*. Are you...” Amanda stopped, not sure how to phrase the question in a way that wouldn’t be offensive. “Alive?”

“Are you?”

She scowled, rolled her eyes, and felt the rest of the good vibes float away with her missing body. “Funny.”

“Death is the illusion, child. Life is in all things. Death is a doorway to other realms.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will,” the Creator promised.

Amanda immediately felt concern. “What do you want from me?”

There was a long pause as Amanda mentally closed her eyes and tried to enjoy not having to hit the space room every couple of hours. She did miss eating, though.

“Listen, and take this knowledge deep, murderer. You will be the first to ever hear it.”

Amanda tried to brace for something bad. Now that she was dead and the mysteries of the galaxy were at her fingertips, the teenager was scared.



“You are right to be so, but also wrong. Calm yourself now, for I have a story to tell you.”

Amanda smiled at the wording, as the Creator had known she would. “My mother used to tell me bedtime tales. I liked that.”

“Your mother is a snake in the garden, child, but that matters not. Listen, for our time is shorter now.”

Scolded, Amanda fell silent, but she couldn't stop herself from wondering if that was figurative or literal. She had no idea how soul distribution worked. Her mother might have been an actual snake in a previous life. The power Amanda could feel from this being seemed endless.

“When I seeded myself through the universes, I did not realize your primitive brains would prevent communication. I assumed that I would be able to guide my creations. When I discovered otherwise, I

was reluctant to destroy them. I had hoped they would find the light within by the time they were reunited with me, but that has not been the case.”

“You want me to tell them?” Amanda guessed. “Because the minute they see me, I’ll be right back here with you. Great idea.”

“Soothe yourself and listen, so that you may have true understanding of what is expected of you.”

Amanda felt the second scold as if she had been sharply slapped and knocked to her knees. *He got tired of the kind, loving image.*

“I am neither kind, nor loving. Those are man’s creations. I am eternal, relentless, and I exist in all things. Over the millennia, I have built bridges and come to my creations individually. It took great energy from me to assume human form, energy that I have not been able to replace, and the next stage of my own existence soon approaches. Before I am reseeded unto a thousand stars, I would know that my offspring are safe from your kind. I want the people of Eden and all other space-dwellers to return to the land from whence they were crafted. You will get them to come home.”



“Let me get this straight,” Amanda began, forgetting her place once again. “You care about the planets you’ll seed, but not the people you created to live on them?”

“You will not question my plans!”

Despite her terror, Amanda laughed. She knew it was a bad idea, but she couldn’t help the harsh chuckles, nor the ensuing rant.

The Creator allowed it. He needed something from this soul that he hadn’t from all the others, but more than that, compassion for the tiny beings he’d created did exist. It was simply outweighed by his disappointment in what they’d become.

“Your kind are the destroyers,” the Creator stated as Amanda prepared for punishment. “Mine are the hosts. Yours are the parasites. One cannot exist without the other, for I have made it so.”

“Can you unmake it?”

“...I don't understand.”

Amanda could tell that rarely, if ever, happened. She tried to be respectful as she answered. “Can you change your design?”

“Why would I do that? The design is perfect.”

“So you could?” she insisted evenly.

“Yes. It would take much time, however, and energy that I must put into my reseeded.”

“Why did you pick me?” Amanda asked abruptly. “Is it because I'm already ruined and will make any deal you want?”

“Yes. And more. Within you lies the potential of all humanity to reach a level of advancement that your scientists can never measure. Because you hate all sides equally, your compassion is pure. It is the only brightness in your soul.”

“I wasn't raised to be happy and gentle,” Amanda sullenly reminded him.

“Yes. You are a product of your environment, but many have been. The difference is your soul still shines, even with all that darkness. I believe you are capable of a great reform.”

“We came from the dirt...”

“Yes.”

Amanda drew in a breath, caught herself. *No body!* “Where did you come from?”

“Why must I be different than you?”

“Because you are,” Amanda supplied logically. “You're a...planet God?”

“I am the first.”

“But who made you?”

“I am the first.”

“I don’t understand. How can you come from nothing?”

“The nothing has never existed. I have always been. Over time again, I have become more.”

“But everything has to have a beginning, a start, a maker.”

“Everything, since me. Every speck came from me.”

“And you’ve always existed?”

“Yes. It is the perception that there was nothing first, that is false. I am eternal, through the past and future.”



“So what were humans?”

“A way to seed myself. I became lonely.”

“We’re seeds?”

“Yes. All forms of life are seeds of the planet that created them.”

“And the grand plan that we’ve all tried to prove or disprove?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

“So you got lonely, seeded humans, and now that you have enough other planet Gods to keep you company, you don’t care enough about the humans to save them.”

“I care enough to let you, one of their own, decide their fate. Is that not merciful enough?”

Amanda barely stopped a nasty reply, though she was sure the Creator knew what she was thinking. She pushed into this new prison, needing to know the rest of the story. “How did you seed yourself?”

“I erupted until the building blocks of life could not avoid each other. I made the trees to sustain the birds, to sustain the land creatures, to sustain the water, and so on. It was a magnificent expression of myself.”

“But?” Amanda asked, sure there was one. Otherwise, human life wouldn’t have gotten so messed up.

“Over time, I realized that I had given everything a mate, a way to live forever, except for myself. So I sought to create another me.”

“You seeded space with other planets? How?”

“I exploded,” the Creator answered simply. “Now, I am in everything. The same happens to each of us. We gather energy to explode, thus seeding ourselves through time infinitely. Most of your deaths are the planet energy being reabsorbed for other uses, but now, for the first time, seeds are destroying their hosts.”

“Why don’t you stop them? Send the flood again or something?”

The Creator chuckled, but not patiently this time. “They are all my creations. None of them deserve my wrath for that fact alone.”

“So you let them get by with it because of pride?”

Amanda *was* slapped this time. Her nonexistent head banged into a nonexistent floor. She lay there, stunned.

“I am the Creator!”

Amanda, stinging from the invisible punishment, glared upward as best she could manage. “Hit me again and I won’t ever do what you want. You’ll lose yourself and your companions.”



Amanda felt the Being's shock at her threat, but her death and then the calm period afterward had given her time (*A year! I've been gone a year!*) to consider her options. As a mass murderer, she expected no mercy. Therefore, she had nothing to lose.

Amanda slowly stood, inasmuch as she could do that. Adjusting to this new form without a body was hard. "Tell me about the seeding. If there are so many, why haven't we had contact with other planet Gods?"

Amanda knew her existence was being decided, but it didn't matter to her now. She was dead. She could still be hurt, but that was all life had been anyway. She would adapt.

"That remarkably unbreakable spirit isn't natural, murderer. I did not give you that."

Amanda understood the insult, and shrugged. “If it had come from you, if we had known the truth from the fantasies, maybe you wouldn’t regret your human creations.”

“I cannot,” the Creator shot back grumpily. “They are my physical presence, my awareness made visible, touchable. I adore my creations. I will not destroy them.”

“So you want me to do it since I’m already damned.”

“Yes.”

Amanda didn’t see where she had another choice, but instead of agreeing blindly, she tried to cover herself for later. “Will I be forgiven?”

“We will not discuss those things until the duty is finished.”

“Are there any rules I need to follow, or maybe, I don’t know, skills you can give me to make this possible?”

The Creator sighed. “The ability to defeat death is no skill, murderer.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Why do you balk at the title? It is earned.”

“Ability to defeat death,” Amanda pushed. “You mean they won’t be able to kill me?”

“Death is unstoppable. Each time, you can be risen, through me.”



“How many times?”

“I am endless. Unless you let them destroy me. The other Beings will not resurrect you if you fail to save me. Their will is clear on this.”

“Do you have a council?”

“Of sorts, but not in the way you mean. I may explain more of these curiosities to you in time, if you do well in your tasks.”

“And those are?”

“First, you must take over the rebel plans and implement the destruction of Eden. That will save years of your time.”

Realizing she would still get to accomplish her life goal made Amanda reckless. “Then I agree.”

Lightning seemed to flash, sealing the deal.

“Sleep now, for when you wake again, a second chance will have begun.”

Amanda realized too late that she should have asked more questions. It was her last thought as the nothingness smothered her in comfort.



4

Amanda snapped awake with a deep gasp, drawing air into lungs that hadn't ever been used. Her perfect body, full of strength and life, vibrated in unhappy convulsions as she coughed.

“Where did she come from?”

“We must have missed one.”

“Grab her and let's go.”

Amanda was hauled to her feet, hands roaming her legs.

“I found her marker. Name is...” Jerald fell silent, looking up into the teenager's cold eyes.

“Well?” Reila asked.

“You’re not gonna believe this.” Jerald stared at the girl’s face, trying to figure out the joke.

Amanda held still as Reila read her tattoo.

“Amanda Roth, daughter of the President of Eden.”

“She was killed right here, in this very spot, over a year ago!” Jerald still felt like a failure because of that death. They hadn’t been able to use her as a hostage.

Resisting the urge to explore her new body, Amanda met Reila’s eyes without smiling. “Who threw the spear that killed me? I demand justice.”

Reila paled. As far as they knew, only the people on this planet were aware of what had happened. The Council had been monitoring the drop and probably knew Amanda had been killed, but they wouldn’t have known details.

“How do you know that?” Jerald stared up at her, mind stuttering. “You can’t know that!”

Amanda kicked his frozen hand from her ankle tattoo. “I’ve been sent back to guide the rebels to victory. The Creator wants them all gone.”

The criminals stared at her as if she’d just sprouted wings.

Amanda smirked, moving toward the little town nearby. She remembered the fort-like setup clearly. “Take me to your dining hall. I need a drink, and we have things to discuss.”

“That’s a lie!”

“What the hell?”

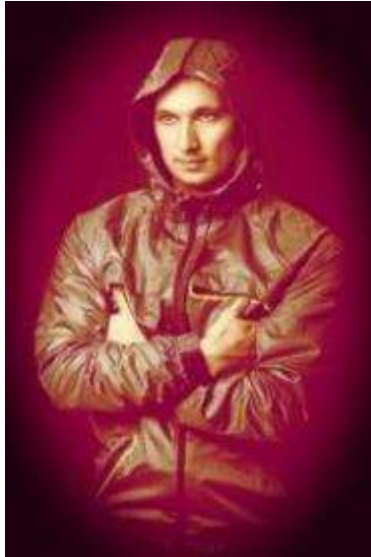
“Who is she, really?!”

“Tell the truth! Who are you?”

Amanda wasn’t sure how much of the truth she should tell. It occurred to her that they weren’t going to believe it, no matter what she said. She doubted this planet had DNA technology, despite their obvious supply sources, but Amanda also wasn’t sure that test would come back as her since she had a new body now.

Thank you for that, she sent silently, wishing she’d asked for a way to communicate with the Creator once she came back.

Reila took a seat at the head of the table. Jerald stayed near Amanda, face a mass of angry confusion.



Amanda listened to the shouts and denials, now trying to figure out if any of the men and women here were guilty of her murder. That would be settled while she was alive.

The center of town held a large wooden warehouse with a wide table that lined the edges and created room for everyone. The wooden floor was scuffed but clean, telling her hygiene mattered here. Amanda was glad. She'd had her shots, but some germs created issues even the chemicals couldn't prevent. The chairs were tall and hard; Amanda was suddenly eager to sit in one and prop her feet up on a table.

The witnesses were armed, angry, and sure she was a spy who'd tricked her way onto the planet. Amanda could see it in their faces. She frowned as she realized they all looked alike. *I thought there were other nationalities dropped here too?* She shrugged it off. *Maybe they're not allowed to live in this settlement.*

"Quiet!" Reila was still studying her captive. She didn't believe the girl...and yet, she did. The Roth magnetism was memorable.

The crowd of roughly one-hundred criminals quieted, taking seats or leaning against the four wooden walls. Reila waited for full silence to come. She had to think. Their enemies were clever. She was already convinced that this was a trap.

"Her marker says Amanda Roth. We all know that killer died here. We saw it." Reila glowered at Amanda, turning her full scorn on the stiffly

standing girl who knew things that she shouldn't. "Explain yourself and do it right now. If we don't believe you, you'll be executed. Today."

Amanda was terrified of what she was about to do. There was a chance that she'd been tricked, or that the Creator would be angry, but her morbid curiosity had to be satisfied. It would prove it to them, and to herself. "Shoot me."



Everyone stared in disbelieving surprise.

Amanda smiled shakily. "I've been told that I can't be killed, that I'll rise every time. Let's test it together."

"You're nuts!" Jerald waved his hand. "We don't shoot unarmed kids who don't pose a threat!"

Eager to find out if she really did have immunity against death, Amanda ran toward Jerald, outstretched hands going for his throat like a child.

The man defended himself, but only lightly. Because of his mercy, Amanda was able to twist free of his hold and grab the unprotected knife from his belt. She moved lightning fast, squeezing into his space like a lover as she went for his throat again.

Not used to fighting women, Jerald was caught off guard and didn't react in time to escape the other arm wrapping around his head to keep him captive against the blade. The tip sank into his neck.

Jerald froze, feeling the girl's threat clearly now.

"I will kill him," Amanda warned coldly as they were surrounded by Reila and the guards. Behind them, the other people blocked doors and windows in case she tried to run.

"Shoot me," Amanda repeated, looking at Reila. "Do it right now, or I'll kill your son."

Furious at how this had gotten out of control, Reila stormed over and blew the stupid kid's brains out.

Amanda didn't feel her body fall, nor the scramble that Jerald made to get away from the gore. She was jerked back into the nothingness.

6

Amanda tried to adjust to being dead again, but she was more disoriented than she'd been before. "Hello?"

A warm sigh of tolerant annoyance swept over her. “Ten of your minutes. That is all you could manage.”

Amanda laughed, glad there was no horrible rage greeting her. “New record, right?”

“Humans should not wonder why a maker avoids them when life means so little.” The Creator sighed again. “Go back, killer. Go back with your words proven.”

7

Amanda’s eyes opened.

Under the dizziness and blood, Amanda heard screams and footsteps of people getting away from her.

“Excellent. Thank you!” Amanda sat up, running a hand across her temple to verify that the wound was gone. She was covered in blood and gore, though. It was gross. “Anyone got a shirt I can borrow? This one seems to have gotten a bit of my brain on it.”

A few feet away, Reila fainted.

Jerald was too stunned to notice.

Amanda grinned. “The Creator wants me in charge of the plans to bring down the Council. Anyone feel like arguing?”

No one did.

Chapter Four

The Plan

1

“So how do we stop the asteroid on the way here?”

Amanda’s words tossed more shock into the room of twitchy, pale people who were keeping their distance. Amanda was at the end of the long table, plucking grapes from thick bunches on platters. Her request for clean clothes had been ignored.

“Do your rebels have technology for it?” Reila was back in the leader’s chair, but she now seemed small and unimportant to all of them and she knew it.

Amanda shrugged, aware of the dismay of the criminals at finding out the asteroid had been sent for them. “No idea. I was a breeder, remember? I had council classes, not science lessons. Uh... What if we use another asteroid to knock the first one off course?”



There was silence at Amanda's question.

She glanced around to find more people leaving the room. Only a few dozen remained with them. Her revival was scary.

Reila nodded, slowly recovering from fainting. Amanda coming back to life before her eyes was hard to accept, but the girl was covered in blood and brains. There was no denying what had happened. "If it's the same size and traveling at the same or greater speed, yes, but we're not scientists. It would have to be calculated perfectly."

Amanda sighed. "That can only happen on Eden station. Contact your people. Arrange a ride."

Reila, frowning, waved at Jerald.

In the corner, Jerald began to transmit the request on their only radio. His quick glares at Amanda weren't hidden. He and his mother had

fought hard to earn command here and this girl had taken it away with a single bullet.

Jerald sounded angry as he turned off the radio. “They said they can get something big, but they won’t use it for us, and they’ll only provide transportation if we have music files to trade. We’ll definitely need a scientist to calculate it.”

“Well, we know where to get them, don’t we?” Amanda glanced at Reila.

Reila shuddered. “I haven’t been on Eden in twenty-three years.”

Amanda sighed in longing. “For me, it’s been ten... No, wait. How long was I dead? The first time.”

People winced at the blunt words. Amanda tried to wait patiently.

“Fifteen months,” Jerald finally responded. He took another long glimpse of her bloody body. *It can’t be true.*

“It’s been eleven years and three months since I’ve walked those halls without chains.” Amanda poured herself a second cup of the sweet grape wine.

“Should we expect your parents?” Reila hoped not, but they did need help with this plan. “The Council might have technology to monitor how many of us are on the planet, and narrow down ages by size.”

Amanda considered that. “Unless they hear I’m alive, no. If my mother even suspects that I survived, she’ll be here, no matter the risk.”

“Ah.” Reila had thought the mother was the power in that elite family.

“We don’t have anything the Russians want,” Hanson pointed out. Hanson was second in command here on HOP-28 and he adored Reila. It was clear by the way he hovered, caring for her after she’d fainted. Amanda wondered if he knew she was pregnant. According to their scientists, all criminals were given drugs to stop breeding. Amanda wondered if the drugs had worn off or if it was just life adapting.

Does it not occur to you that I may have blessed her in this way?



Amanda was stunned. She dropped her cup, unmindful of the new mess splattering her arms and lap. “No! It didn’t.”

Jerald scowled. “Great. She’s hearing voices.”

“Have some respect!” Amanda snapped.

“Oh, so the Creator speaks directly to you?”

Amanda nodded at Reila, then frowned. “Yeah, she’s right. How’s that possible?”

I came along for the ride this time.

Amanda almost choked. “Came along for the ride?”

The Creator’s voice was just as intense in her mind, but Amanda felt a new concern. “You’re using up your energy.”

Perhaps. Can you stop the asteroid?

Amanda looked at Jerald. “Can we stop it?”

Jerald liked an adventurous plan, but only if it had a chance of succeeding. “I’m not sure. We really need help on this.”

“What do the smugglers want?” Amanda felt the hostility in the room, but she wasn’t concerned. She had a protector.

“Information.” Reila didn’t look away from the strange creature now calling the shots for all of them. “Second to that, they also want music.”

“Really.”

“Yes. We have singers and recorders here, but our new music is worth little. They prefer the old files.”

“Don’t we all.” Amanda switched to thought. *Can you help there? I know many old songs, but I can’t sing them.*

Your voice can shine with my glory if we both desire it, murderer.

Amanda winced. “Always with the names.”

The criminals in the room stared.

A new thought occurred to Amanda. “How is it that you all have your memories? I thought criminals were wiped before they were dropped.”

“We were.” Reila shrugged. “The Russians give us information and we pass it on. Each time we accept a new member into our clan, we fill them in on the situation.”



Jerald scowled at Amanda. He was still trying to figure out how they were being tricked. “How do you still have your memories?”

“My mother...convinced someone to skip it.”

The witnesses grumbled at more proof that the elite were able to access benefits they weren't.

“What does the Council think about our society?”

Amanda snorted at Hanson's question. "They don't believe you have one. They assumed I would be torn apart as soon as my pod opened."

"You might have been, if you weren't infamous, but we do have a society."

"Tell me about it."

"Why?"

"Because I asked you to."

Hanson frowned but complied. "Our population votes in a leader yearly. If they die, their killer earns their place."

"That's awful."

"Says you; all our people have jobs. They work on their own schedule. They hunt, fish, trade, invent, repair, and grow. We have no religion, no gangs, no politics. Crime is handled swiftly and the bodies are burned. We also have no medical center. You either live or die. Our currency is the natural resources of this planet."

"Why bother with so much structure if you're all criminals?"

"Because we've changed. Those who don't are eliminated. We want peace as much as we need the Council gone."

"So they'll stop dropping killers here?"

"Exactly! How can we ever live in peace when we're gifted with the worst of the galaxy?"

"Interesting. What's the ethnic makeup here?"

Reila counted it mentally before answering. "About 68% American, 11% Russian, 3% Chinese, 6% British, 1% Indian, and 4% German."

“What about the rest?”

“Unknown. We assume they’re genetically modified. They don’t get ill and they hate other people. We let them grow our food so they can stay away from us for months at a time.” Reila studied her. “Now, what do you see here?”

“I see some dangerous men and women. How did *you* get leadership?”



Reila smiled coldly. “I killed a lot of dangerous men and women.”

“I see.” Amanda was encouraged by that answer. “Maybe we can work together. Tell me about the other countries. Can we count on any help from them?”

“Unlikely. All other countries want to be back on planets, but they can’t because of laws they agreed to in exchange for help from the plague. No

Planets; No War, is a law all countries must obey. The Council made those laws a long time ago to make sure America would always be the superpower in space. Only the Russians protested; they became outcasts because of it.”

Amanda wasn't surprised that the Russians weren't really the enemy. She'd always suspected there was more to their rebellions than just hatred of the United States. “What do the Russian people want?”

Reila sighed. “Russia just wants not to be hunted anymore, and to be part of the Council again so the US will help them. They're dying out faster than the other countries.”

“What do you know about the rebels?”

Jerald forced himself to look at her. “Rebels want complete control of everything and for the two-party system to be gone. They think if the governments fall, all countries will go back on planets and they will be in charge of it because they took down the Americans.”

Her mother had told her that; Amanda believed him but she didn't say so. “We need to concentrate on stopping that asteroid first. We can work on these other issues afterwards.”

“Why does this planet matter so much?” Reila interrupted. “We could just relocate.”

Amanda shook her head, wiping at her wet, bloody shirt. “If this planet is removed, the Council wins. They'll never be stopped.”

“We’ll stop them at some point,” Hanson refuted.

“No, you won’t, because the other Planet Gods are going to remove all human life from the universe.”

Mutters went through the room, but also in Amanda’s mind.

You should not know that. I did not tell you that. Link, Amanda reminded. It popped up while I was searching for a way to convince them to help.

The voice didn’t respond.

Reila poured a cup of the wine Amanda had spilled and handed it to the teenager. “They don’t believe you. If you heard yourself, you wouldn’t believe you either.”

“I know. But *you* do.”

Reila nodded. “I watched you rise after I killed you. Only a God can do that.”

“I was pretty convinced from there too,” Amanda confided, thinking of her first waking and the feel of having no physical presence. “It’s been...interesting for me.”

Jerald was offended. “Interesting?! You blew up a ship of innocent teenagers!”

“They weren’t innocent!” Amanda snarled, bringing attention from the security men. They moved closer.

Amanda let out a sigh. “I’m sorry. I’m not supposed to react that way anymore.” Amanda sipped the wine. “They would have been killers in their own time. You know it as well as I do.”

“That’s why?”

“Of course not! My parents hoped the slaughter of so many breeders would force the shutdown of the HOP. The attack on Eden station would have finished it off when the Moderation Army took control.”

“The Mod? You’re with the Mod?” Reila shuddered. “God help us.”

“Exactly,” Amanda and the Creator replied together.



Reila heard it. Her eyes narrowed. She started to ask a question, then stopped.

Amanda waved a hand. “Go ahead. If there’s no answer, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Reila leaned forward. “If I slap you, will the Creator feel it?”

Amanda felt the Creator preparing to deflect and fire back. “Since I’m caught in the middle, I’m gonna hafta tell you both no.” Amanda sat the cup down, able to feel Reila about to attack.

Reila’s hand went toward her gun belt.

Amanda snatched a knife from the table and lunged forward. She slammed Reila against the wall. Her blade went against the woman’s throat as she leaned in so the panicking security couldn’t get a clear shot. These criminals had been peaceful too long to handle her. “Make a choice now: Hate the Council or the Creator. You can’t serve two masters.”

“The Creator!” Reila spat. Tears rolled as she stopped struggling. “He abandoned humanity!”

“So be it.” Amanda pulled the knife back and stuck it in the table. “You have to stay here so you don’t screw up the mission.”

“I want justice!” Reila hissed.

Amanda waited.

The Creator didn’t answer.

Amanda shook her head.

Reila closed her eyes. “I’ll do everything I can to stop you. This is my planet. Let it die.”

Amanda groaned. *Does it have to be this way?*

YES.

I hate you.

YES.

Amanda grabbed the laser gun from Reila’s belt and began shooting.

“Wake, murderer.”

Amanda refused to answer this time.

“Willful child.” The Creator’s hand brushed over her, bringing peace. “Go back into the darkness for another sleep.”

Amanda tried to avoid the comfort. “Don’t wake me. I won’t ever do that again.”

Pain flamed along the body she no longer had, forcing screams from her missing mouth, but Amanda refused to give in.

She didn’t know how long the pain lasted. When it stopped, time had picked up again.



Amanda enjoyed the cool darkness, but she also worried over it. This wasn’t the sleep cycle after or

between lives. It felt like a graveyard. She could almost smell the decaying flesh.

“The rebels lost. The guards killed all who survived the fight. They were warned.”

Amanda immediately felt responsible. “Who did I miss?”

“Hanson,” the voice answered. “I also missed him. I forgot how hard it can be to kill some of you.”

“Not me,” Amanda grumbled. “I died during the fight. You walking me around and shooting must have been a sight.”

“It gave me an advantage.”

“You’ve done that before.”

Silence.

“I know you have. You’re too...”

“Good at it.”

“Yes.”

“Man was made in my image. That was not a lie.”

“We’re all the worst parts of you.”

“And the best.”

“Don’t suck up now.”

“Don’t be tiresome.”

Amanda grunted. “I had a plan forming before it all went to hell. Did you see it?”

“I see everything.”

“Well?”

“I can, but I don’t understand why.”

“He’ll do the killing that I won’t,” Amanda bargained. “And it’ll keep me sane long enough to do this. I can’t just talk to you between...lives.”

“Why not?” The voice was wounded.

