

## *Isle*

Gasping for breath, Isle glanced over her shoulder. Her leather boots barely touched the sand as she raced away from the town. She could hear motors starting behind her. The rounders would be after her soon. Isle hiked the backpack on her shoulders and continued running. Sweat trickled down her forehead into her eyes. Wiping her sleeve across her face, she cleared her vision. Quickly, she looked back again. The rounders were flying over the town's wall. As the circular machines sped towards her, Isle put on another burst of speed. Leaping over a patch of thorny bushes, the young girl stopped. The ground in front of her fell away into a deep ravine. A few rocks beneath her boots dropped into the blackness.

“Hey kid, stop!”

One of the pilots stepped out of his rounder. Raising his hands, he moved closer to Isle. She drew back until her heels were on the edge of the cliff.

“Are you crazy?” the pilot yelled. “Get back here before you get hurt!”

Looking up, Isle saw the flying machines had formed a semicircle around her, blocking escape routes. The pilots dismounted from their rounders and were gradually coming closer. Isle's chest heaved as she tried to catch her breath.

“You might as well give up. We don't want to hurt you.” The man gestured to the men. “You don't have anywhere to go.”

“There's one place,” Isle answered.

Whirling around, she jumped off the cliff. The men shouted in horror and sprinted to the ravine. A metallic blur whisked in front of their faces and into the sky. Isle smiled as she pressed the lever. Her small ship accelerated, leaving the desert sands below. Taking off her backpack, Isle set it behind her seat in the cargo space. She knew she was safe. The short range rounders

would never be able to get this high in the atmosphere. Leaning back in her seat, Isle set her ship on automatic. She gazed out the window as the world outside faded from blue to black. Bright silver specks sparkled in the distance.

“Time to head home,” Isle whispered.

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The evening breeze brushed Isle’s hair back as she stood staring at the heaps of rubble below. She lived where the city dumped their metal and other trash that wouldn’t conveniently burn away. When Isle’s parents died, the debt collectors took their house, property, and everything else. Isle lasted a few months in the Foster Refuge before running away. At the age of seven, she started living on the streets alone. For the past five years, Isle made the scrapyard inhabitable. A large abandoned rocket was standing at the end of the rubbish heap farthest away from the town. The bottom of the structure was empty, but Isle made the hollow top section of the silver structure into her home. A semicircular platform stuck out at the bottom of the wide windshield that had been broken for years. A long rope hung from the opening with large knots at intermittent lengths so she could climb up and down. The height of the rocket kept her safe from wild creatures. Once she pulled up the rope, Isle knew she was safe from the rest of the world.

As the sun sank over the town in fiery red and gold, she drew in a deep breath. Sitting on the platform, Isle swung her legs over the edge. The last rays of the sun warmed her skin. Once dusk thickened, she could sneak into town and get her money. While the yellow glow faded, Isle turned away and went inside. She hated it when the final light disappeared, and the sky went from grey to black. Seeing all the stars appearing made Isle realize how small and alone she was in such an immense universe.

“Okay, time to get going,” she whispered to herself.

Grabbing her green jacket, she glanced at her reflection in an old mirror she found in the scrapyard. A short, small girl with tan skin and long, black hair stared back at her. Her dark blue pants and cream shirt were threadbare and dirty. A bruise from her last mission was beginning to form on her forehead. Isle jerked her hood up blocking out her image in the mirror. Picking up her backpack from the corner of the room, she stepped onto the platform and pulled on a cable. A screen fell down over the opening to her house. Isle threw a rope over the edge of the platform. Seizing the rough cord, she let herself down.

Once she reached the ground, she trotted past her spaceship to where she had hidden her airsail. Carefully, she pulled the scrap of sheet metal aside and set the airsail on the ground. She lifted up the pole with the sail attached and fastened it on top of her board. Isle stepped down on the power lever and jumped on the board as the airsail’s engine rumbled to life. Standing on the board, she grabbed the cords attached to the sail and maneuvered them until the airsail was flying several yards from the ground. Isle stepped on the power lever again, sending