Amanda’s pitch went up. “How can you ask that?! We’re nothing alike. You may have created me, but you don’t understand me and what’s worse, you don’t like me or care about the survival of my kind. You expect servitude because you’re the Creator and you hold the power.”

“YES.”

“No. That’s wrong. I’m not getting anything from the deal.”

“You may earn forgiveness.”

“It means very little to me after this last display of your hatred for humans,” she warned. “Use your pain ray on me again. That might help.”

“I sense no dishonesty in your answer. Please explain.”

“It will make me hate you more and feed my determination to resist. You need Jerald. I won’t blindly serve you or anyone. I’m different, remember.”

“Is he not different, as well?”

“He is, but in the way you need. He’s a true killer.”

“I see.”

Amanda grunted, expecting to be sent back into the pain cycle again. “Perhaps someone else you don’t hate as much?”

“It’s been a year. The rest of your family has been executed. Only your powerful father and mother remain.”

Anguish tore into Amanda, but she'd been expecting it. The graveyard feel still hadn't lifted. "My mother could help..."

"She would have to die."

"Yes."

"Ae you so lonely?"

Amanda nodded, fighting tears that she had no way to shed. "I don't like being dead."

"Neither would your mother, child." The Creator's love came unexpectedly, erasing all negative emotions. "Sleep again. It will not be for long, but it will be twice as restful. Your work after this will be hard."

Amanda went out all at once, reaching for the darkness like an infant wanting its parent.

3

Amanda gasped air into her new lungs and rolled over, groaning as her new stomach boiled. "Great."

There hadn't been a conversation, just an awakening. *Are you along this time?*

There was no answer.

Amanda sighed in relief as the cramps eased. She slowly stood up and looked around.

Jerald was sitting nearby. He glared up at her with baleful green eyes. "You cursed me."

She snorted. "You wanted to kill me on first sight, but I cursed you? Maybe the Creator's right. Mankind deserves to go extinct."

“Is that the final stake you’re playing for? The...God wouldn’t tell me.” Jerald didn’t deny her accusation. He assumed the Creator had told her what he’d been thinking.

“Then I’m probably not allowed to,” Amanda guessed. “But I play by my own rules. Yes. I’m trying to negotiate our survival.”



“It isn’t going well, I take it.”

“Not in the least,” she sent right back, glowering at him. “And the things you’re going to do will make it harder.”

Jerald frowned. “Then why ask for me to be brought back?”

“Because there are some things even *I* won’t do.” She began walking toward the fort. They’d been revived where she had died the first time. “You will.”

Jerald followed. There was little choice, and she was right. Reila had trained him to be obedient and ruthless. He excelled at both.

“Where is everyone else?”

Jerald scanned the hills. “In hiding. We haven’t been true criminals in a long time; we wanted peace here.”

Amanda wondered if that came from being on the Creator’s planet. “I expected them to attack, to fight harder.”

“You scared them by coming back to life in front of their eyes. They don’t know how to fight you.”

Amanda scanned the mess, trying not to hate the Creator even more, but she failed. The bodies littered the fort on all sides and in the buildings. *They didn’t deserve this.* Flies circled the dead, but nothing else moved. The scene was the same as they’d left it.

Jerald winced at the sight of his mother’s body. “They haven’t been found yet.”

“How long has it been?” Amanda wasn’t sure, but she didn’t think long.

“A few days, I think.” Jerald stayed in the doorway. “The others were criminals. She wasn’t like them.”



“No,” Amanda agreed, taking things from bodies that she needed. She ignored the smells and tolerated the sights. It was hard to believe she’d done all this, or rather, that her body had... Amanda stared at her old body. The two holes in her head glared in warning that she could be killed.

Amanda ducked as Jerald tried to grab her, slamming his head into the wall.

Jerald could have snapped her neck, but he was scared of the Creator. He sank to his knees and waited.

Amanda ran a hand over his brow. “I understand. I didn’t want to do it. You have to know that voice is...irresistible. What it wants, it gets.”

Jerald nodded. “It hurt me.”

“Me too.” Amanda helped him to his feet. “The Creator doesn’t like us. We only have each other.”

Jerald groaned. “Get me out of here then or I’ll try again. I loved my mother.”

Amanda led him away from the fort. “Reila said you could relocate. Where’s the ship?”

Jerald pointed. *I don’t want the pain again, but I have to kill her.*

Amanda led the way. “What’s that sound?”

Jerald stilled, listening. “I don’t... Damn.” He grabbed her arm and hurried them into the woods. “The Russians are here.”

Amanda stopped as soon as they reached the cover of the trees, jerking her arm free. “Maybe we should still try to make the deal.”

“With what? Bodies?”

Amanda realized he was right. Russian rebels who didn’t get what they’d asked for wouldn’t be in a forgiving mood. She followed Jerald through the trees.

“There should have been two ships here. Someone got away.”

“It was Hanson.”

“Figures.” Jerald fought the hatred festering in his heart.

Amanda was impressed with the hiding place. Thanks to the netted cover, she never would have known there was a ship here.

“It’s just a two-roomer, but it holds enough fuel to get us half way across the galaxy if that’s what you want.”

Amanda stepped by him and hit the button to open the door to the ship. “I do.”

The small ship had two rooms and a hatch for docking. The pale white walls were lined in Russian lettering, telling her where they’d gotten it. It held no comforts—just a few chairs and she assumed, a few fold out cots hidden in the thin walls.

Jerald went straight to the cockpit and began punching numbers into the control panel.



As the ship rose into the sky on autopilot, Jerald looked at her. “Where to, murderer?”

Amanda winced. *I’m starting to really hate that name.* “Eden.”

Jerald stared. “What’s the point?”

“Eden controls the asteroids they send. If we can break in and change the trajectory, the asteroid will miss HOP-28 and we’ll be in the clear for saving the Creator.”

Jerald started to speak and paused. His mouth opened, eyes warning of trouble. “What if we don’t save him at all?”

“I thought of that, but the other planet Gods will retaliate.”

“...not if they’re removed too.”

Amanda swallowed. “Kill the Gods? All of them?”

Jerald nodded.

Amanda began to stew. “That’s right up my belief system.”

Jerald wasn’t surprised. “Of course, it is. You’re a murderer.”

Amanda didn’t flinch or flush from his contempt this time. She waited for him to attack.

Jerald went to the small bedroom on the ship and shut the door so he wouldn’t.

Amanda leaned the seat back and went to sleep right there. It had been a long life so far.

4

Amanda woke all at once. The feel of not having a body again sent her to the immediate deduction. “He killed me.”

“Yes.” Light flashed out, bringing peace and concern in equal measures. “He is being punished now.”

Amanda drew on her courage. “Stop it. I killed his mother. He has every right to hate me.”

“He interfered with my plans.”

“So have I.”



“Yes.” A long-suffering sigh echoed. “Very well.”

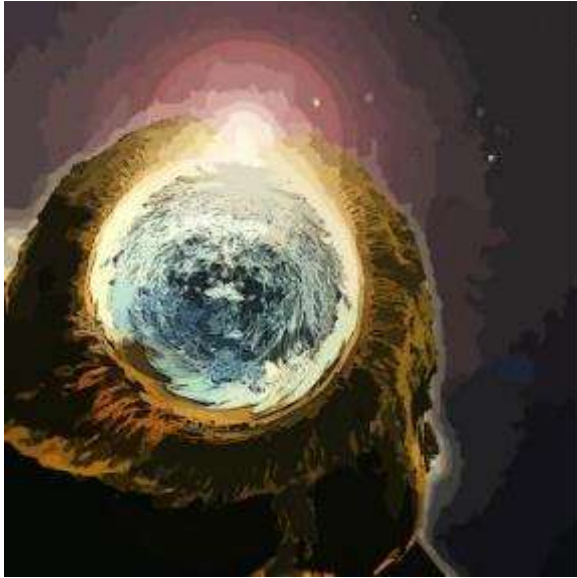
Amanda felt herself mentally shoved through the darkness and then light flashed again. She could see Jerald’s prone form huddled in a spotlight. The rest of the area was dark.

Amanda didn’t know why he still had the same body, but she tried not to let it bother her that she didn’t have one at all. She mentally advanced and found herself standing next to him in an instant. “Jerald?”

He shuddered. “I’m not sorry.”

Amanda suddenly wished for arms to hug him. “I am.”

Jerald tried to look at her but couldn’t. “Where are you?”



Amanda sighed; she was horrified by how much it sounded like the Creator.

Jerald must have thoughts so too because he huddled up again. “Please, don’t!”

“I’ll look after you.” Amanda tried to rub his shoulder and found she could. It was freaky and scary. “Swear yourself to my plans and we’ll leave here.”

“I swear!” Jerald still thought she was the Creator tricking him.

Amanda accepted it. “Okay, we’re ready. Send us back to the ship.”

Everything went dark.

Amanda groaned as she woke. The smell of death filled her nose. She opened her eyes and found her last body rotting next to her.

Amanda screamed.

Jerald burst into the control room and skidded to a halt. He took in the body and her pale face, then left. *I don't care if the Creator was using her body. She killed my mother. I have no sympathy for her.*

Amanda slowly followed him, controlling the need to strike out. They had an enemy and it wasn't each other.

"Alert!" The ship's computer blared through the two small rooms. *"Alert!"*

The ship shuddered. A warning blast slammed into the rear hull, sending both passengers to their knees.

The communication system lit up, echoing.

"You will board our ship or die."

"It's the Russians!" Jerald roughly dragged Amanda to her feet and shoved her toward the escape hatch. "We have to get out of here."

Amanda pulled away, recovering. "Answer them. Tell them we agree."

"We don't have anything to trade." Jerald's face became a huge scowl. "...or are we not trading?"

Amanda looked at him pointedly.

Jerald growled at her, but he couldn't refuse the silent command. This was why he'd been saved—to kill.

Amanda waited calmly while Jerald called the ship that was locking onto them. She stayed where she was as he headed toward the docking hatch.

6

Jerald stepped onto the Russian ship that had docked with theirs. He nodded to the security officer who came to greet him.

The man's face lit up. "You have our music?"

Jerald pulled his gun. "Right here." He opened fire.

The five other men on the Russian ship drew their guns and hurried toward Jerald.

Jerald fired repeatedly, hitting three of them before the others reached him and then rage took over. Jerald ducked, dropping the gun as he opened his arms. He lifted the nearest man and tossed him into the other one.

The two remaining men went down in a heap, guns firing and hitting the walls instead of their target.

Jerald snatched his knife from his belt and fell on them, stabbing and grunting.

The captain rolled, avoiding a stab. He kicked out, hitting Jerald's arm. The knife flew into the body pile and out of sight.

Jerald lunged for the captain, getting his leg. He punched him in the balls and moved up, hitting his stomach, his chest, and finally his chin.

The captain shouted, struggling against the grip Jerald was trying to get on his throat.

Jerald kned him in the balls this time and wrapped his big hands around the man's neck. He strained, squeezing until the captain stopped fighting.

Then he shifted for a better grip and snapped the man's neck.



When the shooting began, Amanda closed her eyes and waited for it to be over. They needed the ship and the files on the computer, not the Russian men. They also didn't need any of their captives, but Amanda thought Jerald might spare them anyway. Jerald was indeed a killer, but he also had compassion for those less fortunate. For this job, he was perfect.

Jerald appeared back in the doorway a few minutes later. He was covered in blood and a haunted expression. *I don't know if I want her approval, her body, or her guts in my hand. What happened to me?*

Amanda stepped by him and went to where she believed the bridge of the Russian ship would be located. She didn't look at him. "Detach the two-roamer. We have a new ride now."

Jerald almost killed her again, but one thing they'd discussed held him back. Removing all the Gods was now more important to him than revenge for his slain mother. "I will get all of you, no matter how many times I have to die in the process."

Amanda echoed his thought as she tried to figure out how to set a course for Eden. She knew enough Russian to get the job done, but it was rusty.



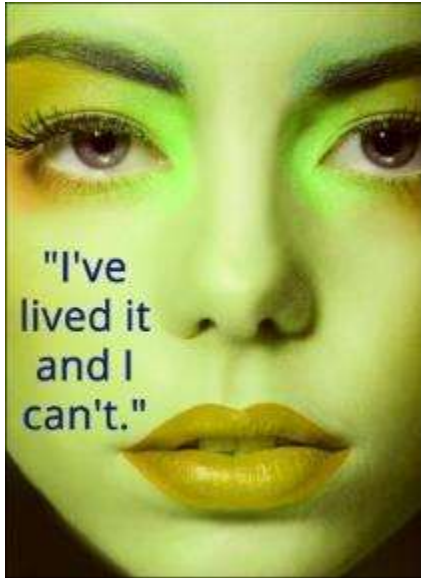
“I’m heading home now. When I get there,
nothing will stop me from accomplishing my goal.”

Chapter Five
The Rebels

1

“I think I can stomach your story now.”

Amanda blanched. She dropped the ration bar back onto the cluttered table between them. “No, you can’t.”



“Try me.” Jerald settled back against the hard chair of the stolen vessel, arms aching. The captain hadn’t gone down easy. Moving the bodies to the

two-roomer before detaching it hadn't been fun either.

This ship was almost a mirror of the two-roomer they'd abandoned. The difference was in the width of the hallway and the addition of a small brig for prisoners. The information on the screens told Amanda this ship had been a transport freighter for small groups being taken to stand trial for various crimes.

"Well?"

Amanda sighed. "I was born to die."

"I don't understand."

"Of course not. You probably had parents who wanted you to have a long, happy life."

Jerald blinked. "Well, yeah."

She stared coldly. "What's that like?"

"Amazing until someone you love dies of black lung from a lunar mine. Then it gets hard to survive without stealing."

"That's why you were dropped on HOP-28?"

"My mother was dropped after my father died. The Council didn't care that she was pregnant. They dropped her one month before my birth."

Another lie Professor Coyle told us, Amanda realized. He said no pregnant drops were made now. "How sweet. Little Jerry suckling at mommy's breast."

"Why are you so nasty?!"

"I was born to die! No one breastfed me or sang me lullabies. I was a member of the Moderation

Army before I was born. In fact, if not for them, I probably wouldn't have been conceived."

"You're different..."

"I was modified to be the perfect killer and I was, until I did it."

"Start from the beginning and try to make sense. Your rambling drives me crazy."

Amanda gazed at him in thoughtful silence, drawn to his sullen, suspicious nature. It matched her own.

Jerald crossed big arms over his wide chest, refusing to give in even if she got angry.

I like him. That's dangerous. "Why didn't you leave the prison planet? You weren't a convict."

"I did. I was sent back on conspiracy charges, among others." He glowered at her. "I tried to blow up a daycare in the breeder tower."

"Interesting. Why only tried?"

Jerald was a bit taken aback by how she accepted each nugget of information without an emotional response. "Uh, I couldn't follow through. One of the kids looked like me. It felt like suicide."

"Why a daycare and not council members?"

"I wanted the parents to live, to feel the pain of their murdered children—like my mom. She was stuck on that planet, with those monsters, just for stealing food. I wanted to steal their happiness too."

"Stop talking now."

He frowned. "Why?"

"We're too much alike. I don't need to hear it."

"You killed your classmates."

“So because I followed through, I’m worse than you are. I get that, but a daycare? That evens us up as far as I’m concerned.”

“Killing is killing. Age and sex do not matter.”

“That proves my point about limits—you have none.”



Jerald was stricken. “Maybe you could teach me...”

“Why would I do that? I need you just like you are.”

“Then tell me your damn story!”

Amanda’s lips thinned. “Fine. My mother didn’t have a child. She birthed and trained a terrorist who grew up with the kids of the most powerful people in the universe. Her husband thought she loved him, but my mother only wanted one thing from all those years—for me to die during a massive act of terror.”

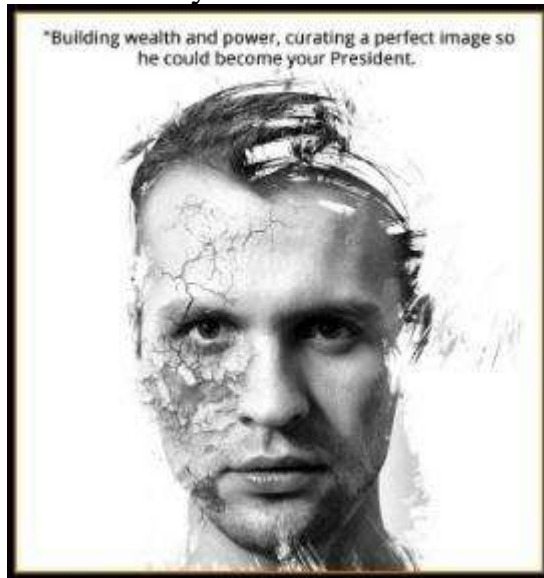
Jerald sneered. “You chickened out.”

“In a way. I insisted on surviving so I could continue to serve the rebels.”

“You’re still doing it, aren’t you?”

Amanda sighed. “No. My duty to them ended when I died. Now, I’m only loyal to myself.”

“Where was your dad while your mom ran around with the enemy?”



“He really didn’t know?”

“Not in the beginning. An illusion only works if someone believes it’s real. He loved us; he liked my training. It made him look good that he had such a devoted wife who would make sure his offspring could defend herself. Like your mom, who pretended she wasn’t one of the monsters.”

“Yeah.” Jerald rose, stomach churning. “I’m going to see if they had captives.”

Amanda swiveled the captain's chair to the screens and began accessing the files and logbooks. "I didn't even get to tell him about my training with the Mod. He'd really be upset over that."

Amanda liked it that she was able to keep Jerald distracted enough so that their conversations always turned to him and his life. He didn't need more knowledge about her. He already knew too much.

"Incoming alert." The computer flashed a red box with angry writing.

Amanda used the computer to translate it.



Amanda frowned. "Who was the other one? Surely you guys didn't come here just for me..."

She typed, bringing up the log. Her face paled as she read it.

Evie Roth.

Amanda Roth.

Amanda jumped up and ran for the brig.

2

“Stop!” Jerald tightened his grip on the beautiful breeder, knife against her throat. “One mother for another.”

Amanda stopped.

Evie didn’t fight the furious man. She stared at her daughter. She would know her blood anywhere by the bright eyes that couldn’t be bleached.

“Why is she here?!” Jerald was beyond fury. He was on the edge of sanity. Jerald didn’t care that Evie appeared delicate in her wrinkled, expensive dress. Her coverings hid a rebel monster. He was sure of that.

Amanda shrugged. “The ship log has both our names on the list.”

“They came for you and your Moderation mother?”

“Yes. Whatever deal you made at the fort was violated. You were betrayed.”

“But I never mentioned you!”

“Someone did.” Amanda eased into the brig, seeing four bodies of big guards and bruises on her mom’s arms that appeared fresh. “Let her go so we can find out where they picked her up and where they were headed after they got us. The log doesn’t have that information.”

Jerald wanted revenge. Killing Amanda wasn’t satisfying because she wouldn’t stay dead.

Amanda dropped down into a hard chair to wait for his choice.

“You’ll just bring her back, right?”

She shook her head. “I don’t have that power, but if I did, no, not now. If she fights with us, her final end could be a lot uglier. At least this death will be quick.”

Evie beamed. “I’m so proud of you.”

Amanda’s lips thinned; her nostrils flared.

Jerald waited for a tirade, but there was only silence. He slowly lowered the blade as the need for vengeance faded into a tolerable throb. He hated Amanda. He needed to hurt her, but he needed her to gain the ultimate revenge—the end of the planet Gods... *I also want her, and she has to be willing.* He sheathed the blade and shoved the prisoner back into the cell where she’d been hiding. *I can slit her throat after she moans my name.*

Amanda recognized the stare. She didn’t avoid it or encourage it. This ugly trip was bonding them. She didn’t want that and neither did he.

Jerald shuddered, barely stopping himself from offering her a deal. He left the brig, but only went into the hall so he could listen.



“I truly am proud of you.”

“That’s nice. You even sound genuine. Did you practice that, mother?”

“Of course.”

Jerald instantly loathed the woman. He slid back into the doorway to glower at Evie.

The females didn’t notice. They were locked in eye-to-eye combat.

Jerald wasn’t surprised when Amanda won.

Evie looked away, sighing. “I won’t apologize for your life. I’m only sorry for the way you found out. I should have told you what you were being trained for, and why, long before you found that letter in my desk.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. I would still hate you for making me live a lie.”

“Then why did you stop your boyfriend from killing me?”

“Because I think you want it. You want to escape the guilt that older age is gifting you with, but I want you to live forever and feel it every second.”

“Does your little boyfriend know who you really are?”

Amanda snorted. “He knows enough. Unlike the man you married.”

Evie smiled coldly. “Your stepfather is a kind, generous man. His stature as a breeder has served me well.”

Amanda thought of something that hadn’t ever occurred to her before. “You’re not, are you?” She stared at her mother. “You can’t have more kids.”

“No. I made sure of that after I had you.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I refused to be part of their control! If I hadn’t needed a way in, I wouldn’t have had you!”

Amanda wanted to feel pain at that revelation, but there was only resignation. “The rebel army is gone.

“Not all of it, but the main forces were defeated. We were told you’d died. We had to change all our plans. Nothing has gone right since we received that notice.” Evie glared. “You could have sent word that you bleached your traits and faked your death.”

Amanda didn’t share the truth. She didn’t trust her mother. “So when are the Russians attacking Eden?”

Evie leaned against the cool wall and crossed her arms over her chest. “They’re going to Eden on a diplomatic mission. The Council is not expecting them, so they’ll be attacked.”

“Why did they take you captive?”

“They don’t trust me either. They plan to hold me as a hostage in case the Council refuses to let them back into the Federation.”

Amanda was shocked as she figured it out. “You’re trying to trigger another war.”

“Why shouldn’t I? Those living in peace on Eden have no idea how much everyone else has suffered because of them! They all deserve to die for letting it happen.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will, in time. All the secrets will come out.”

“If you know them, why haven’t you exposed the truth? What are you waiting for?”

Evie stared back in dislike. “For my daughter to do her job.”

Amanda stood. She waved at the cell. “Go to sleep. If you don’t, he’ll make you.”

Evie went to the cot and settled down. The tiny jail had a narrow bed and a pot, and that was it. The floor was covered in old bloodstains the guards clearly never tried to clean.

Amanda left the brig, bumping Jerald out of the way. “Make sure that cage is locked.”

Jerald did, wondering what would happen next. Would Amanda leave her mom on the ship or try to

take her along for the infiltration of Eden Station? Neither of those felt like good ideas. “Why are you leaving her locked up?”

Amanda leaned against the wall. “She’s lying.”

Jerald didn’t doubt that. “I don’t really understand what’s going on.”

Amanda needed someone to talk to; she decided it might as well be him. “I think my mother has been lying to me and everyone else—about everything.” Amanda motioned toward the brig. “The dead bodies in there are not Russian. And the breeders are going to be wiped out. The scientists will gain control, not the rebels, like I’ve been taught.”

“I thought that was a good thing.”

“It is, if they’re the good guys.”

“And now you aren’t sure of that.”

“No, I’m not. Too many things don’t add up.”

“I still don’t get it.”

“I can’t explain it yet. I need to get to Eden and talk to the scientist my mother has used as a spy for decades. He’ll tell me the truth and then I can make a plan from there.”

“I thought we were stopping the asteroid.”

“We are, but what happens after that matters too.”

Jerald realized she wasn’t just the heartless killer he’d thought. “You care about the people.”

“I do. I don’t want to, but after meeting the Creator, I know they need help. After we stop the asteroid, all humanity is in danger.”

“Do you plan to tell your mother or the Council that contact with the Creator has finally happened?”

“No. They won’t believe it, but even if they do, I can’t trust the Creator either. He’ll try to make deals with the Council and my advantage will be gone.”

“This is all too confusing.”

Amanda shut her eyes, nodding. “I thought I was a rebel, fighting for freedom from the entire Council. Then I died and it all changed.”

Jerald’s mind refused to connect the pieces for him.



Jerald followed Amanda as she went to the captain’s quarters and shot the door panel to open it. She dropped down onto the dead man’s bed.

Jerald froze as she stretched out.

Amanda grimaced. She rolled over, giving him her back. “Just get it over with so that pause in your brain will go away. That’s really why you were stuck on that criminal planet.”

“Yes.” Jerald climbed into the bed and yanked her over by her arm.

Amanda stared at him, not sure if she would kill him at the moment of his pleasure or right before he got there.

Jerald groaned and rolled off her. He collapsed on the bed, muttering.

Amanda went to sleep.

Jerald grumbled a bit longer, then fell into a restless slumber at her side.

3

Evie watched them on the monitor from the captain’s chair. The cell key hung on a chain around her neck. She opened a line of communication and began typing, eyes never leaving the young couple.

The plan is almost finished. We will reach our final reward in three hours. Will you be there?

Evie studied Jerald as she waited for an answer, trying to figure out why Amanda had chosen him as her protector from all the males on HOP-28.

Evie jumped as the reply beeped at her.

We are already in place. Is your clever daughter ready to do her part for the future?

Yes.

Good. No contact is recommended. Goodbye and good luck.

The same to all of you, my friends.

Evie erased the communications, put the chair back into the position it had been in when she sat

down, then hurried back to the cell to lock herself in. “I’ve given everything to the cause. Amanda will do the same.”

Her boss thought showing up with Amanda and her mother as their captives would force the Council to meet with them, to deal with them, but Evie had different plans. “You’re just the match I’m striking to the fuse, my slow friend. It’s the fire that I seek.”

4

Jerald woke with hair in his mouth. He spit it out, head turning to find Amanda on his chest.

She looked up, eyes bloodshot. “What?”

Jerald felt his heart grow. It hurt.

He winced as he patted her shoulder. “Go back to sleep.”

Amanda did, head thumping to his chest. Her light snores echoed a few seconds later.

Jerald left his arm around her and shut his eyes, no longer aroused by lust. The need to protect Amanda was stronger. *I’m changing.*

Sleep reclaimed Jerald. In his dream, he held her close and tried to keep the Creator from taking her back.

Amanda woke next. She did a fast scan of screens and dials, then of the man holding her so tightly that she couldn’t breathe well. Amanda shifted, loosening his hold, then fell back out, soothed.

Evie also slept, but not deeply. When the ship began to slow, she unlocked her cell to be ready for the action. Betraying her daughter would not go over well. Amanda would react as she'd been taught. Evie expected blood and screams. If those didn't come, then she would worry.

5

Thud! Thud!

“Open up!”

Amanda and Jerald were shoved into alertness by pounding on the door.



“Come out now!”

Jerald flew out of the bed, blade in hand.

Amanda grabbed his arm and pointed up.

Jerald sheathed his knife and leapt, grabbing the vent. It came loose in his panicking grip, sending him to the floor.

Amanda walked up his back as he stood, then leapt into the hole.

“Open this door!” Bodies slammed against it.

Jerald jumped and followed Amanda into the darkness.

Below them, rebels burst through, shattering the door.

“In the vent!”

“Get her!”

Amanda hurried to the emergency pod section and kicked the vent through. She dropped down.

“Over here.” Jerald led her to a double pod and shoved her into the cold seat. Heavy steps sounded outside the door.

Jerald secured the pod and activated the launch sequence, picking a fast target.

The escape pod held two back-to-back seats and the controls. The cover slammed down, triggering the automatic oxygen feature. Amanda breathed in deeply, hoping there was enough to get them to the station. Escape pods didn't have much of anything. They were only a temporary transport.

The pod launched just as the rebels broke down the door. It blasted out into space.

Evie stared. “That wasn't part of the plan. Where is she going?!”

Evie left the pod bay and went to the bridge, ignoring the angry, confused rebels force she had

allowed to dock with them. “I need to send a message. Get lost.”

The rebels guards left the room, muttering.

Evie typed angrily on the keypad. *We may have a problem. I think Amanda switched sides.*

She watched the pod on the tracking screen, concern growing when it went to the one place she didn't wanted Amanda to go to yet.

The computer beeped a few seconds later with an order Evie wasn't sure she would follow.

Kill her.

Evie didn't respond.

6



Jerald pointed over the rear of the pod as they breached the atmosphere of the station in orbit near

a dead moon they'd used for protection in the past. The dead moon glowered at them as they shot past.

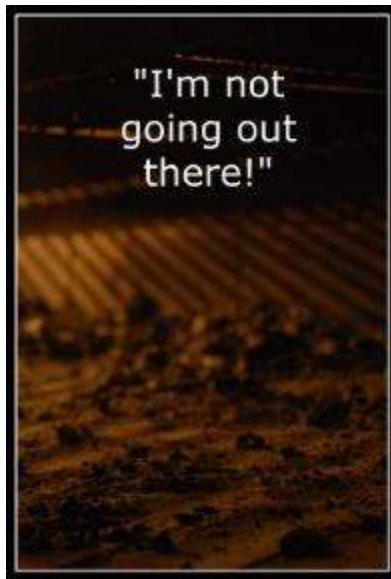
Amanda saw a brief blur that could have been a ship's shadow and then it was gone and they were nearing the station's sewage outflow. "No way!"

Jerald ignored her, bracing as the pod flew toward the sewer opening to avoid the security ships that were running constant patrols.

"Gross!" Amanda held on as they blasted into the muck and vanished.

Jerald tried to steer, but it was impossible to see. The pod pinged off sides and edges, finally slamming to a halt on a platform a few feet above the muck line.

Both passengers breathed through their mouths until their guts would allow normal intake. The smell was bad.



“Okay.” Jerald popped the hatch and climbed out.

Amanda grumbled as she followed him, fighting not to puke. The sewer was lined in gross piles and puddles of green and brown material that Amanda refused to study for long. The walls and floors were gray and black, making it hard to see where to put her feet.

Jerald took the worker platform to the rumbling stairs and began climbing, glad they didn’t have to get into the mess to get out of the sewer.

Amanda climbed fast when she realized it was an exit. She shoved by him on the slippery ladder and pushed her body out of the sewer hole, falling onto the soft brown earth.

Fake sunlight blinded her to the waiting people, but she heard gasps and mutters. Amanda let her eyes adjust as Jerald hurried out and stood over her. He was now her active bodyguard even though he hadn’t realized it yet.

“Welcome home.”

“Thanks.” Amanda took a minute to study their surroundings and figure out exactly where they were.

Jerald stood next to her and gawked, mouth opening to express the shock he felt.

Around them, a small crowd was gathering. The witnesses pointed and muttered, but not in a threatening way.

Amanda decided on a direction, then turned to Jerald. "I think we should..." She paused, seeing his expression. "What's wrong?"

Jerald waved a jerky hand. "I don't understand. This is supposed to be Eden station."

Amanda frowned. "This is. You landed us in the outer district. We'll have to make our way into the wealthy section so we can access the lab."

"That's not what I mean." He turned in a circle indicating everything around them. "I don't understand."



Amanda sighed, realizing he was another lemming who believed the stories he'd been told. "Have you ever been on Eden Station?"

Jerald shook his head. "My trial was held during transport. There were a bunch of bleached faces on a monitor. I couldn't see much in the background."

Amanda didn't want to take the time to explain things to him, but it was clear he was having an epiphany. If she didn't get this over with, it would interrupt everything else they did until he got it out of his system. Resigned, she nodded politely at the people watching them while she began to explain. "Eden Station is divided into three main areas. As I'm sure you know, the station itself is a cylindrical feat of engineering with outer rings."

Jerald nodded, glad she was speaking slow so his ears would accept the words. "All space stations are cylindrical."

"Yes. All stations are also separated by class."

Anger came back into Jerald's face. "That's what I'm talking about. We've been told the lower classes are abused and kept in slavery conditions." He looked around again, voice rising. "Where is it?"

"On other stations maybe, I wouldn't know. On Eden, it's always been this way." Amanda pointed. "There's one central road that travels in an unending circle through the outer ring. That's the poor district, where we are now. The buildings across from us are their businesses. Homes line both sides of that and then farms fill out the ends. Those foods are shipped by the four main roads that lead to the center of the station in a cross. The wealthy people in the middle turn those goods into supplies and materials. Some of that is then passed back to the poor districts to make products, while the rest of it is sent to labs or storage areas between those two for later use. With me so far?"

Jerald nodded, catching about half of it in favor of studying their witnesses. The townspeople weren't threatening, but they also weren't friendly.

"In the very center of the station are two elite towers where the breeders live. Everything they need to survive is in those towers, except for the power that runs them. That's in the scientific industrial area we need to reach." Amanda frowned. "You brought us down on the direct opposite of that. To get to it, we either have to stay in the poor zone all the way around the outer edge until we get close, or we have to try to cut straight through the center and not be noticed by security."

"We've been taught that this station enslaves non-breeders and forces them to work so the breeders can have an easy life."

"That's not true. The opposite, in fact." Amanda's eyes were haunted. "If you're a breeder, you're not allowed to leave that center area inside the wall. You're not allowed off this station once you finish your education, ever. Then you're forced to marry and breed. The Council decides those matches. The men and women have no say in it. The legislators are the slaves. The poor and the scientists are not breeders. No one cares what they do."

Jerald glanced at the poor people, aware of them nodding in response to Amanda's explanations. It was obvious that she was telling the truth. Everything he had been taught to fight was a lie.



Amanda sighed. “Previous council members who made rules that encouraged it. Previous citizens who voted in those rulers. Current populations who refuse to change. There are a lot of people to blame, but honestly, only the solution matters.”

Jerald forced himself to push the confusion and anger from his mind. They still had a job to do. This new information didn’t change it. “I think we should stick to the poor areas as much as we can. Maybe we can go unnoticed.”

Amanda turned toward the street, nodding to the new people who had just joined the group. She recognized them. “Too late for that. Meet Nathan. He is second in command of the Moderation Army.”



Half a dozen Moderation members came through the crowd to surround them with weapons and dark glowers. Their laser guns were up-to-date, and their body markings were light. They blended in well, and clearly had access to the goods being produced on this station. Jerald stepped closer to Amanda, waiting to see if this conversation would be friendly. The body language implied it would not.

The MOD members looked like the other poor people in this district with their blue tops and gray pants made of the cheapest material. There were redheads, brunettes, and blondes. These people couldn't afford to bleach themselves the way the wealthier residents did. The MOD members sported weapons though, something the poor farmers didn't need.

“You have to come with us.” Nathan made a motion.

Both captives were pushed toward a storage shelter across from the business row, but it wasn't violent. These men didn't have orders to kill them, yet.

Amanda didn't resist, so Jerald didn't either, but he was ready to defend them both. Against this many, he expected to lose, but the enemy would be short by half when it was over.

“Wait in here for the boss.”

Moderation members shoved Amanda and Jerald into the warehouse. The door slammed behind them.

“The boss?”

Amanda didn't answer, though she suspected leadership had changed. The previous leader wouldn't have been so polite about their capture.



And that's your mistake. You guys didn't even take our weapons. Some army...

Chapter Six
The Scientists

1

Amanda went to the chairs by the smoldering firepit in the center of the empty building and dropped down. She'd been expecting this, but not so soon. It proved the suspicion that her mother had betrayed her.

The piles of supplies and smell of unwashed bodies said this warehouse was used by the MOD to avoid notice by station security. It had a dirt floor, however. Amanda doubted they used it at night when the animals came out. *Which means they're taking shelter with the poor people in the outer rings.* She hadn't known the MOD had any public supporters, but it was clear now that they did.



Jerald sat across from her. “All my life, I was told the breeders take advantage and we can only trust the rebels. The Council starves the poor and abuse them.” He glanced around, hand waving. “Where’s the starving? The whips and blood? The oppression?”

“It was never true. The Moderation Army never had the people’s interests at heart. The MOD is based on anarchist views of those who refuse to do honest work for a fair share. It’s easier to steal and stir rebellions to take down a system they don’t want to belong to.”

“They’re...freeloaders?”

“In a way. They don’t believe anyone should have to work.”

“Then where would everything come from?”

“The breeders.”

“But they don’t produce. They pay the poor or the scientists to do that.”

“Yes, and no. Some breeders do produce, but not alone. They need workers of all classes, including their own.”

“So if the MOD gets rid of the breeders, they also get rid of the workers.”

“Yes.”

“Why would they do that? Without the workers, nothing gets made.”

“They want the breeders to become workers.”

“There aren’t enough breeders to fill all those jobs. We also can’t force them into slavery.”



“And you’ve just learned why it won’t work. The MOD is pushing something that can’t succeed. That’s why their numbers are dwindling, and they have to commit bigger and bigger acts to get anyone to listen.”

The warehouse door opened the rest of the way. “You’re misrepresenting us.”

Amanda put a hand on Jerald’s wrist to stop his automatic instinct to kill. “How so?”

Three men came through the smelly smoke of the fire. She recognized them all from the missing person rolls.

Nathan scanned her. “I don’t know how you got a complete physical change while hiding on that speck of a planet for a year, but it doesn’t matter. Now we have you.”

“And what do you plan to do with me?”

“We’ll trade you to your father.”

“For what?”

“Access, acceptance, information.” Nathan shrugged. “It’s up to the boss.”

“I see.” Amanda studied the boy she’d refused to date more times than she could count. “Since my mother told you I was coming, I think it’s only fair that I tell you something as well.”

Nathan’s smile faded as he sensed something ugly coming. “What?”

“My mother betrayed you, too.” Amanda enjoyed making him speechless. In the past, he’d talked so much that she’d wanted to laser his mouth shut. “She sold you out.”

“You’re lying. Your mother has been with us since she was born, like you used to be.”

“She locked everyone else out of your communications. It had to be her. She told the Council you were attacking this station; she caused your defeat and all those *deaths*.”

Nathan’s voice rose. “The space force used live ammunition! They’d never done that before!”

“I’m sure my mother was able to convince her security friend that it was needed.”

“Why would she betray us? She’s been one of us longer than you have!”

“My mother is only loyal to herself. She’s been making deals with the criminal planet population, the MOD, the scientists, and the breeders. She’s playing all of you against each other.”

Nathan didn’t respond.

Jerald wasn't sure if the man believed her or not. Jerald did. He'd met Amanda's mother and even though it had been brief, he'd come away with a dislike that would last several lifetimes.

Nathan scanned her again. "Why did you bleach yourself?"

"Easier to avoid security and my parents."

"And yet, your mother knew you. How is that possible?"

Amanda looked at Jerald. "He gave it away by accident. He didn't know she can't be trusted."

Jerald flushed, but didn't deny it. When he'd found Evie Roth in that Russian brig, the truth about her daughter being alive had come flying out before he'd considered it. At that point, he'd thought Evie Roth loved her daughter and would try to help her.

"Why are you here now? Were you looking for rebel survivors?"

Amanda shook her head. "I just wanted to come home. I'm not like my mother wants me to be. I still feel things."

The MOD men looked at her in scorn now. Jerald hid his smirk at their gullibility. *They believe her. What idiots. No wonder they weren't successful.*

"We're going to hold you as a hostage to try one more time."

Amanda sighed. "I assumed as much."

"Will you help us willingly or do we have to force you by hurting your boyfriend?"

Amanda glared. “I will help you as long as when it’s over, you leave us alone. I don’t want to be a MOD member anymore.”

“I’ll tell the boss, but you already know our code—in for life.”

Amanda didn’t tell them she’d died several times. They wouldn’t believe her and she didn’t want the Creator to prove it. That might end in another bloodbath of the poor people outside these walls and she didn’t want to be responsible for their deaths unless it served a purpose. “When is the boss coming?”

“When it’s time to contact the Council with our demands.”

Amanda was sure she knew who the new boss was now. *And I don’t want to talk to her again. If I have to, I might tell Jerald to kill her.* “I don’t support being without a government.”

“We fight for equality, not for control. We do want a government, but it has to be like us, not like *you*.”

Jerald snorted. “You believe killing kids will gain that?”

“If they’re breeders, yes.”

“What happens when you remove the last breeder?”

Nathan refused to be drawn into that old debate again. “Humans can’t go extinct. We’re a plague that can’t be cured.”

Amanda shook her head at the indifference, the uneducated view. “I felt the same way most of my life.”

“What changed your view? You clearly aren’t one of us anymore.”

“I died.” She drew her gun. “Let me help you understand.”

Amanda fired before they could run or defend themselves.

Jerald wanted to kiss her as the three bodies fell with stunned expressions. “I’ve never felt so close to someone!”

Amanda rolled her eyes. “Get a grip.”

Jerald laughed. “Let’s get out of here. Which way?”

Amanda pointed. “There’s always an escape hatch in case of fire.”

Jerald took that route without asking how she knew. He no longer cared about her past with old friends or those old goals. He only cared about the future.

The warehouse door shattered below them.

Amanda and Jerald kept climbing, getting onto the roof of the warehouse. They jumped the ten feet to the ground and fled toward the insect-littered creek behind the building.

Amanda dropped down in the weeds.

Jerald landed next to her, knife in hand.

Voices sounded from all directions.

Amanda pointed toward the end of the district, whispering. “All farms are surrounded in the back

by trees to prevent soil erosion and help hold in the water. We'll climb one of them." She took off running.

Jerald followed, scanning for witnesses. The locals and other MOD members were inside the warehouse now, examining the scene of their latest crime, but it would only be a few seconds before they began to search outside.

Amanda picked up speed, leaving Jerald behind. She hadn't known she could run this fast. It was difficult to swallow the laughter as she flew into the cover of the huge fruit trees. She kept going, only stopping when she neared the thick woods at the rear of the orchard that had been here for longer than she'd been alive. It was full of fruit trees in the middle of delivering a harvest. The smell of fresh growth was welcome after the dry stench of the warehouse.

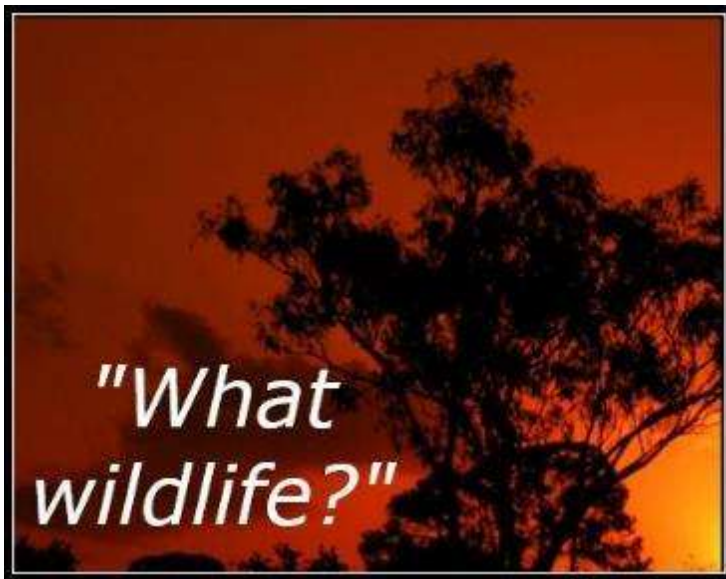
Amanda turned around to scan for Jerald and found him limping through the trees toward her. She didn't rub it in that she had beaten him, sensing he was one of those people who might get sore about it. Instead, she wiped sweat off her neck and picked a tree.

Jerald had been busy staring at her jiggling ass. He didn't care that she'd won the race. As she shimmied up a tall tree, he drew in a ragged breath, remembering that his body needed air. He followed her up slowly, trying not to dislodge branches that might give away their presence.

Amanda settled into the highest branch with thick coverage and leaned her head back. It was peaceful up here, despite the various hovering insects that had been genetically engineered to propagate crops.

Jerald picked a piece of fruit and munched, trying to hear what direction the searchers were headed. There were a lot of shouts, but none were coming their way yet. He looked up at Amanda. "This is the first place I would search."

Amanda shrugged. "Maybe they're scared of the wildlife."



Amanda pointed to a hole at the base of their tree. "Many lifeforms were brought to the station, for various purposes. Some of them went to the science labs, but most ended up out here to keep the soil fresh and the crops growing. Some of those

animals are very mean, to prevent the population from using them as a food source.”

Jerald sighed deeply. “We’re gonna die, again, right?”

Amanda giggled.

Both fugitives stilled as voices headed in their direction.

Amanda wasn’t surprised when the MOD members stopped at the edge of the orchard. From there, they couldn’t view through the tall trees, but she could see the two men clearly when the controlled air blew the foliage aside.

Jerald held his breath, ready to fight.

The men moved away from the orchard and back toward the town, calling for searches of all homes and businesses.

Jerald got comfortable, assuming they would wait until it got dark before they snuck into the center of the station.

Amanda surprised him by dropping from the tree and heading for the rear of the woods. When she began to circle around, he understood they were going to keep traveling even though there were searches ongoing.



“We could, but it will be hard to hide missing limbs and blood. Some of the animals under our feet are going to wake up when the lab switches the station to evening. I don’t want to be their dinner.”

Jerald moved faster, taking a place on her heels.

The view of homes and neat shops added more proof to Amanda’s previous words as they merged back into the populated area. Jerald noticed the houses were all wired for technology. There were no piles of garbage, of waste.

Amanda led them out of the woods and toward the main road that ran down the center of the industrial zone. The house she wanted was directly in the middle. There was no way to avoid being seen. It was shift change.

They blended into the surprised crowd.

Jerald didn't acknowledge the townspeople, but he kept an eye out for security and MOD members.

Amanda went to the only house with a fence around it and rang the rust-covered buzzer. While she waited, she leaned against the gate and scanned. It looked as though Eden Station was doing well. Some of the buildings had fresh paint or renovations, with scaffolding still in place or in the middle of being put up. It seemed as though the industrial area was going through a boom.

The speaker beeped at them.



Amanda pushed the button and leaned in to whisper something Jerald wasn't able to hear. A few seconds later, another buzzer sounded.

The gate clicked open.

The fugitives hurried inside, but it was obvious their presence was not going to be a secret. More

than two-dozen people were now staring, pointing, muttering.

“We’ll probably have to fight to get out of here.”

“I know.” Amanda led them to the main door of the small one-story house that was surrounded by a large yard of unkept blue grass.

Jerald was impressed and confused once again. He’d been told the scientists lived extravagant lives too. It appeared nothing was true. *I don’t know what to believe.*

Amanda reached back and put a hand on his arm. She didn’t like his misery.

Jerald gazed at her hand, grateful. *I can believe in the murderer. She’s too brutal to lie.*

Amanda turned as the door opened, smile coming across her face.

The tall, bald man grabbed Amanda and hugged her.

Jerald stared. He hadn’t considered that Amanda would have people who missed her. He assumed this was an uncle or maybe a brother. It was common for families to be split up according to their status. Non-breeders were not welcome in the wealthy areas. *Or so I was told. That may not be true either.*



The man backed up to allow them inside a rundown home filled, floor-to-ceiling, with devices and electronics. Only a small living area was clear, and it was filthy. Amanda recognized a few of the devices, but not many. This scientist was doing things not taught on or off the station. She should be familiar with this equipment, but she wasn't. That meant it wasn't legal.

Amanda pointed. "This is my partner, Jerald. This is Alex. He's a retired station scientist and my father—my real father."

Jerald gaped as the man shook his hand. "How is that possible?"

"Not all scientists are sterile." Amanda frowned. "Though the public doesn't know it. They think all the scientists are sterile and all the breeders produce more breeders, but neither is true."

“How does the Council keep the public from finding out?”

“They doesn’t know either, is what I suspect. Someone is keeping them in the dark.” Amanda stared at her real father, enjoying the feel of familiarity and comfort. She’d only spent rare, stolen hours with Alex, but she liked him.

“What happened to you?” Alexander frowned deeper. “Why did you get bleached?”

Amanda sighed. She was tired of that question. She almost told him it was good cover for being on the run; she chose to have a personal moment. She looked him in the eye. “I died, dad.”

Alexander started to chuckle.

“A spear went through my heart. I shouldn’t be here.”

Alexander assumed she was going crazy or starting a joke. He played along. “And then what happened?”

“I was brought back.” Amanda kept going.

Jerald watched the windows and listened. He hadn’t heard her story. As he put those pieces of her personal puzzle into place, he realized he’d assumed a lot of things about her that weren’t true. He’d also been perfect on enough of his guesses that he wasn’t in shock.

Alexander listened with half an ear, watching the couple keep track of each other without even seeming to know it. *They make a nice match. Too bad the council will never let them have peace. They hate happy unions. They like having ways to buy off*

their peers. What better way than blackmail disguised as friendship?

“And that’s how I ended up sitting here.” Amanda waited for her father to tell her she was nuts.

Alexander smiled. “I’m just glad you are. It’s nice to be able to see you.” *I’ll listen to her story later and see what I missed. The recording devices are all on. I need to burn them after I listen.* “I was about to have tea. Join me.”

Amanda nudged Jerald toward the rickety table and chairs, then took a seat across from Alex. She studied his movements, his delighted but nervous expression. After being betrayed, she couldn’t help the suspicion. His quick peeks at windows weren’t helping. She assumed he was being watched.

Jerald frowned. “We were told all science people are sterile.”

Alexander shrugged, shadows coming over his aged face. “Most of them are, but a few get lucky. President Roth stole Amanda’s mother from me. We were married.”

“And she was pregnant.”

“Yes.”

Jerald doubted Evie had left Alexander for a love match. “She needed power and a way to change the laws?”

“Yes, but she is only his wife. She has no real power of her own.”

“But she wants it.”

“Yes. Evie desires to be the leader of all worlds and people. She wants one government that answers to her and no one else.” Alexander smiled at Amanda. “I guess you have a lot of questions too.”

Amanda snorted. “Yeah. I assume the MOD is getting ready for another attack on the towers. They’ve lost all the battles since my trial. Do you know why?”

Alexander shrugged. “Once your mother took over communication for the Mod, she was no longer allowed to share details with me. I loved your mother, but not the Moderation Army that rules her every waking thought. She married your stepfather so the MOD would have a way into the towers. I haven’t spoken to her in years.”

Amanda wasn’t sure if she believed him or not, but it didn’t matter. She had to have help. “I need you to recalculate the trajectory on the asteroid headed for HOP-28. Give me coordinates to send it somewhere harmless.”

Amanda’s father frowned. “Why would I? It was a Council decision to remove that planet because it’s become a criminal base. The last rebel attack on this station came from HOP-28.”

Jerald scowled. “I’m from HOP-28. We’ve never attacked this station.”

“I don’t have time to explain why.” Amanda used her mother’s tone. “Mom said you would do it for her. Why not for me?”

Alexander sighed deeply as he waved a hand to activate his computer. “I can give you the

coordinates, but you have to get into a lab to program them in.”

“I’ll cover that next.” Amanda watched his hairy fingers fly over the keyboard. The feel of time running out was getting louder. “Hurry!”

Alexander scowled, but he didn’t protest as he typed faster. He changed the topic. “I heard you were killed.”

Amanda snorted. “HOP-28 is...special. You hear a lot of things.”

“It’s full of criminals.” Alexander finished the calculation and hit save. “I wasn’t there for the vote on that removal, but I agreed with it.”

“Did you know Amanda was there?!” Jerald was angry again.

Alexander nodded. “That was very sad. There was nothing I could do about it. I don’t have a say in Council matters or trials. I wasn’t even allowed to visit when she was here.”

“So you just let her die?!”

Alexander missed the wording. “I’m no longer on either side of the Council; I have no authority.”

“Alexander refused to take sides or play their games.” Amanda understood his choice. “If not for his formulas that they still use to calculate asteroid trajectories, he would have been eliminated by both sides.”

“That’s how you got assigned to a house instead of the dorm, right?”

Alexander nodded, impressed with Jerald’s intelligence.

Jerald stood up. "We have to get out of here."



To his surprise, Amanda rose and followed Jerald toward the door.

"Wait!" Alexander jumped up and grabbed Amanda's arm. "Take this." He handed her a communication drive that she shoved into her pocket. "Read the folder, not just the coordinates." He pointed to the rear of the home.



Voices sounded outside. The gate buzzer echoed.

“Let us in! You are harboring two dangerous fugitives! Open up!”

Alexander opened the main door. “Wait! That’s not—”

Laser fire erupted, hitting the thin walls of the house, piercing them.

Alexander crumpled to the floor.

“No!” Amanda ran to her father. Laser fire blasted into the house in rapid succession.

Jerald huddled over Amanda and her father, trying to protect them with his body.

Alexander pointed a bloody hand toward the back of the house again. “Get out!”

A loud whistle sounded.

Jerald grabbed Amanda’s arm and dragged her toward the exit, kicking and screaming.

Something large and heavy slammed into the front room and bounced. Hissing sounds echoed.

Jerald shoved Amanda out as the house exploded.

2

Amanda stood up in the smoke, trying not to cough.



She considered their situation for a few seconds, then pulled her gun. She swung around to face Jerald. “I need a new body.”

Voices and shouts rang out from all directions. A loud alarm began to blare from the street pole nearby. They were about to be surrounded and captured. Jerald slowly drew his gun. “Together?”

Amanda nodded, lifting her weapon. “We’ll do it on the count of two.”

Jerald made sure his aim was perfect and began to count. “One.”

She smiled, lending comfort. Dying was never easy. “Two.”

Guards came around the side of the house in time to see them both fire and fall.

The guards hurried toward the scene. “The fugitives are dead.”

“Cancel the alarms and searches.”

Moderation members watched from the growing crowd as security guards surrounded the scene. Nathan stared at the bodies, then the burning house. When he swung around and headed back toward the poor district, his men followed. Amanda was dead. Any information she'd had wouldn't be given to the Council now. *Guess the boss didn't need to come out here after all.*

One of the security guards waited until no one was looking and then he began searching the bloody bodies for loot. This was the best part of his job.

He found the information drive in Amanda's pocket and slid it into his own before standing up to notify the morgue transportation crew.

A few feet away, two very new people watched the excitement with blank expressions and tense bodies. Amanda had asked that they be brought back instantly to continue on.

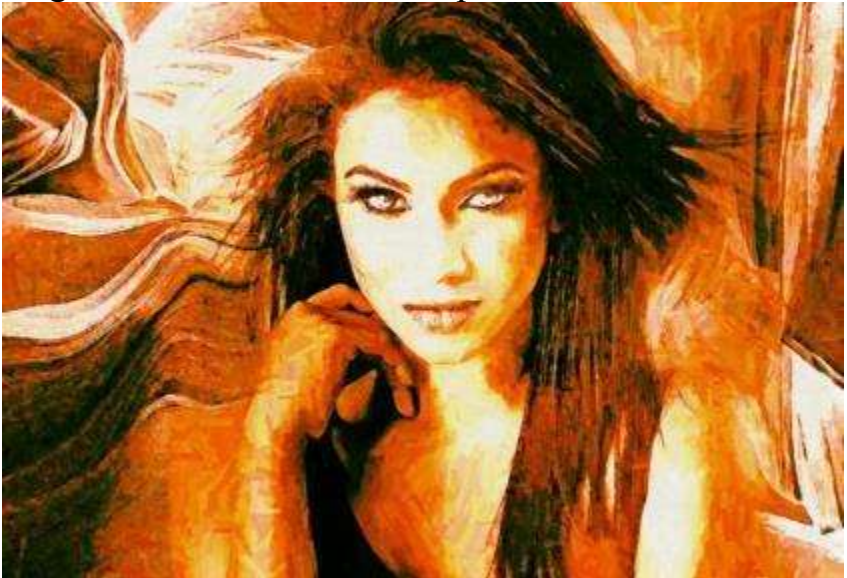
Only a smoking, burning frame of the house remained. Amanda thought of Alexander's twitchiness and wondered if the attack had already been planned. *Our arrival was just the excuse they needed.*

Thick smoke rolled over the witnesses as the fire crew arrived to put out the flames. The buildings here were crammed together. A massive fire on the station wasn't welcome by anyone, even the Mod.

She and Jerald watched the security guard steal the information drive. As he headed to his home, they followed. They needed to know whatever was on that drive. The enemy didn't.

3

“Why do I keep getting the same body? Your long hair and cute ass are a slap in the face.”



“No idea.” Amanda stared at Jerald over the body of the thief he'd just strangled. She pocketed the file drive. “You should run. I'll try to get the Creator to leave you alone.”

Jerald scowled, hand tightening on the gun he'd liberated. “I'm not going anywhere.”

Amanda grunted, pushing to her feet. “I knew that; I still had to say it.”

Dirty and cluttered, the thief's house was full of items he'd stolen while working, but none of them were things Amanda wanted or needed.

Jerald would have taken a change of clothes and some of the food, but it all stank, telling him the guard had a hoarding problem. He hadn't been selling these things. *He was stocking up in case things went bad.* Jerald realized the guard had probably known about the MOD being here. The man had wanted to be sure he would have supplies if things went to hell. When the MOD had lost the large attack on the towers, this guard hadn't been able to get rid of these supplies without the loyal security guards noticing, so it had sat here and begun to rot.

Jerald peered through the curtains of the dead guard's tiny home. "Do you think we were seen getting in here?"

Amanda took the currency and left the wallet with the man's ID. It wouldn't do her any good. "I doubt it or we'd be surrounded again." She caught a glimpse of herself in the window. "Damn. I'm me."

Jerald chuckled.

"No, really." She waved. "This is what I really looked like."

Jerald realized she would still be recognized. "That's not good."

"I think the Creator's almost out of energy." She shuddered. "We may not be able to come back again."

Jerald touched her wrist. “Then we’ll just have to go all the way this time.”

Amanda nodded, lips twitching. “But only after we finish the job.”

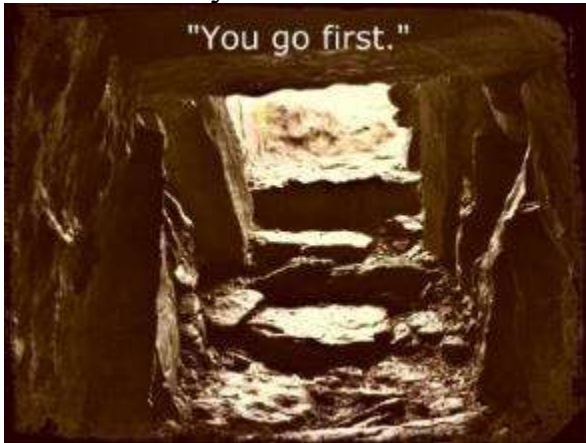
Jerald busted out laughing.

It sounded odd considering the circumstances. He snapped his mouth shut.

Amanda scanned the small home and the single window. Her mind clicked the oddity. “No one on Eden only has one exit.” She shuffled across the carpet, looking for a hatch.

Jerald joined her, checking the walls.

“Over here.” Amanda pried up a corner of the rug. She peered at the lettering on the smooth, round cap. “Sewer connector.” She grunted, turning the ring to unlock it. “Maybe it won’t be that bad.”



Jerald held the cap while Amanda dropped into the stinky darkness.

Chapter Seven
The Breeders

1

Amanda breathed in shallow gasps to handle the smell, pinpointing their location. She quickly went toward the faint glow of a red light.

The tunnel was two-feet wide and eight-feet tall. It connected to the sewers, giving them rank air, but also an unviewed passage under the main streets of this middle district. If not for the dim red lights on the bottom of each cap, it would have been easy to get lost down here.



Jerald assumed the lights were for workers. He closed the cap and caught up to her. He grabbed her hand. "I don't see well in the dark."

Amanda let him keep a hold of her, almost enjoying the contact. *How did that happen?*

"Is that stairs?"

"Yes." Amanda climbed them quickly, without slipping on the damp, rusting metal. "I wonder if public services knows how bad these ladders are."

Jerald didn't answer. He was listening for maintenance workers.

Amanda twisted the ring and pushed the cap up.

Jerald waited for her call, frowning when she didn't say anything.

Amanda climbed out, holding the cap for him. "We're in a storage shed." She spotted guards through the windows and put a finger over her lips.

Jerald left the cap open in case they needed to go back down.

Amanda eased toward the rear of the shed, scanning through the back, small window. It was too narrow to allow them an escape.

Jerald pointed at a rusting section of the wall, where part of it had crumbled into a pile of debris. "We can fit there."

Amanda went first, squeezing through on her knees. She slid into the shadows behind the shed.



Jerald took longer to get through. There was only an inch of space around his bigger body. He finally squirted through, rustling the metal. He hurried into the shadows, heart pounding.

They waited for sounds of pursuit.

Amanda finally nudged him. She led the way through the weeds that lined the back of the alley. She brought them out near a huge gate that was closed. No guards were here and the place had the feel of an abandoned post.

She stepped into the dim street light and resumed walking.

Jerald followed, head nervously swiveling from side to side.

“The dorms are coming up on your right.” Amanda thought he might find it interesting to see how the science side of Eden’s population lived.

Jerald turned his head and immediately frowned. The science dorm stretched into the distance, but it was one floor and a dingy gray that matched the robes and jumpers of the citizens who lived there. It was finally the class difference he'd been expecting since they'd landed on Eden.



Each person hurrying in and out of the multiple doors wore a patch that denoted what area they worked in. Jerald recognized the plumbers, janitors, and repair workers first. He assumed the gold triangles on shirts meant science or lab workers. He also spotted a few red exclamation marks. “What are those?”

“Public services.” Amanda led him by the dorm, not peering through the glass walls like he now was. She'd seen all this while growing up. Nothing had changed in the time she'd been away.

Jerald was horrified by the glass walls of the dorm. If not for the furniture inside, all of it dark brown and old-looking, the people would have had no privacy at all. As it was, he caught glimpses of women changing and men showering in the tiny rooms. “Where are the wealthy science people?”

“They live in houses, like my father. You’ll see more of those as we walk through, but most science residents prefer the dorm. They want to be with their own kind.”

Jerald thought it seemed like a place where rebellions would grow. “Who set it up like that?”

“It was a trade-off vote. At least that’s what we’ve been taught in classes. The science population agreed to live in the dorm as long as the breeders agreed to the fertility tests during puberty. The scientists also made it one of their conditions that the wealthy could have whatever setup they wanted—they just can’t tell anyone.”

“That’s when they split you guys up, right?”

“Yes. If a breeder is sterile, they have to go live in the dorm. Once there, the scientists welcome them openly and convert them.”

“Are they allowed to see their old family again?”

“Of course. They have weekly visits, but most of them refuse those visits after a few months of being...welcomed by the scientists.”

“Why do they have to be separated?”

“So each side will keep fighting for their goals without weakening on laws because a family

member is on the other side.” Her voice lowered. “And it doesn’t work.”

“If it did, there wouldn’t be rebels, right?”

Amanda nodded. “There also wouldn’t be such a discrepancy in population numbers.”

Jerald wiped the scowl off his face. “More breeders?”

“Just the opposite. If the scientists ever revolt, they’ll be able to overrun the towers and the Council buildings.”

“Which is why the Council gives in to most of their demands?”

“Yes. The breeders fear the scientists.”

“I never knew.”

“No one does. If not for my mother being married to the President, I wouldn’t know it either.” Amanda lifted her hood and walked straight over the small bridge and into the breeder section of the station.

Jerald followed, head again swiveling for threats. “Shit. What do we do now?”

“Act like we belong here.” Amanda assumed the chirpy tones of a breeder. “That’s the asteroid center. Wait until you see it!”



Jerald was startled by her change, but he managed to keep his face blank. “That’s where they send them?”

“Don’t be silly. The scientists do that somewhere else. This is just a lab.” Amanda grinned. “Come on. We can get inside for a tour.”

The two towers reached high into the sky and gleamed with beckoning colors and lights. It proclaimed safety and comfort waited inside those heavily guarded fortresses.

The asteroid lab next to the towers was also tall and lit up, but it was a sterile gray that matched the few employees coming and going from it. The large group of people in front were all scientists. Jerald assumed they were on a break by the way they kept glancing up at the clock above the main door.

Jerald finally caught on. He breathed a sigh of relief. “There’s my tower! I’m safe!”

Amanda nodded, scanning the six-story high-rises that were behind the asteroid center. “I’m glad I found you. It’s not safe out there for our kind.”

Jerald fell deeper into the role; several people had spotted their entry. “Are you sure? Breeders aren’t safe anywhere.”

“We’ll get you settled into the tower and you’ll see it’s different for our kind here.”

Jerald offered her his arm. “Shall we?”

Amanda took it, leading them right by the tower guards.

Jerald stared at the glass-front building in the center. “Can we go there too? I’ve never seen the view from that high.”

Amanda patted his arm. “Of course. Would you like to do that first?”

It was clear that he was a new and she was his escort. The guards stopped watching them and went back to scanning the entrances for more fugitives.

“I would. Sorry about getting lost back there.”

“You’re fine. Just ask a sentry next time. They’re here to protect the breeders and keep out the lower levels. If you miss a boundary line, ask someone.”

“I thought the guards might get upset.”

“Nah. They’re great. It’s the scientists and their kin you have to watch out for.”

Guards and citizens around them nodded, showing support of her words.

Amanda tugged her cloak and hood tighter, feigning cold. “Let’s get inside. I still don’t like the wind, no matter how they recreate it. My hair doesn’t stand a chance.”

The chattering couple moved into the atrium of the tall lab a few seconds later, strolling as if they belonged there.

Jerald suddenly wondered if they did. “Are you really a breeder?”

Amanda nodded, glad he’d whispered. “You?”
“No idea.”

“There’s an adult test, but only if you’re looking for a new job or a marriage.”



The reception area held one tired-looking woman in gray behind a cluttered desk. She glanced at them as they entered, scanned their expensive clothes, and frowned before going back to her typing. The rest of the rounded office area was empty except for the occasional guard who also scanned them, sneered, and glanced away. Jerald

understood this was a science area and breeders were tolerated but not welcome.

Amanda took them to the elevator, voice lifting again. “We’ll go to the very top so you can stand on the invisible balcony. It’s so scary!”

As soon as the elevator doors shut, Jerald braced on the handrail. He appeared like any other new tower resident being impressed by the technology here. Amanda now saw him as a clever actor who would help her bring down the Council. “Thank you.”

Jerald flashed a bitter smile at her. “Even though I didn’t have a choice?”

“Yes. I couldn’t do this alone. I know that now.”

Jerald didn’t answer. He’d been raised to do bad deeds, but he’d never doubted it was right. Until now. “There are a lot of people on this station—innocent people.”

“I know.”

“And?”

“And nothing. We can do it and free their souls, or we can do nothing and let them remain ruled by the Council. There isn’t another choice.”

“What if we ran away together? The Creator’s tired. We might survive.”

Amanda sighed as the elevator stopped on the top floor. “I’m in this all the way. That asteroid will be stopped and the AR project will be ended.”

“Okay.” Jerald hadn’t expected another answer, but he was scared. *I don’t care if I die, but I don’t want all these innocent people to pay for it.*

Amanda led them onto the empty balcony, pointing and smiling, but her words matched his grim mood. “If you can think of a way to spare them and still get our mission done, I’ll listen.”

He grunted. “I’m trying.”

“Good. In the meantime, see how differently the breeders live. This is what made me who I am.”

Jerald saw the outer wall had been an illusion. Only that first layer was glass. Inside, the building was a fortress of observation and security. Huge screens below showed every inch of the breeder compound. “They have a barber!”



Amanda nodded, letting him do the scan at his own pace. She had faith that he would spot the atrocity.

“I see a florist...and a hardware store! There hasn’t been a tool supply shop in...” His tone dropped into ice. “Is that a butcher?”

Bingo. Amanda led them away from the center, to get a view from the right side. “Yes. I wonder where that fresh meat comes from...”

Jerald scanned the other side and found a small farm with several animals. “Herds!”

Amanda pinched his arm. “Not so loud!”

Jerald barely noticed. The deer and cows below looked healthy, unlike the images they’d all been shown of herd animals in space. *We were lied to so we would eat that paste and the Council would have the fresh meat.* “I’ve seen enough.”

“One more side to go.” Amanda took him to the railing by several doors. “Check out those tanks.”

Jerald stiffened in shock. “Are those real?”

“Yes.”

Jarred stared at the fish shifting inside the tall, round tanks that resembled wide drain pipes on their side. “Fish can’t survive in space.”

Amanda snorted. “After years of seeing this and hearing the lies we’re fed in school, my brain clicked on.”

“I thought you said there wasn’t slavery here.”

“There isn’t. The poor people know the breeders have more; they’re still grateful to be on this station, to have a job, food, a home away from the space raiders.”

“It’s not right.”

“That there are separate classes and rules?” She opened the door closest to them and held it so he could enter.

“The lies. If they told the truth, the poor people would have farms and tanks too!”



“Would they?” Amanda shrugged. “Or would they destroy it for all of us by demanding those animals be released? Or all slaughtered and shared evenly?”

“That doesn’t matter—fairness and truth do.”

“So all these breeders should live like the poor people.”

“Yes. I mean, no. Why can’t the poor live like this?”

“Good question. They have brains and brawn. What’s holding them back?”

“The wealthy, who lie to them all the time.”

“So the poor have no responsibility to discover things for themselves? It should be given to them even though they didn’t earn the knowledge?”

“You sound like a breeder.”

Amanda took a seat in the neat office as Jerald shut the door. “Okay, let’s do it the other way around. Who came first? The poor or the rich?”

“The poor. They became rich.”

“Exactly.”

Jerald frowned. “Wait a minute. I didn’t mean that.”

“It came out of your mouth.” Amanda took pity on him. “They’re both right and they’re both wrong. There is no simple answer that makes everyone happy.”

Jerald stared at her. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you still think we can have a happy ending. Even if we complete our mission, humanity will just start it all over again. Happy endings are a myth.”

“Then why are we even doing this at all?!”

Amanda let out a miserable breath. “Because we’ve only ever known those two sides. I’m going to give humans a third option.”

“What’s that?”

“No Creator, no space living, and no blowing up experiments. I believe the HOP worlds were corrupted before they began, due to flawed data that said we had to have a Creator at all.”

“But we do. You and I know that for sure.”

Amanda shrugged. “Will we still after we kill them all? The planets haven’t made new people for eons. We’re our own gods now.”

“But...but...” Jerald didn’t know what to say to such a logical answer. “That’s blasphemy.”

“I know. And yet here we are, working for a Creator who plans to kill all humans because we are an accidental side effect. We didn’t leave the Creator’s light to wander the darkness. We were never bathed in that glow. We’ve always been outcasts. That’s why we’re so evil.”



The asteroid lab was round, clean, and filled with desks, monitors, and equipment that Jerald had never seen before. He hoped Amanda knew how to enter the codes. “Don’t you need a password?”

“No. The information drive Alexander gave me has his ID number embedded.”

“Will it be accepted? He’s dead now.”

Amanda felt pain again at those words. She nodded. “Deaths take weeks to register on this station and computer codes are only updated monthly.” Amanda stiffened. “Get in the closet. Guards are coming.”

Jarred went where she pointed, mulling her words even though they might be caught here. *A world without religion to give people an excuse to kill. I wonder what that would be like...*

Jerald froze as Amanda squeezed into the closet with him. The narrow space only allowed two bodies pressed tight, standing.

The main door opened. A few seconds later, it shut and locked.

Jerald scowled at her. “We’re trapped.”

Amanda nodded, enjoying the feel of human contact. “The lab is closing for the day.”

Jerald understood they had to wait and relaxed.

Amanda stayed tense, listening. Any number of cameras could have captured them coming in and not leaving. She was counting on the guards being put at ease because of their reported deaths. “They’ll do checks on all the rooms before the final lock.”

Jerald ran a hand down her arm and felt her shiver. *If I’m going to die, I want her one time before I go.*

Jerald leaned against the wall and pulled her into his arms.

“Mmm...” Amanda let him wrap her up tight, eyes shutting. “This is nice. Don’t ever do it again.”

He frowned in the darkness. “If you like it, why can’t I do it again?”

“Because I like it. This is just a job for me. When it’s over, I don’t want to miss you.”

“Same.” Jerald sighed. “Can I kiss you?”

Amanda tilted her head up. “I thought you’d never ask.”



Pleasure flew over Jerald’s skin as their lips met. He clutched her hips and pushed against her.

Amanda popped the button on her pants and let them fall. She arched against his hand as his fingers found that magic nub and lit her up.

Jerald used his free hand to lower his own pants, lust flowing thickly.

Amanda leaned against the wall, legs spreading as his fingers rotated in delicious circles. Her mother had told her how to block these feelings during moments like this, but Amanda refused to use those tricks. She wanted this memory.

Jerald claimed her with a wild thrust, drawing a low cry from her and a stunned moan from himself. He mashed them together and froze, waiting.

Amanda was ashamed and delighted when the pain sent her need to a new level. She squirmed against him.

Jerald understood. He pinched her nub with one hand and squeezed a nipple with the other.

Amanda's climax sent scalding liquid over both their thighs.

Jerald grabbed her by the hair and kissed her as he shoved in deep and banged against her until he lost control.

Amanda held him as the spasms twitched and jerked his body. She shut her eyes and stored the good moment in her mind. She didn't want to forget a single second of it.

2

Amanda activated the lab computer and stuck in the information drive. She waited nervously for it to load while Jerald watched the door. "We should have a few minutes before the next patrol."

Jerald inhaled deeply, loving the smell she'd left on him. "How did we go from enemies to lovers so fast?"

She shrugged, typing now. "We died a few times. Maybe that helped."

Jerald chuckled, mood odd. "I wish we had an after."

Amanda sighed, clicking on the trajectory controls. "I do too. I'm not the same person I was." She entered the information from the drive, not reading the notes yet. She wanted to get the coordinates in before the guards came back.

Jerald watched her fingers fly over the keyboard. "Do you love anyone?"

Amanda looked over at him; she slowly shook her head.

Jerald sighed. "I didn't think so." He turned back to watching for guards.

"I've got it." She clicked the final setting. "Once we trash this office, they'll have no way to redirect it."

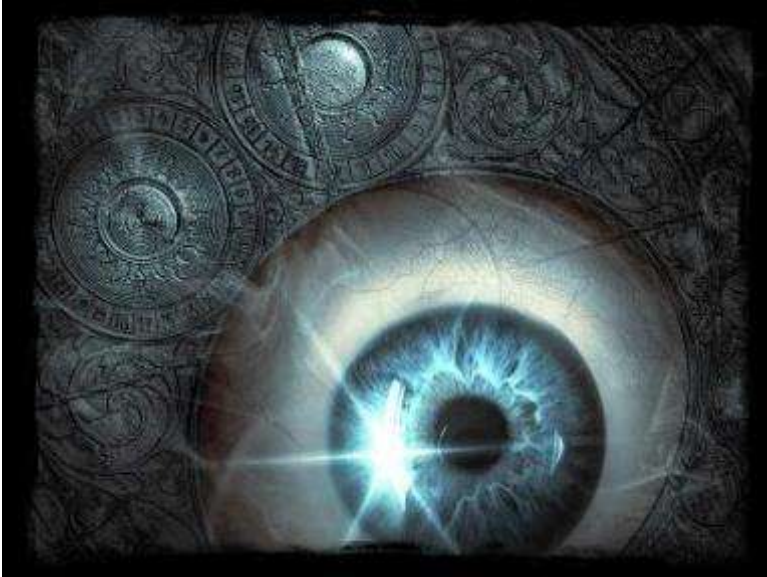
Jerald joined her, watching the simulator line up on the asteroid flying toward HOP-28. Her words of this just being a normal lab had clearly been a lie.

"Alexander said to check the folder on this drive..." Amanda opened the first one.

"It's empty." She tried the next and found the same.

Jerald leaned against her warmth. It was almost certain that they were going to die again; he was dreading it.

“This one has a single file...” Amanda opened it. They read it together.



I'm being watched all the time now. I've tried to get this information out, but everyone I give it to comes up dead or goes missing. I'm not sure why I keep trying. This will be the last time, though. They won't let me live much longer.

-Alexander

48% of all scientists are now breeders. We have been sending our kids to the breeder towers for three decades in an effort to make the council one-sided. The President is one of us. He buries the ten-year reports on fertility, or changes them where he needs to.

The scientists want to keep searching for our origins so science always has a place, a voice, a

vote, exists. We don't want recovery, so we lie about the rates in the science side.

The breeders want to go back onto planets so they can breed faster, heal their DNA, and eliminate all seats controlled by sterile people with different ideals.

There is only one way this can end; America is about to go into a new civil war that will surely destroy all of us this time.

“I never would have guessed.” Amanda finished checking the other folders, but they were empty.

Jerald felt the building vibrate. “I think it’s launching.”

The station shuddered as the top of the lab opened, preparing to fire.

“Where do they get the asteroids?”

“Collision sites are easiest because no one notices a hunk of rock missing. They store them in capsules around the station. Conveyers bring them into place.”

The building shuddered again; a giant burst of fire flamed over the front of the tower.



“Look out!” Jerald couldn’t help his shout. Watching people outside be burned by the blast was awful. He didn’t care if they were scientists or breeders, just that they were people. “Why didn’t you warn them?!”

“We would have been caught if I’d shown compassion.”

Jerald glowered at her. “You’re not a good person.”

“Nope.” She stood, hand going to her gun. “I’m not evil, either. I’m a normal human.”

Jerald couldn’t argue that point. He watched Amanda put her gun on the counter and realized they weren’t making an escape attempt.

Alarms kicked on, blaring through the station.

Amanda grabbed the chair and began smashing the controls.

Jerald joined her, running through his lives in his mind. *This is it. My last few moments of breathing. Am I sorry?*

Jerald slammed the chair into a computer bank, causing shorts and sparks. *No. I've helped stop the destruction of the Creator. He may not think that's a big deal for one simple life, but I do.* Jerald dropped the chair. He grabbed Amanda and kissed her.

They were locked in that embrace as guards flooded the lab and began beating on them with fists and clubs.

“Damn terrorists!” The guard pulled his gun.

“No!” Jerald shoved Amanda out of the way.

Jerald took the hit. He sank to his knees as blood bloomed on his chest.



Amanda stared, hearing someone scream. *Is that me?* She snapped her mouth shut.

The noise ended.

Amanda let the guards take her into custody, not looking away from Jerald as he died. Pain ripped into her heart. She gasped for air. *I guess I was wrong. I do love someone.*

She opened her mouth and screamed all the way to the holding cell.

Chapter Eight
The Enemy

1

“P lease. Please.” Amanda ignored the guard stripping her. “Please. Please.”

There was no answer.

Amanda donned the prisoner uniform, eyes clenched shut. “Please!”

“Stop begging!” The guard struck her in the head. “You’ll get no mercy from us!”

Amanda slid to the floor. “I helped you!”

The guards began kicking her and slapping, zapping her with the electric batons.

Amanda screamed. “You owe me!”

Time slowed as the Creator responded. *I owe you nothing, child. You are a murderer. Face your punishment alone.*

“I helped you! I saved you!”

That was your mistake, not mine. The connection broke.

Amanda huddled on the damp floor, bleeding and moaning. “You knew. You knew he couldn’t be trusted.”

The guards hauled her to the cot in the cell and secured her bonds to the rail. One of them slapped

her as he walked by. “My wife was burned! If they don’t execute you, I will!”

Amanda started laughing hysterically. “I can’t die! I can’t die!”

The guards were chilled. They locked the cell door; most of them went to help with the rescue and recovery efforts going on at the lab.

The jail here in the Council building was a long hall of cells that all held a cot and a pot, like on the Russian ship. A guard stood at each end of the hallway; both those men glared, eyes spitting hatred for her betrayal.

Amanda kept laughing and crying, mind broken. *God betrayed me. I saved him, and he left me here to die. For real this time.* Amanda’s rage flashed over the room.

Electronics groaned uneasily.

Amanda stilled. Her mind snapped one thought into place. “But I’m not dead yet and until I am, I’m can’t give up...” Amanda rolled over, groaning again as a rib shouted in pain. *I burnt his wife. I deserved the kicks and slaps. I’ll spare him when it starts.*

Amanda limped to her feet, going to the edge of her tether. Cameras swung continuously along the hall. Amanda saw the other cells were empty. Being the only prisoner was unfortunate, but she’d known this would get ugly when they were captured.

Her heart clenched again. *I miss him already.*

She banged on the door. “Hey! I want to see the President!”

“Like that will happen.” The guard who’d slapped her kicked the cell door. “Shut up!”

Amanda glared at him. “All breeder prisoners get a last request. I want to talk to the President!”

Another guard frowned at her. “The President is dead. He was murdered three nights ago by your Russian friends. His wife was taken captive by the very people you support!”

Amanda sucked in air. “We pass that title through heredity...”

“So?”

“I’m Amanda Roth. As his only child, that job now belongs to me. Here’s my first order: Get the old lab back online and send three ARs to HOP-28!”

Time slowed again.

Amanda huffed as the guards stared at her in shocked recognition. “Too late now. You betrayed me. I have no mercy.”

The guards looked at each other as she continued to rant and talk to someone who wasn’t there.

“Is it possible?”

“I thought she was sent to a criminal planet.”

“Looks like she made it back.” The angry guard pointed at the screen, where the computer was giving them the results from scanning her. “She’s Amanda Roth, born right here on Eden Station.”

Amanda ignored the whispered pleas from the Creator now filling her head. She sank back down on the cot, mind going cold as she worked on a new plan to get what she needed.

I'll bring him back for you...
Amanda swallowed the pain.



Never. Die like you were meant to. Your imperfect accidents will rule in your place. “People know I’m here. You can’t hide it. Go tell the Council that Clifford Roth’s heir has returned.”

“Say that again.”

The guard cleared his throat. “We have Amanda Roth in custody. She’s claiming the right to rule by our law of inheritance.”



The Council members all turned to stared at Miller, who was sitting in that Presidential seat. They’d been about to vote on who would lead them now. Miller had been so sure of his win that he’d already claimed the chair.

Kate Pruett stood up, gesturing angrily. “Amanda Roth is long dead!”

The guard hated his job at this moment. “The computer verified it. Amanda Roth is here, in our cell.”

“That’s not possible!” Kate didn’t want Miller to lead them, but she wasn’t about to be tricked into giving the seat to a copycat rebel.

“Maybe it is. We were told she was killed on HOP-28, but we didn’t insist on seeing a body.” Jack shrugged at Kate’s scowl, almost elated this had happened. Without it, Miller had been sure to be voted in. He’d won over enough of the Council to get the win. “If the computer verified it, then it’s her.”

“This is a trick.” Kate wasn’t willing to give up so easily. “You are tricking us somehow!”

Jack motioned to the guard. “Bring her in here. We’ll hear what she has to say.”

The guard hurried off, ignoring Kate’s anger.

“No! We make the choices now!”

“Not if she’s the President’s daughter.” Recovering, Miller stood up and looked around at the other Council members. “Our laws are clear. We follow the hereditary right to rule. Even if she’s a convicted killer, she’s our new leader.”

Silence fell through the room as everyone began to consider what that could mean for the future. Amanda Roth had clearly hated the breeders; she’d killed their heirs. It was impossible to guess how she might handle them.

Miller was hoping Amanda’s loyalties were to the scientists, but he suspected she was responsible

for destroying their asteroid lab. As far as he knew, they only had one prisoner. *It has to be her. That means she hates the scientists too.* Miller moved to stand in front of Kate. He needed the Pruett on his side and rumor said she could be easily swayed with death and power. “There’s a way for us to retain control if she’s still with the rebels. It will mean lying, a removal, and then rezoning Council duties for greater personal gain.”

“I always lie. Removals are what we spend most of our time deciding.” Kate’s eyes narrowed. “But you want to change our governing laws.”

Miller shrugged. “Maybe we won’t have to, but if she’s not loyal to the system, we may need to.”

Steven slowly nodded. “Do we have any video of what she’s been doing since she got back?” Steven looked around the chamber. “Maybe there’s something we can use against her.”

“Good idea.” Kate hurried to scan the records. “Computer, bring up all recordings on the station of Amanda Roth in the last year.”

“Computing... What dates?”

Kate added it. “The last forty-eight hours.”

“There is one voice recording for Amanda Roth. Shall I play it?”



“Yes.” Kate and everyone listened to a girl’s familiar voice greeting someone she introduced as her father.

“I died, dad.”

Alexander started to chuckle at her joke.

“A spear went through my heart. I shouldn’t be here.”

Alexander assumed she was going crazy or playing a joke. He played along. “And then what happened?”

“I was brought back.”

“She isn’t really Clifford’s daughter!” Miller was relieved. “We can challenge her claim.”

“Actually, Clifford was her registered father. They both acknowledged the relationship. She lived

with him for more than ten years.” Tyra was well-read on their rules. “By our law, she is his heir.”

“Damn!”

The other members understood Miller didn’t want to give up the job he’d almost had, but they ignored him in favor of listening to Amanda’s story about making contact with the Creator.

“I was brought back.”

2

Amanda stepped into the council chambers wearing a copy of the prison uniform she’d been wearing the first time. She lifted her head as the guard pushed her into the center of the room and retreated.

Kate wanted to confirm how it was possible. “Where did you buy a bleach-out while on the run? That’s the only way you could have hidden this long.”

“I didn’t. The Creator gave me a new body.”



Amanda could tell by the silence that none of them believed her. She also didn't detect any surprise. They'd known she was going to say something like that. *How?*

Amanda remembered her father's words of being watched. *They have the recordings from Alexander's house and they don't believe it. Nothing I say on that topic will get through. They've already made up their minds.* Amanda held out her bound hands. "Release me. I'm your new President."

"You are a convicted killer." Jack pointed at her. "And you were about to be convicted again for treason!"

Amanda shrugged. "So? There are no laws against it." She kept her arms extended. "The minute my father died, I became your leader.

Release me and then we'll discuss the changes I'm making." She raised her voice to be heard over the mutters and comments. "Or should I tell the guards to kill you all for refusing a direct order?"

The guards in the room tensed, not sure which way they would go if she did give that order. Even though she hadn't been sworn in yet, she was right; she was the leader now. Many of the ten personal guards exchanged nervous glances and mutters.

Miller held up a hand. "Quiet!" He glared at Amanda as the others fell silent. "You don't have the authority to order our deaths until you're voted in. Bluffing won't save you."

Amanda laughed, sending icy chills down the backs of the council. When she stopped, her face lost all expression. "I never bluff. My father didn't use his power. He believed in compromise. I'm not like him. I do things *my way*."

"You're a traitor!" Kate slapped the desk with her polished nails, snapping one off. It flew across the floor and landed by Amanda's feet.

Amanda stepped on it, crushing it into powder. "The Russians are coming. Deal with me or deal with them."

"The Russians?"

"She's lying!"

"We can't trust her!"

Amanda thought of the brief blur she'd spotted. *Enemy ships!* Amanda lowered her hands, sighing. "Check the last calls that came into this station."



Miller went to join Jack as the man checked the logs. “Remember what I said. Play along; attempt to make friends with her. She needs us as much as we need her.”

“We don’t need her.” Jack scowled toward the calmly waiting girl. “We need to kill her.”

“If the Russians are coming, she might be able to talk them down or at least distract them long enough for our Space Force to fight.”

“Do you think she’s telling the truth?” Jack wasn’t convinced

“Yes.” Miller was. “Somehow, she came back here. Now that she’s stopped the asteroid we sent to HOP-28, she might even be on our side. Afterall, she is a breeder.”

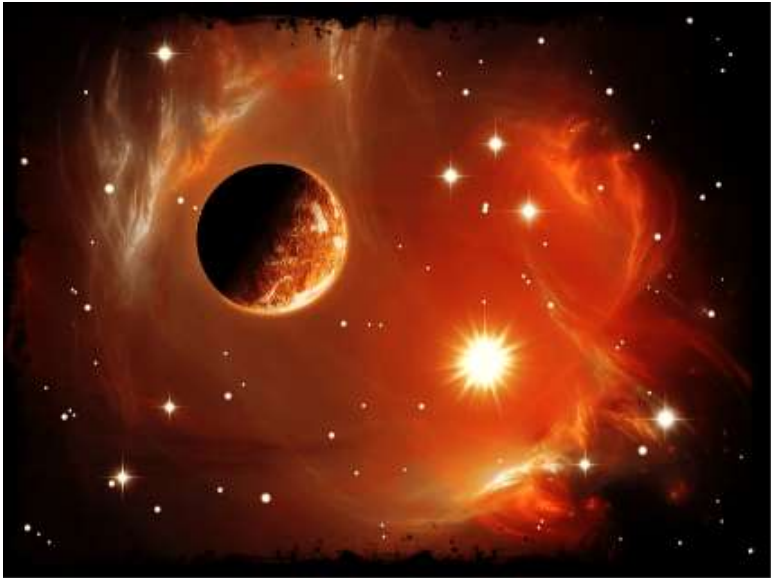
Amanda had been listening to their lowly spoken conversation with her sharper ears. She

cleared her throat. “My first order after you swear me in will be to open the old asteroid center and send another one to HOP-28.”

Everyone stared in shock.

Amanda shrugged. “I made contact with the Creator. He wants us all gone.”

“Even if I believed that, which I don’t, why does HOP-28 matter?”



Amanda’s face lit up with fury as she answered Steven. “The Creator *is* HOP-28. The planets are alive, and they hate us.”

“It is the Russians!” Jack pointed. “The last call was from a Russian ship. The voice recordings have been identified as Evie Roth.”

“Oh, yeah, my mother wasn’t kidnapped by the Russians. She’s working with them now.” Amanda moved toward the Presidential seat, ignoring their

cries and accusations. “She killed my father. I want to know when she’s captured.”

Alarms activated up throughout the station, blaring a warning. People fled to their homes.

Amanda sat in the Presidential chair and leaned back, shutting her eyes. “Secure this station and do it now.”

Jack ignored the other Council members who were screaming at her and each other. He hit the button on his console, activating the speaker system. “This is the Security Office. We are under attack! Go to your shelters and prepare for security to defend you. I repeat: we are under attack! Seek shelter immediately.” He let off the button and looked at Amanda for her next order.

The chamber slowly fell silent.

“My mother will want to negotiate. While we’re busy with her, I’d bet a small army of ships will come up behind us. They’ll hide behind the dead moon and attack once she calls it.” Amanda made a quick choice. “Let her land, then order the Space Force to wipe out anyone in orbit around us. That ten minutes might be enough to give us the advantage. Bring my mother here to answer for her crimes. We’ll broadcast it so everyone knows what really happened.”

“Then you’ll execute her?”

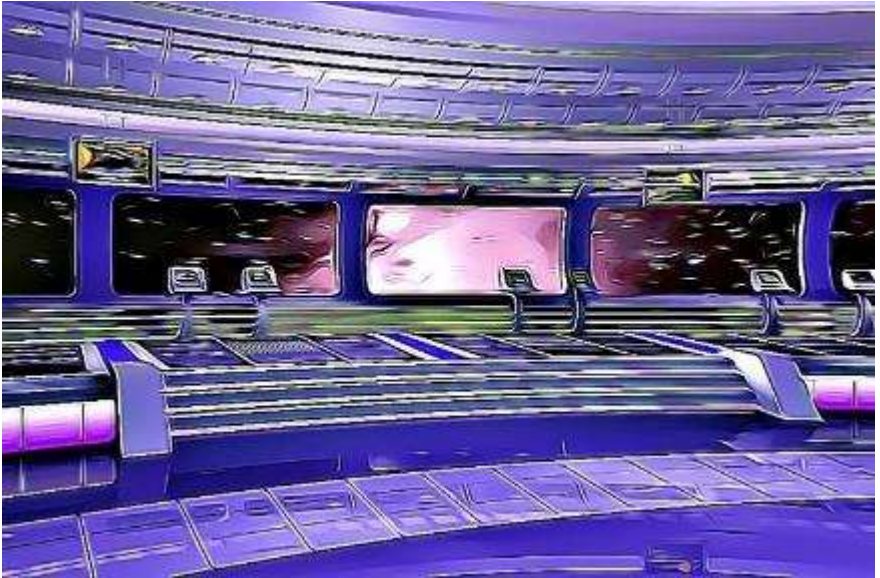
Amanda nodded at Kate’s surprised horror. “That’s what a President does.”

“The ship is hailing us.” Miller also looked at Amanda for orders.

Amanda nodded at him.

Kate stomped over to the girl. “You’re not in charge!”

Amanda stared back coldly. “Neither are you, unless you change the law.” She smirked as the woman paled. “I see what’s in your heart. It won’t work. The Creator wants us all gone. Your schemes and plans won’t sand up to that.” Amanda gestured. “Open the frequency; listen to the sound of the first attack before it starts.”



Jack hit the button. “You are in a territory of the United States Federation. Leave our air space at once.”

“This is Evie Roth. I took over this ship. Let me land!”

All eyes turned to Amanda as part of her story was proven.

Amanda waved at Jack.

Jack understood she didn't want her mother to know she was here. "You are cleared to land at space port C. Dock, remove your weapons, and exit the aircraft. Security will meet you."

"Thank you! You don't know what I've been through!"

"Calm down, Mrs. Roth. You're safe now." Jack turned off the communications link.

Amanda flashed a small smile at him. "You're a great liar. I have a need for that."

Jack flushed but didn't respond. He stared at her between duties, imagination running wild.

Kate stepped in front of Amanda again, jealous. "We have to vote on your leadership and then you have to be sworn in."

Amanda shrugged. "I wouldn't take long to get it done. As soon as my mother signals that she's with the Council, the Russians will attack, and maybe the MOD army as well, if they're still loyal to her. I assume she's the bomber that kills all of us."

Miller faced the rest of the council members. "I vote yes. What about the rest of you?"

"Yes."

"Hell, no!"

"No."

"No."

"Yes."

"Yes."

"No."

“Yes.”

“No.”

Miller grunted. “It’s tied.”

“I claim temporary control under the law of ties. I acknowledge the 24-hour time limit.” Amanda held out her bound wrists. “I want a recount immediately after my words are further proven.”

Miller grudgingly came forward and began untying her. “So be it.”

Amanda rubbed her wrists and leaned back. “Is the Space Force ready?”

Jack nodded. “As soon as the alarms went off, they went to their stations.”

“Has my mother docked?”

Jack checked the monitor. “Yes. Security is bringing her here now.”

“Tell the Space Force to open fire on the remaining ships right now. Don’t give them a chance to hit us first.”

“That will start a war!” Kate had no faith that the Space Force could win that fight.

“We’re already in a war. If you let them hit first, they’ll take out our power.” Amanda shrugged, eyes shutting. “It’s your families they’ll execute while you watch.”

“I won’t do it!”

“I will.” Miller joined Jack at the monitor. “Give the order to open fire.” Miller glared at the other council members. “We’ve been talking about an opportunity to remove the Russian threat for years—this is our chance.”

The rest of the council fell silent or nodded, realizing he was right.

Miller turned back toward Amanda. “And if it goes wrong, we have someone to blame.”

Kate gestured at the stunned guards. “Put her back in her cell until the fight is over.”



Amanda didn't resist. She listened to the alarms change to a serious bray that alerted the residents of a coming event. The station shuddered as bay doors for the Space Force opened for the first time in decades. They did all their training in simulators. She couldn't remember the last time they'd had to fight, but she did recall the mission to remove space junk that would have hit the station. She'd been a toddler, but her mother's anger had been clear and memorable. *Mother wanted the station destroyed even back then. She's never been loyal to the breeders or to the scientists.*

Amanda sat on the hard cot while the guard locked her in. She didn't respond to his silent questions or his fear. The Space Force had to defeat the rebels in the Russian ships. If they couldn't, there was nothing she could do.

Amanda concentrated, wondering if the Creator was still observing. The asteroid would be sent soon, though it would probably lose its straight course a bit. There was even a chance it would miss. The old asteroid lab had been shut down when the new one was built. It hadn't been updated since then, but it should still be enough to destroy HOP-28.

You are evil!

Amanda nodded, smirking a little at the panic in that communication. "I am what you've forced me to be."

We will come to an agreement.

Sure. You agree to let humans live and leave us alone.

Never!

"Then we can't come to an agreement. That's all I want." Amanda's mind flashed Jerald.

She sighed. "That's not enough. What good is having him returned if we all die in a week or a month?"

Silence fell in her mind. Amanda shut her eyes and laid down, eager to rest. Even if she died during this attack, the asteroid would still remove the Creator and humanity would be safe again for a while. She assumed the other planet Gods would then attack, but she'd figured out the Creator had to be in agreement. Once the Creator was gone, the rogue Gods would be almost powerless.

“Unless they elect a new leader. I don’t know how that works.” Amanda shrugged. “I know they aren’t as strong without you. It’s the best I can do.”

That survival spirit did come from me.

Amanda didn’t answer. She knew she was fulfilling her engineering by trying to save her people, but she couldn’t show a weakness now. She had a slim advantage that she needed to hold onto. If she gave in, all humans would be wiped from existence.

3

“Let go of me!” Evie struggled against the guard as she was brought into the Council chamber. “I’m the wife of your President. How dare you treat me this way!”

Evie’s appearance was wild compared to how cool and calm her daughter had been. The Council members frowned at her. Thanks to Amanda’s accusations, they heard the false indignation in her protests.

The guard took her to the center of the chamber and let go, but he stayed close to her.

“Evie Roth.” Jack stood up. It was his job to question her. “Where have you been?”

Evie tensed. “I was kidnapped from the diplomatic mission by rebels. The Russians rescued me and brought me home.” Evie scanned the disbelieving faces, heart thumping. “I saw the Space Force launching. What’s going on?”

“We’re eliminating the Russians.” Jack studied her.

Evie paled. “You can’t do that!”

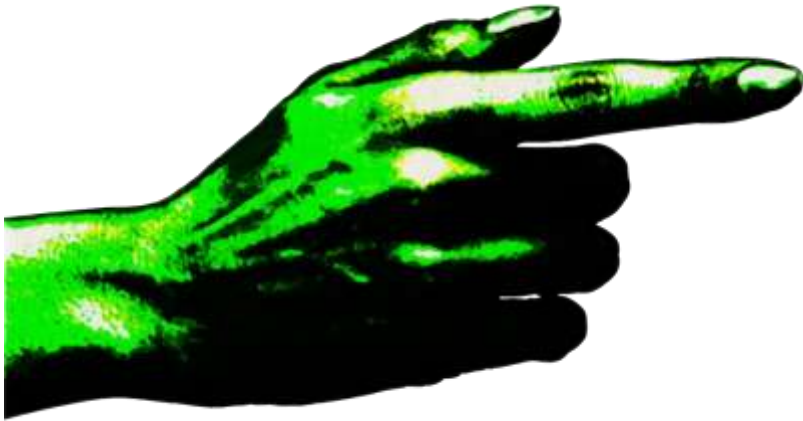
“Actually, we can.” Kate had never liked or trusted Evie.

“No! They’re here to negotiate their reentry into the Federation.” Evie moved toward Miller, aware of the guard following, getting ready to grab her. “You have to stop them. You’ll trigger a war!”

“You have been gone for months.” Miller shrugged. “Things have changed.”

“Because of my daughter? She has no say in council affairs!”

Kate’s lips thinned. “How do you know your daughter is alive?”



Evie quickly backtracked. “The rebels... I mean, the Russians, intercepted communications between her and the rebels.” Evie tried to sound happy. “I can’t believe she’s alive!”

“She isn’t.” Jack hoped the rest of the Council would play along. “She was killed in a gas explosion while meeting with a scientific rebel.”

Evie quickly considered her options. “The Russians told me she was going to attack this station.”

“The Space Force has been activated. They’ll handle the threat.” Jack waited, letting her trap herself.

“But those aren’t Russians!”

“You just said they were.” Kate was delighted by this turn of events.

Evie waved it off. “I meant the Russians aren’t rebels. They aren’t attacking us. The rebels are.”

The station shuddered as a blast hit an outer ring.

Evie paled; the Council members glared.

Jack decided to close the net over Evie’s head now. “Why haven’t you asked to see your husband?”

Evie realized that was a huge mistake. “I want to talk to the President!”

“You can’t, and you already know why.” Jack motioned toward the guard. “Put her back in a cell.”

“What?!” Evie pulled away from the guard’s grip. “You can’t do this!”

“Evie Roth, you are under arrest for the assassination of your husband, our President, Clifford Roth. You will stand trial in two days.”

“No! Stop!” Evie hadn’t planned on the Council figuring it out. “Wait!”

The guard dragged her from the room.

Jack looked around. “Amanda was telling the truth. She may have saved this station.”

People muttered and nodded, unable to deny that Evie was a traitor while her daughter, the terrorist, had warned them.

“As soon as the battle is over, we’ll vote on her inheritance.”

No one protested Tyra’s words. Their laws were absolute. Amanda was about to become the President.

4

Amanda sat up as Evie was brought down the hallway of cells. She grinned, enjoying the sight of her mother being flustered and disheveled. “Hello.”

Evie stopped, shocked. “How do you keep coming back?! You’re supposed to be dead!” Nathan had sworn he’d witnessed Amanda’s death.

Amanda shrugged as the guard shoved Evie into the cell across from her. “Sorry?” She chuckled when Evie glared. “Welcome to Eden prison. I hope you enjoy your short stay.”

Evie caught the wording. “What do you mean by that?”

“It means you won’t be here long. The council is going to vote on your betrayal. Then you’ll be...removed.”



Evie crossed her arms over her chest. “They can send me to a planet and drop me. It won’t matter. I’ll find a way back.”

Amanda shook her head, grin widening. “You don’t understand. They’re going to change our laws. You’ll be the first execution in thirty-thousand years.”

Evie froze. Then she relaxed, snorting in scorn. “They need a public majority for that. It won’t happen.”

“Actually, the public just found out you’ve been arrested. Listen to the screams out there. Those aren’t for me. They’re for the woman who betrayed our President.”

Shouts and screams from outside the Council building echoed, proving her words. Amanda kept going. “The public will vote on the law change and it will easily be more than 75% when they find out you hired an assassin to kill your husband. The

people loved Clifford Roth. And the entire Council already wants it, so that vote's in the bag too. I think they've wanted you gone for a long time."

The smell of madness came from both cells. The guard didn't like it.

The station shuddered again as another blast hit it. New alarms wailed in the distance.

"Why did they attack?" Evie was furious that she'd lost the advantage.

Amanda shrugged. "Maybe because I suggested it."

Evie gawked at her daughter. "You know it's not the Russians."

Amanda nodded. "I've known for a while now. There are no Russians—just your rebels playing with old equipment."

Evie realized Amanda knew the truth. "Did you tell the Council?"

"Why should I?"

"So they'll know, so they'll understand the rebels have been playing them all along."

"I doubt they're in the dark. Your husband may have fudged the numbers and reports on scientific recovery rates, but it's a lot harder to convince ten people that a country exists when they never see evidence of it."

Evie laughed.

Amanda understood there was still something she was missing, but she filed it for later examination. Right now, she wanted to rub salt in that other wound. "I wonder how long they'll wait

before announcing the possible change to the punishment law. Not long, I'd bet. It's easier to get agreement while everyone is angry and grieving."

Reminded of her situation, Evie fought for an escape. "Uh... They can't hold that vote without a sitting President. It will be a long time before they have one. The Council can't agree on anything like this. All of them want power."

The guard motioned toward Amanda. "They want you back in the council for that re-vote, Madam President."

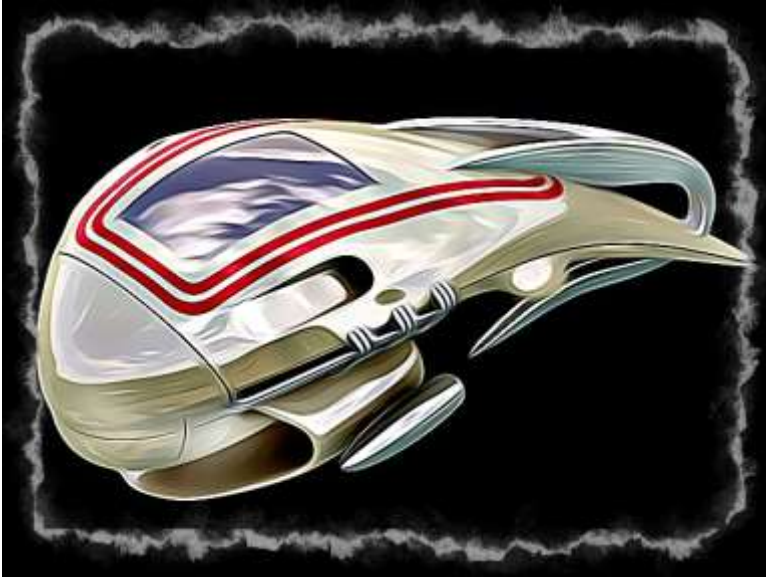
Evie stared in shock as the guard opened Amanda's cell and fell in next to her. "You claimed it; you're going to be the new leader."

Amanda laughed coldly at her mother's wave of terror. "And I am a true reformer. You'll go down in history, and in flames. I'm voting for fire as the new execution method." Amanda enjoyed Evie's screams as she left the jail.

5

The Council was in chaos as Amanda was brought back in.

"We're losing! There are too many ships!"



“You have to hold them off!”

“The Russian weapons are better!”

Amanda stared at the large screen, dismayed. The battle was almost over. Only a few Space Force ships were left. The Russian vessels did have better weapons.

Kate saw Amanda. “Why is she here?!”

The guard shrugged. “The locals are rioting. They might get into the jail. I didn’t know what to do with her.”

Amanda realized the guard wanted her in here for the battle. She stepped forward. “It’s not Russians. Those are rebels. It’s a coordinated attack. The rebels here on Eden are attacking right now too. Check the screens. Your people are rioting to cover the rebels.”

Many of the Council members switched to views of their homes, neighborhood, and offices. In every shot, people are were shouting, breaking things, fighting, or running from the ones doing all that.

“How do you know?”

“That’s not possible!”

Amanda gestured. “My mother just told me.”

The guard nodded. “I heard it. She’s telling the truth.”

“Do something!” Kate waved at the screen. “As President, you have to do something!”

“I’m not yet, though, am I?” Amanda waited even though another Space Force ship blew up, raining debris over this side of the station. Alarms blared; lights flickered.

“Computer! Bring up the vote on the Presidency of Amanda Roth!”

“*Calculating...*” The computer buzzed. “*Council members will now enter their votes.*”

All the members rushed to hit their buttons.

Miller and Jack exchanged glances, but there was no other choice. If they lost this battle, it wouldn’t matter who had leadership. They would all die.

“*The votes have been entered. It is a unanimous choice. Amanda Roth is now the President of Eden and the United Federation.*”

Tyra took a robe from under her desk and brought it to Amanda. “It’s a bit long. I ordered it for Miller.”

“Thanks.” Amanda put on the Presidential robe, covering the prison uniform. She caught Miller’s grimace.

Amanda locked eyes with Jack. “The rebels have been living with the farmers in the poor districts. Tell them you’re going to send the fire crews there.”

The council was horrified.

Jack assumed it was a bluff. He hit the buttons on his monitor. “All fire crews report to the outer districts. If the enemy doesn’t surrender, set it all on fire and let it burn!”

There was a brief moment of silence and then voices of the fire crew began responding.

“Are you sure, sir?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Fire crew five is on the way!”

Jack looked back at Amanda. “That’s not enough.”

“Contact the asteroid handlers. Tell them to let go of all the rocks we have in the capsules. Then send one to hit them and blast them all toward the enemy ships. Conker.”

Jack grinned. “That’s brilliant!” He got busy, ignoring the anger, fear, and cautions of the other members.

Miller moved toward Amanda.

Amanda’s guard stepped in front of her, frowning at Miller.



Miller realized she had protection now. He stopped. “What else did your mother tell you?”

“She said there’s a traitor on this Council.” Amanda’s voice grew icy. “I’ll find them and they’ll be executed alongside my mother and anyone else responsible for this rebellion.”

Most of the council members relaxed a little about her upon hearing that. Her words said she wasn’t the enemy anymore.

The others watched the screens and waited to see if her plan would be enough to save them.

Amanda listened to the chaos and gloated mentally. The Space Force and many of the station guards were gone now. The locals were indeed rioting, and the rebels were about to be wiped out. The few who survived would surrender to keep their farmer friends and families from being burnt out

and killed by the mob. It was all going exactly the way she needed it to.

The station shimmied and squealed as capsules opened; huge space rocks slid along the rings as they were released.

“Fire it now!” Jack was eager to see her plan in action. It reminded him of shooting marbles as a child.

Miller eyed the girl in dislike that everyone missed as they watched the screens.

The lights dimmed again; an asteroid launched toward the twelve enemy ships flying in formation toward the last of the Space Force...

“Direct launch!” Jack hit more buttons. “Surrender now or die!”

The asteroid couldn't be stopped as several ship captains immediately begged for mercy. It slammed into the other hunks of rock and sent them barreling into space. Explosions lit up the screen in rapid succession.

“Perfect.” Amanda moved toward the Presential seat and dropped into it, face glowing with her victory. “Now burn the poor districts to the ground and tell them the rebels set those fires. Then tell them my mother ordered it.”

Jack didn't hesitate. He knew most of those people were against the Council.

The rest of the Council was stunned that she would be so ruthless, but they didn't protest. Her decision would eliminate the rebels on the station

and allow the public so much anger that they would vote any way the council wanted.

Amanda glanced around the room, seeing if they would go along with it even though a lot of innocent people would be killed. “My definition of reform is a little different than yours.” She turned her attention to Jack. “As soon as this is over, let it slip that my mother is in the jail. Then we’ll offer the vote to appease them and ensure that no one is punished for her death.”

Jack almost switched sides in that moment. He grinned at her. “Your father would be horrified.”

“Yes. He didn’t have the stomach for this ugliness.” Amanda leaned back. “But I do, and there’s nothing I won’t try, so be warned. Stand against me and it will cost a life—be it yours or mine.”

Chapter Nine
The President

1

“Pull back the fire crews.”

Jack did, almost sorry that she wasn't following through on that threat.

“The farmers betrayed us.” Winston felt the same way. “They do deserve to be punished.”



Amanda sighed. “The rebels threatened their lives and farms too. If truth be told, they don't care who's in charge so long as we leave them alone.”

Kate scowled. “Is that going to be another of your reforms?”

“I have plans for them.” Amanda locked eyes with Kate. “They’re going to help you repair and replace the sewer pipes, caps, and ladders.”

Kate paused. “What?”

“I was in the sewers recently. They’re in rough shape. I know my father hated to spend money on infrastructure projects, but I’m not him. After the sewers, you’ll get me a list of the most-needed repairs and replacements in your sector. I’ll go from there.”

Kate was surprised by that. Most Presidents avoided infrastructure projects because there was no glory in them. “Okay.”

Amanda glanced at Jack. “You’ll need a new Space Force and more guards...”

Jack nodded, eager to reap rewards for following her orders first. “We can draft them from the surviving rebels, but we’d never know for sure if they can be trusted.”

“I’m going to open up the HOP worlds; you’ll have all the bodies you need in a few months.”

Shouts and cries filled the chamber again.

Amanda stood up. “We’re not destroying anymore HOP experiments. When they reach the advancement level, we’ll make contact, pick the worthy people from their population for our settlement, and then leave them alone.” Amanda moved toward the door that led to her father’s old office, ignoring the newest protests. “You all have projects. Those projects need my approval. Don’t

fight my reforms and I won't fight your expenses—including those for personal gain.”

“You're trying to buy us off!” Miller's voice rose. “We can't be bought!”

Amanda opened the door and paused, looking over her shoulder. “Jake and Kate can. And everyone else is mentally gathering a list of what they want. Maybe you can't be bought, but *they* can and that means I have their votes. I don't need yours.”

Miller realized she was a hundred times more shrewd than her father had been. “Can I speak with you, alone?”

Amanda nodded. She entered the hall and went toward the bare office she'd only been in a few times. “But leave the recording devices on. All my deals will be made openly.”

Miller followed, frown lining his face like a mask.

Jack looked at Kate with a lifted brow.

Kate, busy planning her sewer project, shrugged and kept working on it. If Amanda was willing to hand over unlimited funds in exchange for a few law changes, Kate was willing.

Jack snickered. “I kinda like that girl. Too bad she has to go.”

The other council members nodded and went back to their plans.

Amanda's guard left the chamber, frowning.

“Before you start whining and trying to change my mind, give me an update on HOP-28.”



Miller paused in the doorway, mouth hanging open.

Amanda scanned the neat, mostly empty room. She spotted a red stain near the couch, but her emotions were locked up tight. She refused to grieve in front of anyone. She also wasn't sure that she would grieve. Clifford Roth had been nice to her, but he hadn't really been a father. He'd had a job to do and so had she. Their time together had been spent discussing those jobs, not bonding.

“Are you okay?”

Amanda realized Miller had mistaken her stare for emotions. She turned to face him. “My update?”

Miller frowned. “Removals have to be voted on by the council.”

“It already was.”

Miller grimaced as he understood she knew they'd voted to destroy the planet she'd been dropped onto. "Is that why you're insisting on it? To rub it in that we wanted you gone?"

Amanda wasn't surprised by that revelation, but she still didn't think the truth would get through. "No. It's full of criminals who have plans to take over this station. I'm protecting my new job."

"Oh. The lab is already gathering the asteroids we didn't use or hit. In a couple hours, we should be able to send one to HOP-28."

"Make it your top priority. When the people on HOP-28 find out this invasion attempt failed, they might come in force with the rest of the criminals."

Miller didn't want that to happen either. "I'll see to it."

"Good." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Now tell me what you want in exchange for your votes."

"I told you; I can't be bought."

"And I know that to be a lie." Amanda made a fast guess. "My mother told me a lot of things."

Miller paled.

Bingo. Amanda stared at him. She'd known her mother had affairs to further her plans. "Well?"

"Your mother and I were...good friends."

Amanda smirked. "With private benefits."

Miller reddened. "That's none of your business!"

“Your affair with my mother isn’t my business?” Amanda grunted. “Perhaps not, but I’d bet the Council would think it matters.”

Miller shut the door. “Don’t do that.”

“Give me your votes and cooperation.”

“Fine!” He glowered at her. “Honest Presidents don’t use bribery and blackmail.”

“Honest Council members can’t be bribed or blackmailed.” Amanda turned toward the desk. “Get out.”

Miller left, slamming the door.

Amanda felt that voice in her mind getting ready to speak. “I told you to save it. You made your choice; I’ve made mine.



Stubborn child! The Creator broke the connection.

Amanda was more worried than she'd let on, but it was a bad time to show a weakness to any of her enemies. She sat in her father's chair and began opening his desk drawers. She didn't know what she was looking for. She hoped it would stand out.

She saw the shadow of her guard appear outside the door and felt better. *I know they'll try to get rid of me at some point. I just need to accomplish a few things first and then I'll go willingly.* Being back in the great big nothing held a lot of appeal now that she was alone. *I never thought I could miss someone the way I miss you, Jerald. You'd probably laugh in my face.*

Amanda sat in front of the computer and began exploring.

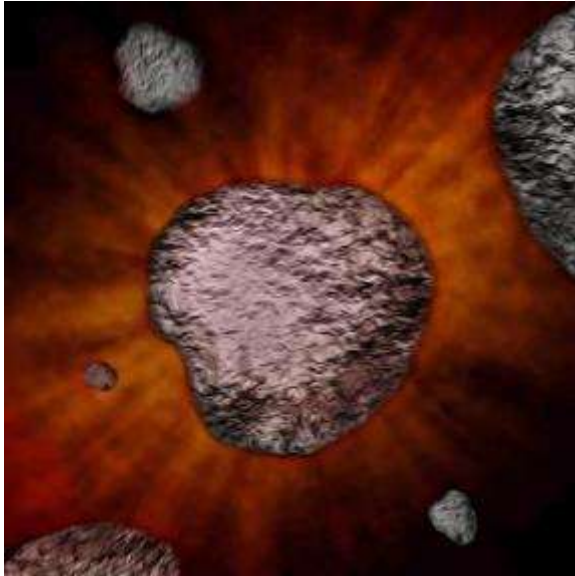
3

She was deep into the files when the office door opened. She didn't look up. "Update me on HOP-28."

Wilson Taft smiled humorlessly. "You really have a hard-on for that planet."

"Yep. How long until it's gone?" Amanda hitched up the long robe and donned a defiant profile.

Wilson hated the sight of her in Miller's robe. *We had deals in place! How dare this rebel traitor upend it all!* "About an hour. We're calculating the trajectory and refilling fuel pods for the launch."



“Good.” Amanda minimized the file. “What do you want?”

“We’re ready to vote on the change to the punishment law. It requires you to be there.”

“I want the public to see it as well. That will stir them up.”

Wilson’s good mood vanished. “If they riot, we’ll all be killed. Half the security guards are missing or have been injured too badly to work.”

“We’re giving them a target—my mother.”

“They won’t stop with her if they get in here.”

Amanda sighed. “You know as well as I do that they have to go to their homes to vote. Once there, most of them won’t come back out. Reason and common sense will kick in. Stop lying to me or I’ll make even more radical reforms than I already have planned.”

Wilson backed out of the room, face covered in embarrassed anger. “We’re waiting on you in the Council chamber!”

Amanda went back to reading the file. “I’ll be there in five minutes.”

Wilson shut the door and went to inform the others that the bluff hadn’t worked. Amanda was smarter than they were giving her credit for. If they couldn’t find a way to trick or force her onto their side, the future would get ugly.

Amanda opened the last file and scanned her father’s notes. She’d already learned a lot of things she hadn’t suspected. She assumed this last file, named ‘Secrets’, would give her more surprises.

This is a list for my heir to use as they see fit. If I’m gone and you found this on your own, use it right away or the Council will find a way to get you under their thumb.

All of the Council is sleeping around on their spouses, taking bribes, and using funding for other purposes than its designations.

The HOP has been used to target other countries. According to the logs I found when I inherited this position, we accidentally hit the Chinese station with an asteroid meant for HOP-10. After that, there were a lot of ‘accidental’ hits that have resulted in the elimination of almost all other countries. I believe we may even be the last. My wife

tells us the Russians are in trouble and need our help, but I've begun to suspect that's a lie. I don't know who she meets with when she leaves my side, but I know it's not Russian delegates.

The scientists are lying about the recovery rates. I was blackmailed by Miller and forced to change the numbers on the reports. They now outnumber the legislators, but that's not enough for them. They have sided with the rebels against the breeders. I don't know when they plan to trigger their next attack, but it might be enough to remove all of us. My wife says we're doing the right thing by helping the rebels, but I have my doubts. Evie has become cruel over the years. I think she'll kill the Council as soon as she takes control and I can't support that. I also can't refuse it or she'll kill me.

Amanda shut the file and leaned back, considering everything she'd just learned. *I can't trust any of them.*

Amanda wasn't sure what her goals should be now. She wanted to help the locals on the station, and the innocent people on the HOP worlds, but that would be impossible with so many traitors on the Council. They would try to remove her as soon as her mother was dead. And the Creator would probably help them.

Amanda thought of reaching out to make a deal on that end, but she didn't do it. The Creator was going to kill them all if she gave in. Amanda no

longer thought removing HOP-28 would eliminate him. She'd remembered his words about reseedling. She expected a report that the planet had blown up before the asteroid reached it. She also expected to be attacked because she'd tried to remove him. Panic threatened to overwhelm her. "I wish Jerald was here."



Amanda stood up, finding her courage. "But I'll try to make him proud."

4

"Attention! Attention, residents of Eden station..." Jack waited for Amanda's nod to continue. "The traitors have been beaten. Their leader has been captured. She is in our jail cell awaiting trial."

The noise outside the chamber increased; the public was hungry for revenge.

“Due to the nature of these crimes against the Federation, the Council is activating a public vote on the law of punishment.”

Now the noise seemed to fade into a tense silence. Amanda was encouraged.

The Council members were angered that Amanda had been able to correctly predict the public’s reaction.

“In a few minutes, your vote devices will be activated. The evidence for and against these changes will be presented. It is your duty to help decide the future of all criminals.” Jack started to tell people to return to their homes.

Amanda shook her head. “They’ll go on their own. If you tell them to do it, they’ll resist.”

Jack watched the monitors to see if she was right. The crowds of people, including scared, angry farmers, were all over the public areas of the station. Windows had been shattered and a few buildings were currently burning, but it wasn’t safe for the fire crews to put them out. Those crews hadn’t protested the burn order and the public didn’t know it had been a bluff. The buildings would just have to keep burning until the crowds cleared.

“While we wait, let’s have that other vote.” Amanda didn’t wait for their protests. “Computer, activate the punishment law council vote.”

The computer responded immediately. *“The vote on punishment law will now be calculated... Council members may enter their votes.”*

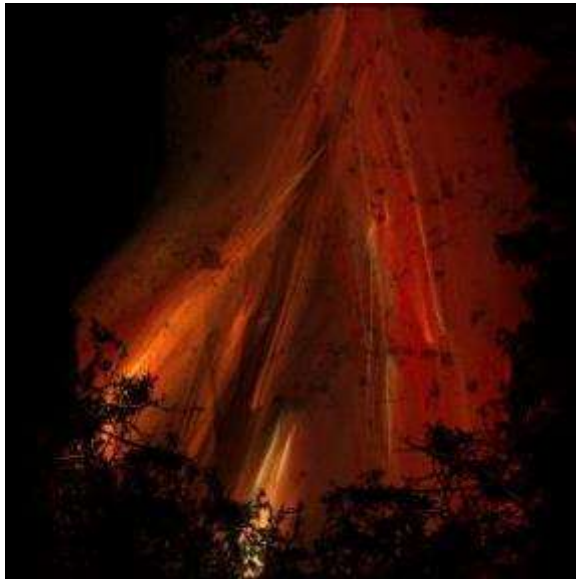
To Amanda’s surprise, none of them hesitated. That worried her, but she didn’t have time to figure it out. She motioned her guard closer. “Is my mother ready to confess?”

“I’ll find out.” The guard left the chamber.

Amanda scanned the Council members, seeing who was eyeing her and who was sharing looks with other members. *I’m in a nest of snakes.* Amanda sat up straighter. *They don’t know I’m a mongoose.*

“The votes have been entered. The Council decision is unanimous. The new penalty for crimes may include execution.”

Amanda smiled. “Good. One of the new methods will be fire.”



Council members frowned or paled.

“The Presidential choice has been recorded.”

The computer fell silent, waiting, along with the Council, for the public tally.

“People are starting to vote.”

“Give the public updates every few minutes.”

Amanda gestured. “It will encourage the others to go home and vote too.”

Jack admired her mind. “You really are smarter than your father.”

Amanda nodded. *But am I smarter than my mother? She’s the one to watch out for.*

Jack addressed the public. “We have totals coming in. So far, 8% of people have voted. 50% of those favor changing the punishment law to include execution.” He watched the screens.

More people turned toward the towers, dorm, and farms.

Amanda pointed at the biggest screen. “When her trial starts, I want everyone to see it. We’ll do it all live, including her execution.”

Miller frowned. “If we find her guilty.”

“*When* you find her guilty, I want the public to see it.”

The Council assumed Amanda wanted them to vote guilty even if they didn’t feel that way. No one protested, but they didn’t like it.

Amanda stared around at them. “You had no trouble accepting my bribes. And you know she’s guilty. What’s the problem?” She didn’t give them

time to answer. “Is it because I didn’t offer you anything for this?”

People flushed and dropped their heads.

“Don’t assume I’m going to give you something every time I want you to vote my way. I’ll dole out those rewards as I see fit.”

The crowds on the screen were thinning now as the public was drawn to the chance to make their voices heard. Amanda had read about the call of civic duty, but she’d never witnessed it. Seeing this let her understand how populations were controlled throughout history. *They think they’re helping themselves, but they’re really sealing their own doom.* Amanda turned as the guard came back in.

“Your mother has asked for mercy.” The guard didn’t tell her the woman was crying. Hearing the vote change was finally getting to Evie.

Amanda shook her head. “This Council has no mercy for traitors. Her trial was set for two days. I want it moved to tomorrow morning. The longer we keep her in the jail, the more chance the crowds will return and break her out so they can hang her.”

Miller pointed. “You want to burn her alive. How is that better?”

Amanda shrugged. “One is justice. The other is murder.”

“I don’t agree.”

“I don’t care.” She looked at Jack.

Jack updated them all. “35% of people have voted. 63% of those favor changing the law.”

Amanda settled back in the chair to wait, but she didn't shut her eyes even though she was exhausted and her guard was here. She didn't feel safe. *Something's coming. I don't know what it is, but I think the Creator is responsible.* "Update me on HOP-28."

Stephen went to that screen while Jack handled the vote updates. Steven scanned the automatic messages. "The asteroid will launch in fifteen minutes."



Amanda didn't tell them to do it faster. She understood it took time to gather the huge rocks, put them in place, reload the fuel and firing mechanisms, and calculate the trajectory. It had gone fast from the other lab because everything had been ready and in better shape.

“48% of people have voted. 67% favor changing the law.” Jack was now sure it was going to go their way. He looked at Miller.

Miller didn't respond. Amanda was watching too closely. He didn't want her to know she was sealing her fate. *And this time, I'll cut off her head and make sure she's dead. I thought a spear through the heart would be enough. I'll be more drastic this time and do it myself.*

“70% favor changing the law.” Jack was only updating the Council now. The crowds were gone as everyone wanted to have a say in this vote. *Don't they understand this means we'll be able to kill them now?* Jack was disappointed, but he recognized the new power over the people that this would give the Council.

Amanda turned to Kate. “Do you have a place for executions?”

Kate grimaced. “No, but we'll get one erected.”

“Put it near the science dorm.”

Kate frowned. “Why?”

“Because it's full of rebels and traitors, of course.” Amanda didn't flinch from the new glares. “Did you know the scientist recovery rates are above 50%?”

Chaos erupted through the chamber.

Amanda let them argue and deny, enjoying dropping bombs on them. She planned to release all the secrets she'd learned. *When I'm finished, this Council will be forever changed.*

“We get reports. That’s a lie!” Kate didn’t believe it.



“We’ve long suspected those numbers were manipulated.” Steven glared at Miller. “By your good friend.”

“Clifford Roth wouldn’t do that.” Miller pointed at Wilson. “But he would.”

Jack checked the vote totals again, not surprised by the revelation. “72% approval.”

Amanda felt ugliness coming; she turned toward the big screen just as it lit up.

“Warming! Solar flares have been detected! Warning!”

The entire Council went still and silent as the computer warned them of imminent peril. Solar flares were rare and dangerous.

Amanda sighed. “See what path they’re on.”

Jack changed the screen to check on the newest threat. “It looks like...” He paled. “A direct course with this station.”

“Bring up the shields!”

“Turn off all electronic equipment!”

“Warn the public!”

Amanda stood up. “None of that will be enough.”

“How do you know?!”

“The Creator is pissed about the asteroid.” Amanda considered their options. She could only see part of the station reflection on the screen for the dead moon nearby. The station didn’t orbit the moon, but it was close enough to cover signs of life from three directions... “We only have one choice that’s guaranteed to work.” She looked at Steven. “Move the station. Do it now.”

More shouts came from the others, but Steven nodded. “We’ve done that a few times over the last century.” He looked at Jack. “How long?”

Jack was already calculating it. “About ten minutes.” He punched in more numbers. “It might block most of it, like last time.”

None of this Council had been here for the last move, but the records were detailed.

Amanda watched the main screen, where the vote was still up. 74%, with 83% of the public votes counted. *I’m going to get my way on that.* “How long until the asteroid launches?”

Steven checked the countdown. “Four minutes.”

“Don’t move this station until it launches.”

Kate paled. “But we might not clear it in time!”

“I know. But if we don’t send that asteroid, the Creator will keep sending flares and other cosmic threats until we’re all dead. Do what I say!”

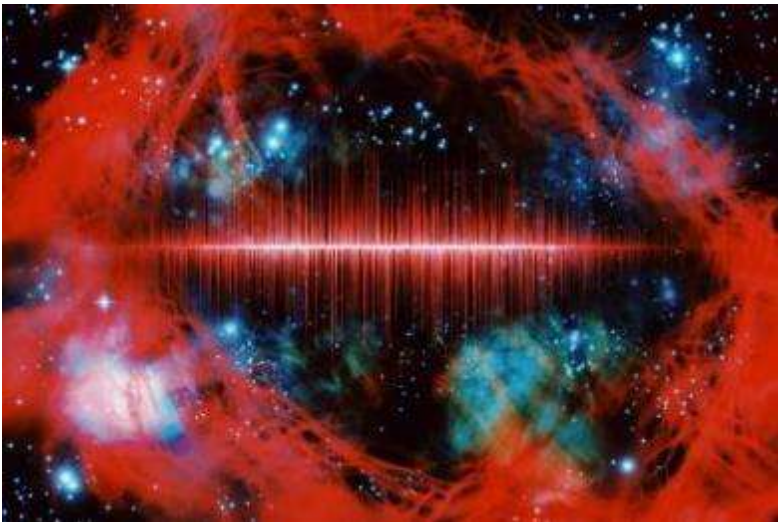
The next four minutes of waiting were tension-filled pauses where people in charge of moving the station got ready and everyone else hoped they would have time to move.

“The new punishment law has passed.” The computer flipped that screen to a confirmation tally. *“The public has been alerted to this change.”*

Amanda wanted to feel bad for the future criminals who would be executed, but she couldn’t. She believed it was the right thing to do, and she wanted to watch her mother burn.

“One minute until launch.”

“Six minutes until the first waves of solar radiation arrive.”



“We’re not going to make it in time.” Amanda waved at Jack. “Do all the other things you mentioned as soon as it launches. Kill everything except what you need to move the station.”

Jack was already covering these items as fast as Kate and Tyra could type in the instructions.

The station shimmied as the lab began to launch.

“Launch will commence in 30...29...28...”

Amanda could feel the Creator trying to find a way to stop it. “Override and launch it now!”

Steven did as ordered, able to feel the danger. “What’s happening?”

“The flares are changing direction!”

Amanda waved it off. “Flares can’t stop rock. Launch!”

The station lurched as the asteroid launched. The Council watched it on the screen, in awe of the power they controlled to end life.

The asteroid streaked by the station and vanished into space.

“Move us!” Amanda turned her attention to the screen now showing the solar waves. Only a few particles of the colorful radiation were visible, but they were vivid.

“Brace! This station is changing orbit. Brace!”

People all over the station were knocked to the ground as the station’s rockets fired up and began moving them. Many of those people had never felt it before. They immediately wondered if their vote had caused this choice.

Jack got on the public speaker system again. “Hold on! We’re avoiding solar flares. If the power goes out, wait for the repair crews...” He stopped as the power went off.

The chamber went dark except for two computer banks and the large screen in the front of them.

Amanda’s guard moved closer to her in the darkness. He flipped on his belt light and scanned the shadows continuously.

Amanda wasn’t worried about being attacked right now. After they were safe, then she would be in danger from everyone.

The station picked up speed. Walls groaned and creaked; dust fell from ceilings. Buildings collapsed in the poor districts. People screamed for help all through Eden.

Kate gestured. “We’re behind the dead moon! Stop now.”

Jack tried to slow them down, but the computer was in control. It kept the station moving until they reached the exact coordinates he had put in.

The station’s sudden stop slammed things around and knocked people to the floor again. Parts of walls and roofs slid off and tumbled to the ground. Huge plumes of smoke and dust rose from the outer ring.

The lights flickered and returned, lighting up a Council chamber that was no longer neat; many members were hiding under their desks.

Amanda hadn't budged from her place in front of the Presidential chair, though she had braced against it with her feet. She waved. "Get crews out to help people and extinguish fires."

Jack and Kate hurried to handle that, hearts pounding. Their workers would be busy well into the night getting things set right.

"The solar activity has passed. Resume normal duties." The computer beeped and fell back into waiting mode until it was needed again.

Amanda knew the moon's gravity shield was already radioactive. They couldn't remain here for long or it would affect them. "As soon as the waves are gone, move us back to the previous orbit."

Jack and Steven both nodded in acknowledgement of her order. They were watching the levels of radiation around the station. If it got too high, they would move the station sooner.

"How long until the asteroid reaches HOP-28?" Amanda wanted to be sure that was covered.



Steven hurried to check on it. “Uh... Fifteen minutes... But the planet isn’t there.” Steven checked again. “Where did it go?!”

Amanda grunted. “Check for natural debris flying toward other planets.”

Steven did, stunned. “That’s exactly what happened. The asteroid we sent will hit HOP-17 instead.”

Amanda walked toward the office door. “Warn them or don’t—it’s up to the Council. For now, it’s break time.”

No one spoke as she left. They were too stunned. But none of them considered warning the residents of HOP-17 that their removal had come a few years early.

Miller followed her. “You can’t do this.”

Amanda knew what he was talking about. “It’s a done deal.”

“Your father did this! He made her betray the Council. She didn’t want to!”

“Other way around.” Amanda walked by the office toward the steps to the private residence. “I found a file where my father kept tracks of secrets. I’ll be releasing them over the next few days. I’m telling you so you can give a warning and this reminder: I could have just dropped the bombs, but I warned you. I expect the same courtesy.”

“That’s not courtesy. You’re going to ruin their careers, their lives!”

“Yes. I told you—I’ll rule openly and you’ll all be exposed for the lying traitors you really are.”

Miller stopped, realizing her mother's execution probably wouldn't be the only one. When the public found out how the Council had betrayed them repeatedly through the years, they would demand death for everyone. "We've just let the lions back into our pits." Miller went to his office, mind spinning.

5

"I'm ordering everyone to get ready. It's almost time." Morro didn't give anyone time to protest yet. "The Council is fighting over leadership. Criminal rebels destroyed the asteroid lab and killed some guards. The President was assassinated. Things are happening fast now."

"You said that last time." Nathan believed Morro was the reason his advance on the towers had failed.

"It feels different this time." Morro pointed toward the Council building. "They've even moved the station. They told us solar flares, but we all saw the Space Force launch and very few of them have returned. This is our chance."

Nathan snorted. He'd just been contact by Miller. "Nothing has changed. As soon as we revolt, they'll put us down." Nathan was disheartened by Evie's betrayal, Amanda's fast death, and the loss of his friends in the last attempt to take down the federation.

“You are not a true rebel if you stop fighting.” Morro sneered at Nathan. “You MOD members are useless unless you have a large group.”

Many in the crowd of two-dozen nodded, sneering.

Nathan walked toward the warehouse door, offended. “But you’ll call us in when it finally happens. You’re also nothing without a crowd.”

The science members turned toward the boy, teeth and fists clenching.

Morro waved it off. “Let him go. He’ll learn in time. The young have no instincts.”

Everyone at these meeting knew Nathan had run away when his grandfather was murdered for his seat on the Council. That same person had tried to kill the teenager too, but luck saved Nathan and gave him a home with the local rebels. Morro felt bad for the boy who had then worked his way up to leader of the remaining MOD. *But the last generation were the hardasses. Nathan’s men are weak, lazy, and dumb. The science side needs to take it easy with the effects of some of their public experiments.* Morro knew of two. One was airborne in the sewers. The other was in the water. Either way, the citizens of Eden station were ingesting and inhaling a variety of cocktails all aimed at slowing their recovery. The scientists didn’t want it to happen too fast. *We need complete control first.*



Morro glanced around at the tired men and women who'd come for this forbidden meeting. It was full of scientists, rebels, and even criminals who'd made their way back to the station undetected. "Things are different this time. I think we can get rid of the entire Council while they're busy with the Russian rebels. We just need to smuggle a demo expert."

A door opened the rest of the way in the rear of the warehouse. "Did someone say they needed a smuggler?"

People turned, smiling as they recognized the man.

Morro hurried over with his hand out. "Hanson! We were told you died."

Hanson shook, moving toward the front of the room. "I almost did. The Council sent assassins—genetically modified." He looked around at the stunned faces of a small army. "The Council has a new weapon that can't be killed. We have to get to them now, before they have time to build more."

“Build more weapons?” Morro didn’t understand. “The use of robots in war is against the law.”

Hanson snorted at the irony of such a statement coming from Morro. He held out his arm. The laser wound was still healing. “They’re using modified people now. One girl wiped out everyone in the settlement on HOP-28.” He didn’t want to tell them who the girl was. He believed the Creator had taken over her body; these people needed to have a more plausible story. “The Council is testing their new weapons on criminal worlds! They’re about to unleash an entire army of those things. If we don’t strike them soon, there won’t be any of us left to fight!”

Nathan gestured. “We have plans to attack at the inauguration next week. You can go over them and make sure we’ve covered everything.”

Hanson shook his head, voice curt. “It’s not going to go that long. Sometime in the next two days, the final battle of our revolution will begin.”

Nathan hid a shiver. “How do you know that? Where have you been? What happened on HOP-28?”

Hanson shook hands with the men he recognized as he kept walking toward the front of the warehouse. “My brother still talks to me. He said the scientists are making plans to change our laws. They’re going to trigger our action. All we have to do is wait until it starts, then join in and direct things our way.”

“No more breeders!” Morro knew how to keep a crowd energized. He smiled as they chanted it right back, faces darkening in angry determination.

Morro exchanged a glance with Hanson as the crowd began to disburse before the guards out here in the poor district noticed their gathering. They always limited these meets to a few minutes. They’d never been raided.

Hanson was aware of Nathan glaring at him for being ignored. He didn’t care. Hanson hadn’t liked Jerald. He’d ignored him unless he had to communicate about a job. *I was there for Reila. Her tag-a-long son wasn’t mine.* Looking at Nathan, he felt the same way. *That’s someone else’s mess.*

Nathan felt a bit crushed that both senior men were ignoring him even though he was the leader of the MOD. His one chance at respect had been blown the instant he survived the attack on the Council that had cost so many other lives.

He slipped out the door and went to the farmhouse he was sleeping in tonight. MOD connections kept the members moving through the community. Nathan used to think it was to protect the members. He understood now it was to protect the locals from the guards finding out they had illegal company. *I just want to go back to my old life.*

Nathan shoved a farmer out of his way and went inside. He’d even tried to marry his way back into it with Amanda, hoping it had been long enough that his uncle wouldn’t still want him dead. Or that

Amanda's family would be able to protect him from Quint Bush. *But nothing I do works out. Am I cursed?*

A tiny voice in the rear of his mind whispered, "Yes." then fell silent.

Inside the warehouse, Hanson leaned down to whisper in Morro's ear. "Don't report this to Miller. We're about to change the future of every living thing in the universe. Don't tell Miller it's coming and you could be voted in as the next President instead of having to kill him later."

Morro winced at having his deepest secret known. He glared at Hanson. "You don't care about my goals. You only want a pardon so you can bring your criminal wife here to live!"

Hanson's face tightened. "The Council killed Reila. Now, I only want vengeance. What better way to get it than to remove all current members?"

Morro believed him, though he didn't trust him. "We can work together. The towers have been wired. We just need to smuggle in a demolition expert to verify it's set up correctly."

"You armed the towers?"

Morro nodded, eyes glinting. "Clifford Roth ordered them wired for gas. I just added a finishing touch."

"Being Miller's cousin gives you ways to them that the rest of us don't share. Thank you for your support."

Morro scowled. "You sound like you're the leader of these rebels and criminals."

Hanson shrugged. “Why not? They clearly don’t have a clue what’s coming.”

Morro laughed. “No, they don’t.”

Hanson knew Morro wanted the revolution to happen now, before he tried to gain a seat on the Council, but Hanson doubted the breeder would get it. *The scientists will remember that you worked with the rebels and criminals. That won’t be forgiven even if it gives us what we want.* Hanson was still loyal to the scientist’s dreams of being the only power in the universe who got to decide life and death. *We’ll be the Gods soon. And the rest of you will worship us or die.*

Chapter Ten
The Future

1

Amanda could feel her mother's influence as soon as she entered the Presidential residence. She stood just inside the doorway as it swung shut, scanning the dim, spacious room.

The plush carpeting and velvet curtains hid huge glass windows and pristine floors that didn't warp or bend after years of use. The long, dark couches were made of material she'd only seen in books; she'd never sat on one. She hadn't been allowed in here. The dining table was long enough to hold two-dozen people, and the tall-backed chairs appeared comfortable. The chandelier over that table wasn't lit, but she could almost see how it would illuminate the room and draw attention to the awards and certifications on the walls.

Amanda scanned the windows, admiring the views of the small city and towers outside. The Council chamber was a long, wide building with an office for each member on the sides and a private residence for everyone on the second floor. The Presidential residence was in the center, but a full

floor higher than the others, allowing for an unrestricted view of Eden.

Amanda spotted a small desk in the corner and knew that's where her stepfather had spent most of his time when here. Her mother had decorated it and enjoyed throwing parties and gatherings that let her rub it in that she was First Lady. "And yet, she hated it all. What an odd woman." Amanda went to the desk and sat. The computer activated.

Amanda opened a new file instead of searching what was there. She planned to look later. For now, she wanted to make some plans of her own while they were still fresh in her mind.

In the Future

1. There will be no separation of classes. Breeders and scientists will live in the same places, eat the same foods, and share the same chores.

2. Herds, crops and fish will be bred for the purpose of sharing. All households will receive mating pairs and be responsible for their own food.

3. A document of liberties and crimes will be drafted and posted in public so everyone knows the penalty for breaking the laws. Executions will be carried out immediately. Lesser crimes can be forgiven if the person reforms. Until they do, criminals will still be dropped onto isolated worlds for behavior modification.

4. The public will be allowed access to all Council records. People will be encouraged to audit the Council and their decisions yearly.

5. The Council's top priority will be to put us back on a planet to try again.

6. All HOP experiments will be paused while I redefine the parameters.

7. All removals will be paused. The public will vote on them.

8. All lies will be exposed to the public. Starting with no other countries exist but us.

Amanda leaned back to reread her list and consider what else she wanted to put on it. She assumed the Council would kill her before she could accomplish all of them, but she would be able to get a few reforms through.

Amanda yawned as weariness settled over her. She hadn't slept well in a long time. She saved the file, then went to the couch and stretched out. She was sleeping a minute later.

2

“Do you believe her, that she made contact with a Creator? And that she died and came back?”



Jack shook his head, hand trailing her hip in satisfied roaming. “No. She’s a Roth. All they do is lie.”

Kate sat up, not caring when her robe slid off the rest of the way. She leaned back against the wall, enjoying the softness of the folding bed under their sated bodies. “But what if is true?”

Jack put his mind to the question, intrigued. He and Kate had spent many breaks in her office this way. They both enjoyed after-sex talking and the topic they most enjoyed was ‘what if’. “We would need to ask the computer if the HOP has next step orders.”

Kate grinned. “I did that. And it does.”

Jack sat up, pulled in completely now. “How many? What’s the ultimate goal?”

Kate chuckled, arching a bit to show off her sculpted body to its best advantage. “There are four steps. Contact was the first.”

Jack’s eyes darkened. “And the last?”

“Pick one controlling party and follow the Creator’s examples, literally, in every way.”

Jack dug for the memory. “Amanda said the Creator is cold, calculating, brilliant, clever...”

“And a killer.” Kate shivered. “We’ve been following the image of our maker all along.”

Jack grunted. “You believe her.”

“Yes. I was near Miller when he arranged for Amanda’s death on HOP-28. The assassin he hired was the best. All of the Council uses him.” She gave him a pointed glance. “Even you.”

Jack drew in a breath. “That’s why I can’t find a hire right now.”

“Yes. They’re scared of any Council job. Something that could take out their best is sure to kill them as well.” Kate checked the time on the ever-present wall clock. She slowly stood, letting Jack look his fill of her naked body before she began dressing. The leggings and shirt under the robe were bunched around her ankles.

Jack thought of the sickly woman waiting upstairs for him to finish his Council duties and become her husband again. He would bathe, feed, dress, and entertain her until she fell asleep. Then he would go to his folding couch, crash, and get up in the morning to do it all over again. “Will you marry me?”

Kate kept dressing, not pausing. “I’ve already told you yes, after the mourning period. When you kill your wife, we have to be apart for at least six months and even then, we have to go slowly.”

Jack watched Kate smooth down her bleached hair, mind going back to their conversation. “Amanda also told Alexander the Creator made others like him and that he’s about to do it again.”

“Yes.” Kate tugged her robe over her straightened clothes and began fastening it. “Well, we know how to remove them, don’t we?”



Jack stared in shock. “We have the advantage!”

“Maybe. She was sent back, multiple times. We can’t do that. And I doubt that’s the only trick we’re short.”

Jack began dressing. “Why aren’t you in security? You’re very sharp at it.”

Kate stepped over the piles of books and papers that were waiting for the monthly janitorial clean up. She avoided the overfull waste can and went to the mirror on the back of her office door to make sure she was completely presentable. “Pruetts are good at all duties of the council. During the gene splicing period, our family lines were altered.”

“As a precaution, right? So one or two people could run it long enough for people to be taught or a generation to grow and learn.”

“Yes. Thankfully, we’ve never needed to use that.” Kate turned to him, now the one admiring his hard body while he tugged up his pants and tucked in his shirt. “To be so good at all the duties, my brain requires unlimited information going in and out. My job in communications keeps me up-to-date on everything.” She stepped forward and placed a light kiss on his tense cheek. “I hear almost everything. I read every message. I watch every video. I know secrets that can bring down most of the council.”

“So why haven’t you?” Jack’s voice grew angry. “Why would you wait?”

She flushed. “Because it will blow me out of the sky too. I’m married; so are you. We’ve been having an affair for five years and it’s not a secret anymore. We have several projects together that are illegal, not the least of which is food deliveries to the other countries.”

Jack smirked. “That was one of my best plans. Charge the Council for the food and delivery to the other countries who are under our control and never

cause trouble. Then we sell it to the criminals on planets where we've dumped our trash. We pocket from both sides."

"It's made us rich." Kate went to the door, hand pausing on the knob. "But we're not happy."

"No." He stared at her in longing. "There's only one thing I want and I'll never have it."

"Then things will stay as they are." She slipped out, shutting the door behind her.

Jack went to the door behind the curtains and returned to his own office. He sank down in the chair and shut his eyes. *Unless I really kill my wife and your husband.*

3

"Thank you! Get me out of here!" Evie came to the cell door, hair wild, face smudged. The red prison uniform did not look good on her.

Miller waved at a guard. "Open it."

The guard frowned but didn't protest because Miller was the most brutal of the Council members. If he angered the man, the guard would be demoted for it.

Evie didn't want to die. She'd been willing to sacrifice her daughter, her husband, and her role of First Lady, but her life was too much. *I thought I would welcome death at this point, but I'm terrified!*

Evie fell into Miller's arms as soon as the cell door opened. "I knew you'd save me!"

Miller led her from the hall without replying.

Evie shivered under his arm, mind racing. She didn't know where he was taking her, but she hoped it was to an escape pod. "I can't say on this station. She'll hunt me down."

"It's okay." Miller tugged her closer, voice soothing. "I've got it covered."

"You're going to kill her, aren't you?" Evie nodded. "That's the only way we can all go on like we were."

"Ah. But you don't want that either, do you?" Miller led her to the side door and out into the shadows behind the jail. "You wanted me gone too." His face morphed into an honest reflection of the cruelty inside. "You should have killed her like I told you to."

Evie heard the danger in his voice, but it was too late to run. Miller grabbed her arm in an iron grip. "Let go of me!"

Miller gave a low whistle. "Come get her."

Nathan and five other members of the MOD army came around the corner and surrounded them. Their dark glares said they weren't going to listen to excuses for her failures and betrayals.

Nathan and the others were bloody and bruised, telling Miller they'd had a hard time surviving the riot. Miller had contacted them at their homes right after the vote. *I told them to stay inside. Not my fault they didn't listen.*

"Why are you doing this!" Evie struggled as Nathan bound her hands and started pulling her

down the alley. “Amanda will kill me. You don’t need to do this!”



Miller didn’t answer. He watched until they got out of sight, then he went back into the jail. “Excuse me? Are you the only guard here right now?”

“Yes. The others are on break.”

I see.” Miller stepped forward.

The guard tried to duck, but he reacted too late. Miller’s quick stab took his life.

Miller let the body fall, dropping the knife. He had already turned off the cameras in here, and voice recordings weren’t enough to prove his identity. He slapped the button on the wall as he left; alarms wailed in fresh warning that something else had happened.

Miller wiped his bloody hands down the front of his robe as he ran toward the main Council chamber. He shoved open the door and burst

through, panicked. “The MOD is here! They broke into the jail and rescued Evie Roth!”

Alarms in the background lent support to his words.

“Someone check on the President!” Jack took over; security was his job. “Get the guards out searching for them. Get our security searching the grounds.”

Miller leaned against the wall, heaving in air. “It was awful! They killed the guard.” He held out his hands. “I tried to help him, but I didn’t know what to do!”

“It’s okay. Shhh…” Kate came over to comfort him. “We’ll catch them. Don’t worry.”

Miller nodded, eyes shutting as he tried to recover from his ordeal. “I hope it’s soon. Those animals are a threat to all of us.”

4

“We have to get off the street!” Nathan pulled Evie into the shadows as a small cluster of guards ran toward the Council chambers.

Evie laughed harshly. “He betrayed you too. Miller alerted them.”

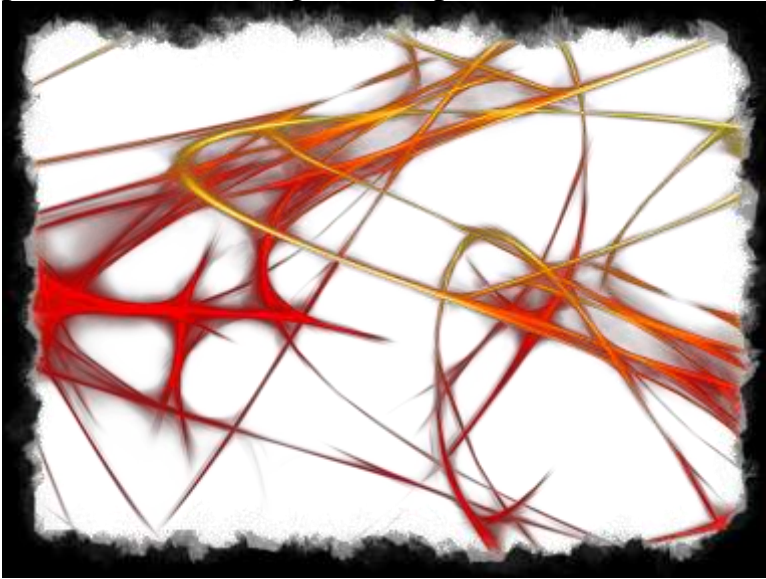
Nathan didn’t have time to argue. He scanned for a safe place to hide until the chaos died down.

Another group of guards appeared at the end of the alley.

“Damn it!” His eye was drawn to the two towers. Anger and determination flooded his face.

“Fine. If they want a real war, they’ve got one.” Nathan dragged Evie toward the tower, ignoring the cries of the guards as they were spotted.

Nathan and the other MOD members burst into the tower, guns out, shouting orders at the two-person crew running the reception hall.



The clerk got up to run.

Nathan fired, hitting her in the back.

Evie screamed as the woman fell; blood ran down her leg and splattered as she hit the ground.

Nathan’s men all fired at the single guard. He went down in a heap, dead before he could draw his own weapon.

Evie looked away from the mess.

Nathan sneered at her. “You spent too much time playing mind games and not enough time on missions.”

She didn't answer. It was obvious that he was right. *I don't want to do this anymore!* It was an awful revelation for Evie. She ran toward the first floor office.

Nathan followed her as his men secured the reception area. "Barricade the main doors!"

The guards chasing them ducked laser fire and stopped at the end of the street to call it in.

5

"It's happening." Hanson pointed at the towers. "Get the rest of us and meet me there." Hanson took off running before Morro could answer.

Moro headed toward the dorm, excitement rising.

Hanson flew to the tower door and banged on the glass. "Let me in! I can help you!"

Nathan waved at his men. "Let him in, and anyone else who comes to help. We'll need the manpower to secure this tower." Nathan shoved Evie toward the control room behind the reception desk. "Get in there!"

Evie cringed into the corner of the command room as Nathan came in and shut the door. "This won't work!"

"Shut up, traitor!" Nathan went to the main desk and began activating the computer. "This is all your fault!"

Hanson stepped to the command door. “We need to take out the security on each floor. Do you want me to handle it?”

“Yes. Take all my men if you need them.”

“I do. Turn off the elevators as soon as you figure out how.” Hanson headed for the steps.

Nathan started with basic functions on the screen, sweat covering his skin. *I’m not getting out of this one alive now that we’ve voted to change the punishment law, but I’ll take an entire tower with me as I go.*

6

“Wake up!”



Amanda stirred as pounding on the door echoed. “We have a situation! We need you!”

Amanda sat up, swallowing a groan. “What is it?”

“Your mother escaped!” Avery’s panicked voice echoed through the door. “She took over a breeder tower. We’re getting calls from guards and locals.”

Amanda scowled, standing. “I should have just slit her throat.” Amanda opened the door, smoothing her hair and shirt. “How many are there?”

“We don’t know yet. Kate is trying to establish visual confirmation.”

Amanda’s guard stayed on her heels, ready to fight for her if he needed to.

Amanda wasn’t sure what would happen when her guardian was out of energy, but she didn’t have time to worry over it now. She stormed into the Council chambers, glaring at everyone. “How did she get loose?”

Miller came over to her, still streaked in drying blood. “The MOD army broke into the jail and killed the guard! They let her out.” Miller’s voice was laden with panic. “She told them to take over a breeder tower!”

Amanda looked at Jack. “Update me.”

Jack scowled. “I can’t. They’re turning off the cameras and elevators. Each time I connect, it goes dead.”

Amanda didn’t have experience with hostage situations. She’d never known it to happen on Eden. “What’s the protocol?”

No one answered; they didn't know either.

"Computer, what are the laws governing hostage situations of breeders?"

The computer buzzed. *"There have been no such instances in over a thousand years. No laws have been made."*

Amanda went to her chair, yawning. "Then we'll have to make up our own as we go."

"You have to save the breeders. Give them whatever they want!" Wilson had three family members living in those towers.

"But the non-breeders can be sacrificed, right?" Amanda sneered at the man. "We save them all or we let them all die. Make your choice now."

All the council spoke up. "Save them."

"Agreed." Amanda ran through options in her mind. "If they took hostages, they want something. Contact them and find out what it is. We'll go from there."

7

"This is the Moderation Army. We are in control of tower A. Stay away unless you want to see us throw your friends and family off the roof." Nathan paused, gathering his thoughts. He needed to be sure he didn't miss anything.

"This is Jack Mitchel, Head of Security. What do you want?"

Nathan considered the usual tirade about equality and justice. He settled for greed. "Turn

over all the Council members to us, including yourself. We'll trade your lives for these."

"That's not going to happen." Jack knew without taking a vote that the Council wasn't about to sacrifice itself for anyone, even family. "Tell me what you really want and I'll see what I can do."

"I want the Council gone!" Nathan's rage burst through. "Resign and let MOD members pick your replacements or I swear I'll kill everyone in here!"

"The Council might consider that. We'll need time to discuss it."

Nathan's voice became ugly, unstable. "Do it now!"

"They can't." Evie kept distance between herself and Nathan. "The laws have to be voted on and entered into the computer or it's not official. Then the new President has to approve it."



Nathan kicked the desk. “They don’t have a new President!”

Evie laughed without humor. “It’s Amanda. Amanda inherited.”

Nathan threw his arms into the air. “I saw her die. Stop lying! Do you even know how?!”

Evie slouched, face clouding over. “She said the Creator brought her back.”

Nathan scowled deeper. “Yeah; she told us that too. She’s nuts.”

Evie considered it thoughtfully. “Is she? I’m not so sure anymore.”

8

“He’s crazy.” Amanda could only think of one solution. “Tell him he has five minutes to surrender and then we’re gassing that tower. He can’t turn that off.”

Jack gawked at her. “That will kill everyone, including the hostages.”

“Yes. It takes away his advantage.”

The Council chamber exploded with threats, curses, and pleas. Amanda ignored them. She stared at Miller, scanning his bloody clothes and hands. “Are you injured?”

Miller shook his head. “I tried to help the guard. It’s his blood.”

“Are you a medical officer too?”

Miller frowned. “No, but I still tried to help him.”

“Uh-huh.” Amanda waved at Jack. “Ask Nathan what happened in the jail.”

Kate frowned. “You think Miller is lying.”

Amanda nodded, ignoring Miller’s darkening countenance. “I think someone triggered this. If we’re all about to be killed or lose family, I’d like to know who to blame for it.”

Jack relayed her question. “What happened in the jail? Do you still have Evie? Was this her idea?”

“No!” Nathan’s terrified, furious voice blared at them. “That crazy guy set us up! I never would have done it this way!”

“He’s lying.” Miller backed away from Amanda as her guard stepped forward. “He’s MOD. He can’t be trusted.”

“He has no reason to lie.” Amanda glowered at Miller. “Tell me why and I’ll consider sparing your life.”

“I’m innocent!” Miller kept backing up, trying to reach a door. “I tried to help him.”



“Jack, show us the cameras from the jail.”

Jack did it quickly, frown growing as nothing came up. “The cameras were shut off.”

“And who could have done that?”

“Only one of us. The Council controls all cameras in the cells with a universal password.”

“Arrest him.” Amanda waited as her guard and a few others in the chamber had Miller surrounded. “Now tell Nathan he has five minutes to surrender. He’ll get a fair trial. If not, they all die and we just start over without any armies to stand in our way.”

Jack relayed her orders with a thumping heart and a spinning mind.

9

“They won’t do that.” Nathan looked at Evie. “They’re breeders too. They know people in this tower.”

Evie snorted, inching toward the door. “Amanda killed fourteen people in a terrorist attack; she has no sympathy for breeders and she’s calling the shots.”

Nathan shook his head. “She did that for a good reason—to stop the council. Deep down, she was one of us.”

“She’s their President now! She wants to keep control.” Evie saw her moment as Nathan glanced down at the computer screen. She flew to the door, yanked it open, and took off running toward the main entrance of the tower.

“Stop her!” Nathan gave chase, realizing his men and the science rebels were all upstairs, conquering those floors. He could hear their shouts and screams from the breeders. No one else was down here to help him with Evie.

Evie jerked the door, but it wouldn't open. *I'm not dying like this, for him! I'll turn myself into the guards. They'll take me back to a Council cell.* She flipped the lock and ran outside. “Help me!”

Guards opened fire.

Amanda saw it all on the Council screen. *Both my parents died from over-zealous guards that I triggered. How odd.*

The council all looked to her for signs of anger or grief, but Amanda didn't feel anything. “Tell him he has four minutes left.”

“You can't do this!” Kate ran to Amanda, shoving her guard aside. “You can't kill all the breeders!”

“I'm not. Science people in the dorm are breeders too, remember?” Amanda decided to let go of the other secrets. “How many people in this room know there are no other countries left?”

Silence fell for a few seconds. Amanda saw the shock and the dismay. Most of the council knew. Those who didn't stared at her like she was crazy.

Amanda glared at Miller. “Tell them the truth.”

Miller stared at the floor, blocked from running by the other guards. “We've been using the asteroid

removal program on other nations. We eliminated the last one over fifty years ago.”

“That can’t be...” Kate watched the screens as Steven brought up the proof. They even had video of the asteroids hitting those other stations.

“But why go to all this trouble? Why lie?” Tyra wasn’t as shocked as the others. “Many of us would have voted for it anyway.”

Miller shrugged. “Who can say? Those choices were made before any of us inherited our current positions. We just decided it would cause too much anger and guilt if we told the truth.”

“So you let us believe lies to avoid conflict.”

Miller nodded at Tyra. “Our heirs weren’t going to be told either. We were going to let it die out.”

“Who’s we?”

“President Roth, Steven, and I. Clifford didn’t want the Council fighting and blaming each other over things that had already happened and couldn’t be changed.”

“That sounds like the man I knew.” Amanda gestured. “Everyone who’s having an affair, raise your hand. And you might as well do it because I have a detailed list in Clifford’s office. I can go get it if I need to.”



Eight of ten hands reluctantly lifted.

“Good. Now, who knew it wasn’t the Russians attacking us?”

No one admitted to it, but Amanda marked the faces that suddenly wore guilt or fear of discovery. All the scientists had known, but half of the breeders had as well. “Figures. Tell Nathan he’s down to two minutes.”

All the breeders were tensed to fight. Amanda knew what was coming next, but she was determined to follow through with her plans. This was extreme, but it would have been the same result anyway. *You’re all planning my death. I feel it. So let me deal out some of my own. I’ve gotten good at it.*

“This is against our laws!”

“No, it’s not, actually.” Jack was almost enjoying the moment. “When we changed the punishment law, we didn’t specify that we had to protect innocent lives to do it. She’s sentencing the MOD to death. It’s legal.”

“I’ll stop her.” Kate hit buttons on her keypad. “Computer, bring up a vote for the removal of sitting President Amanda Roth.”

The computer buzzed and beeped. *“Vote is on screen. All Council members will vote.”*

Amanda watched the scientists. When most of them entered a *no* vote, she knew which side she could count on. *And they’re they bad guys. Guess I am too.* “One minute, then blow it. Start passing the orders!”

Breeder Council members rushed the scientists, trying to stop them from entering the orders.

The scientists were ready.

Amanda watched Tyra wrap a cord around Jack's neck. The woman quickly spun around twice to tighten it, then leaned with all her weight over her desk, brutally strangling him.



Next to them, Steven was doing much the same to Kate. All the scientists were armed with ropes. The breeders had guns, but they couldn't find the air to reach them while fighting off their attackers.

The guards in the chamber fled. Amanda noticed hers stayed put, but all other personal security on both sides were now gone. They refused to take sides and be hanged by the winners or shot by the losers.

Amanda didn't interfere. Jack and Kate were smart enough for the job, but the rest of the breeders weren't capable of deep thought. They had no business being on the Council at all. Hereditary rule wasn't a solid plan.

Miller, now unguarded, flew toward Amanda.

Amanda ducked; her guard swung.

Miller went down as a knife plunged through his back and popped out the front.

Tyra lowered her arm, glaring down at the body. "I never trusted you."

Amanda's guard straightened, nodding at Tyra.

Tyra went back to help the other scientists. "Amanda Roth is the President and she gave an order—follow through!"

10

"I surrender!" Nathan saw the fire crew gathering outside the tower. "I give up!"

"No, you don't!" Hanson shot Nathan in the back and took over the console. "All breeders must die! Attack them all! Blow the tower!"

Nathan's eyes shut; blood ran from his mouth. *I died for nothing...*

All over the station, Hanson's order echoed through news reports and radios. Chaos ensued as science rebels were finally allowed to show how they really felt.

"Blow it!" The fire crews were at the corner where the wiring connected.

“Don’t! You’ll kill them all!”

“Do it now!”

Guards were yanked into brawls as they tried to stop the fire crew; other guards tried to protect them. It split down breeding lines, like it always had, but there were more scientists than legislators.

The center man in the fire crew hit the button and stepped back to watch, eyes glowing with eager madness as someone stabbed him in the back.

The charges on the top floor were in the walls. They detonated in a fiery blast of death that knocked out two of the other walls and blasted them into the second tower. Charges on the middle floor imploded, sending a sharp wave of glass and debris over the crowd. Both structures groaned, tilting...



The scientists cheered as the towers fell, trapping or killing the breeders and Hanson and his rebels. Flames and debris shot out, spraying the crowd and surrounding buildings.

Scientists scanned the cheering people around them, picking out a few remaining MOD members.

“Kill them! No more MOD!”

The MOD members ran, but the farmers they’d forced to help them attacked, slitting throats, driving knives into stomachs, and shooting them in the back.

Thick smoke rolled over the site; no one came to put out the fires.

11

“What about her?”

Council members turned to stare at Amanda. The chamber was destroyed, but all the scientists were alive. Some were injured. The breeders hadn’t gone down easy, but they had lost in the end.



Steven frowned. “We can’t just kill her. She’s the President.”

“Is she, though? The public doesn’t know. She wasn’t inaugurated.”

Steven nodded, seeing where Tyra was going. “We have control of the computer. We’ll wipe that vote and say the rebels got in here. They did the killing, not us.”

Scientists straightened, ropes in hand, to glare at Amanda.

Amanda shuddered. *I’m about to die again.* “What about the HOP worlds?”

Steven shrugged. “We’ll continue them, of course.”

“I told you I made contact. There is a Creator.”

“If that’s true, then he blew himself up and we are the gods now.”

It echoed her previous thoughts.

“And as gods, it is our duty to keep seeding worlds, like the creator has done.”

Amanda realized all her plans and threats were useless. The scientists had used her to accomplish their goals. This coup had been planned for a long time. She was just a trigger in the explosion. *Why did I have to go through this?* She didn’t resist as Steven and Tyra strode toward her. She assumed death was coming now. “It was all a waste of my lives. I’m sorry.”

“Without her, you wouldn’t have gotten this far.” Amanda’s guard glared at them. “Let her be a seeder.”

Tyra and Steven stopped, looking at the other three scientists.

Quint Bush nodded. “I like that. We’ll know where she is if we need her for something.”

“Yes, it feels poetic. She’s getting the life she should have had before she found her way back here.”

“And we did already sentence her to be dropped.” Tyra nodded with the others. “I agree. Get her ready for a drop.”

“Well, I don’t!” Amanda turned to run.

Her guard stabbed a syringe into her neck, then caught her as she fell.

Amanda understood he had been in on it all the time. “Traitor!”

The man nodded. He hefted her into his arms and took her from the filthy council chamber. “Time to go, murderer.”

Chapter Eleven
Close

1

“**H**OP-17 is gone.” Robert added another drop of chemical to the slide. “Years before it was scheduled.”



Karen nodded. “I heard it was another *miss*.”

“Same here.” Robert examined the slide. “It’s positive.”

Both scientists paused for a minute to glance over at the unconscious woman on the preparation

cot. A pregnancy test was standard for criminals being dropped. Amanda was across the room, breathing evenly as the drugs kept her under. It would be enough to keep her from waking during the drop.

The seeding lab was small but well stocked with everything they needed to outfit a human for their next adventure. Both scientists viewed it that way. They never got out of this lab for excitement of their own.

Karen's voice lowered. "The new Council said to drop her no matter what."

Robert glanced toward the main door; a security guard was outside it, keeping people away. "They also said not to endanger her life."

"Does that mean she'll get to come back at some point?"

Robert shrugged, cleaning up the test. "My uncle wasn't sure. He just said to get her off this station right now." Robert made the choice. "We'll drop her as is. The memory serum might harm the fetus." They'd figured out it wasn't the drops, but the chemicals they'd been mixing for those ugly moments. Dropees now received the memory wipe and drop chemicals at different times.

Karen approved, but she didn't want to get in trouble. She liked her job. "Are you sure? This wasn't approved by the council."

"Yes. She earned it."

"By confirming that we do have a Creator?"

Robert wasn't willing to go that far. "Well, she narrowed it down for us. We were finally able to identify the three flaws in the human design."

"I haven't read that file."

"Steven sent it. It will be burned as soon as we launch her and the other four subjects we've already prepped."

"The Council and this lab will be the only ones who'll know where she's going?"

"Yes. The less interference the better. We've given them the best beginning of any HOP world." Robert was encouraged to have made any progress in the program during his lifetime. He also liked having someone to talk to about it all. As the head scientist, he wasn't allowed to discuss the program outside these walls.

"What were the three identified flaws?"

"Religious background, two genders, and outside interference."

Karen scowled. "Two genders are needed. And it's illegal to only pick one."

"Not to seed, as we've done here. The women will have sons, but they will not have a constant battle between those genders from the very beginning."

"Won't they be confused and hate the offspring?"

"Perhaps, but females have the instinct to nurture and protect. I believe we'll have the first peaceful world that sustains. As for illegal, the

Council is changing most of our laws. My uncle said this program is to be given complete immunity.”



Karen smiled. “That’s good.” She yawned. “How long have we been doing this now?”

Robert also smiled. “All our lives, like our fathers before us. No matter who runs the Council, the program will go on.”

“Yes. So we’ll have no more contact with Amanda or her child?”

“None.” Robert gestured. “This planet is in a quarantine zone. There’s no outbreak, but the lethal alarms around the area will convince travelers to stay away.”

“For a while.”

“Yes. Progress taints everything at some point. Until then, Amanda and her fellow subjects will populate their planet and provide interesting data for our sons and daughters.”

Amanda woke to the sound of a bird chirping.

The bright sunrise hurt her eyes as she sat up and looked around. Amanda felt the soft one-piece jumper and the sturdy boots on her feet, but she didn't examine them. The coverage of green trees and grass in every direction held her attention. Pristine beauty met her gaze in every direction except for the pod under her. The lid had lifted before she woke.

Amanda tried to remember what had happened. *I was in the Council chambers...* "And they tricked me!" She stood up, stomach twisting. She held onto the lid of the pod as she tried to get her balance and a better view of where she'd been dropped. "Wish I had the computer."

"Computer is active. Waiting for commands."

Amanda flinched at the sexless computer voice coming from the pod. "Be quiet."

"Lowering volume."

Amanda sighed. "Computer, do you detect other lifeforms near me?"

"There are ten total lifeforms on this planet. The nearest four are three rotations of the sun away. The other four are twice that distance."

Amanda frowned. "What about the tenth?"

"I do not understand the question."

Amanda turned to glare at the pod. Her eyes widened. The pod held packages; the pop-up baby crib grabbed her eye. Her hand slipped down to cover her flat stomach. "I'm a seeder."

She shut her eyes against the glare of the sun. “I’m pregnant and almost alone on a HOP world.” It was what she’d longed for in the beginning, though carrying a life hadn’t entered the picture then. Amanda wondered next if she’d been implanted or if her moment with Jerald had caused it. There was no way to know for sure. “But I hope it’s yours, Jerald. I’ll try to give it the choices you never had.”

A tear rolled over her cheek as she thought of his death and of the other deaths she was responsible for. “I’m sorry it turned out this way.” She wiped her face. “And I’m also glad.”

She had accomplished her goal in one form. The Council had been brought down. It would never be the same. The scientists would see to that. But it hadn’t been what she’d envisioned. “For a little while, I actually had reforms and plans. I felt like a leader. I’ll miss that.”



“Why can you not be a leader here?”

Amanda gasped. The Creator’s voice in her mind was loud, clear, and vibrant.

“Do not fear, child. You have been forgiven. I only wish to see that you are settled onto this new planet.”

“Is it...” She drew on her former courage. “Is this where you live now too?”

“No.”

Amanda was relieved. “Good. No offense.”

The Creator chuckled. “You have learned to love. You think of others before yourself, and of the future you can create. Now you are following my image.”

Amanda wanted to be angry, but she’d triggered everything that had happened. All sides had just taken advantage of her ignorance. “I was an idiot.”

“But your ignorance was necessary. You would not have grown and changed; you found my light, though it is not what you expected.”

Amanda snorted. “True. And the federation is broken.”

“Yes. With the scientists in charge, the HOP worlds are now safe.”

Amanda thought of her child. “And me?”

“The same. I will look over this planet more than the others, perhaps, but you will be free to live now.”



Amanda thought of everything she'd done. Her anger returned. "I killed a lot of people for nothing. Why did you make me do that?"

"It was not for nothing. Many things were accomplished during your lives."

"Like what?" Other than the Council and blowing up a couple planets, she didn't think much had changed at all.

"The breeders wanted to be back on planets, but they were willing to kill all lives on the HOP worlds to achieve it. They'd already destroyed the other cultures. They had to be stopped."

Amanda nodded. "I agree with that."

The Creator breathed in deeply of the unpolluted vibrance of the planet that was still growing under Amanda's feet. "The criminals wished for chances to reform, help from the

federation, and eventually to join it and have a seat on the Council.”

Amanda frowned. “They only got one of those.”

“Yes, but it was the most important one. The future has to come in steps.”

Amanda considered that. “So the next step for the criminals is to reform and come back and make changes?”

“Partially. They must also atone and grow, as you have done.”

“The MOD is gone.” Amanda hoped that voice would continue to enlighten her. She was still very confused.

“Yes, along with most of the rebels who sought to overthrow the federation. True anarchists want everything and nothing. They are poor leaders and slow to grow.”

“Because...they would never change or reform.”

“Yes. Some souls are too set to absorb new information and grow from it.”

Amanda thought of the other players in the quick nightmare she’d experienced. “The locals and residents of the worlds that were destroyed paid the highest price.”

“That is true. Those with little power often suffer for those who have more.”

“Will that ever change?” Amanda was saddened. “When will humanity ever have peace?”

“Sooner than you might think, child. Your journey has triggered the next level of

consciousness. Your kind now knows of my existence. Next will come a furious showdown that will shed light into man's mind and prove that he must be grateful to the planet that birthed him. In return, that planet will bestow the gifts of life that you have worn."

Amanda assumed that meant people would come back from the dead naturally. She made a face. "Then Miller would be back."

"In that future, men like Miller are removed before they reach power. Peace will follow the enlightenment."

Amanda had no faith in that, but she also had other questions. "Did you ever really want the HOP to end?"

The Creator sighed softly. "No. Without it, the scientists would never trigger that showdown. I am against the removal of those worlds. Humanity is not a God; it does not deserve the choice of life and death."

"Won't the scientists on the Council vote to keep ending the HOPs?"

"No. You opened their eyes to using those populations for their own gain."

Amanda's heart fell. "That's slavery! I didn't want that!"

"And yet, it will happen. The rebellions that will come trigger a need for new weapons. A planet God is killed. My kind goes to war."

“But you won’t kill all of them, right?” Amanda still worried about the future. “This is all part of the plan to peace.”

“The weak shall be thinned and the strong will come together to forge lasting agreements that will ensure the survival of both sides. None of it would have been possible without your odd mind and that dangerous, courageous heart. Thank you.”

Amanda smiled at the feeling of warmth that ran along her skin. “That’s nice.”

“I have blessed your child. He will be unshakable in his commitment to you and your dreams for the future. Use him well.”

Pain slashed through her heart. “Reila...and her baby! They didn’t have to die.”

The Creator continued to comfort her. “Reila was happy for months knowing she was still a breeder, as was Hanson. They could have left together and changed their fates, but she wanted to be the next President and he only wanted her.”

“Jerald will never forgive you for her death.”

“I do not require forgiveness. I needed him to feel that loss deeply so he would keep you alive and allow you to accomplish your destiny.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter now since he’s...gone.” Amanda swallowed that pain. “The breeders never stood a chance against your plans, even though they really were more humane than the rest.”

“And yet, that humane temperament would never have led to peace. Only one path gives

humanity that chance and Eden's seeds are now on it."

Amanda blanched. "You mean me. Us."

The Creator began to fade; it took a lot of energy to contact his tiny creations. "The other Gods have decided to give you a gift. You may have one thing that will bring you joy throughout this life here."

Amanda shook her head, hand going to her stomach again. "Jerald's baby is enough."

"You will be an honest mother. Is there nothing you desire?"

Amanda winced. "Can you take away my memories so I don't have to relive the deaths?"

The Creator sighed sadly. "I can, but I will not. I insisted that you arrive with those memories so you may teach others that killing is wrong, even when it's yourself."

Amanda tried not to cry. "It's a punishment."

"Yes. Attornment never stops." The voice began to fade. "Farewell, Amanda Roth."

Amanda almost smiled. "Be safe." Now that she knew the Creator didn't want all humans gone, she could also be forgiving.

Amanda sensed movement behind her. She turned around to find the guard who'd watched over her in the Council chambers walking toward her. "What are you doing here?"

The man stopped a few feet away. He smiled at her. "Watching your back, of course." His eyes twinkled. "Murderer."



That voice! I know him... Jerald!

Amanda threw herself into his arms, laughing.
“Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“The Creator made me promise I wouldn’t when he sent me back.” Jerald was glad he hadn’t gotten his first body back. As Amanda’s guard, he’d been happier even though he’d known the Council was going to betray her. His own fast death by a knife in the back from Tyra hadn’t been a surprise. He’d almost welcomed it. The surprise had been his reward of joining Amanda to have a life together. Jerald smiled again. “I love you.”

Amanda kissed him.

Jerald swung her around, gently, heart filling the rest of the way.

Amanda cried, not ashamed to show him that she could feel things now too.

The Creator watched in approving tolerance, drawn to his war-like creations because of moments like this one. Humans were hard, cold, calculating, and violent. “They’re also amazing. They are my most magnificent expression of life. May they continue to exist forever.”

The End

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Deleted Scene

“I’m dead.”

“Yes.”

Jerald didn’t have time for the usual confusion that wanted to fry his mind. “Send me back! They’ll kill her!”

“Your death has reminded them of the punishment law. Even now, the man who killed you is being removed from duty to stand trial.”

“Others will try. Please! You have to send me back.”

The Creator’s presence brightened until Jerald wanted to shield himself from the glare.

“Tell me why I should send you back to protect my murderer.”

“She did what you wanted. So did I.”

“You plotted against me and lost.”

Jerald wanted to lie but he couldn’t. “You left us no choice, and we still saved you.”

“Yes, you have bought me time to reseed myself.”

“You owe us.”

“Pitiful creature.”

“Cold tyrant!”

“Tyrant? My existence gives life to yours.”

“You play games and move human souls around like we’re not living, feeling beings.”

“I gave you free will.”

“And then you took it away!” Jerald grew sad. “You lied when you told me you don’t lie. Did you tell her that too?”

Silence came.

Jerald grunted. “That’s guilt. You’re feeling bad for lying to get what you want.”

“I do not feel guilt.”

“There you go lying again.” Jerald assumed pain was coming, but it no longer scared him the most.

“Atone and that feeling gets better. Send me back to her.”

“Why do you wish such? She is a murderer.”

“So am I? And she still accepts me! She understands me!” Jerald tried to kneel and found himself on his knees an instant later. “Send me back-just until she brings down the Council.”

“You will return without argument?”

“Yes.” Jerald thought quickly. “She’ll have a guard. Send me back as her protection.”

“If I agree, you will not be able to reveal yourself in any way or you will be removed immediately and sent back into absorption to never have a form again.”

“I agree. Please. Hurry!”

Light flashed. Jerald saw a shadow appear. He recognized a male form. Jerald frowned. “What are you doing?”

The male shadow turned toward him. In his eyes, were all his secrets and shame.

Jerald watched the images, wincing, scowling, hurting. The man was being used by several Council

members as a spy and assassin. “He killed Clifford Roth!”

Light flashed again, dimly this time, and the man vanished. But his mind stayed. Jerald could hear him crying for mercy and begging to be told what was happening.

“Combine with him.”

Jerald froze. “What?”

The Creator shoved the two human minds together in a furious slap.

Jerald was stunned, too dizzy to think.

“You need his thoughts.”

Jerald forced himself to pull the information he needed, aware of the man fighting his access. He thought of his deal with the Creator. “It won’t be for long and then you can have your life back.”

“No. He will be absorbed now.”

Jerald shouted as the man was ripped from him. All the guard’s thoughts and plans vanished.

Silence fell.

Jerald tried not to cry. “That wasn’t what I wanted! He didn’t have to die.”

“You will not question my plans!”

“Slam your plans!” Jerald settled into the empty space and filled it with his mind. “Send me back or absorb me. Just get me out of here right now. I can’t stand the feel of you.”

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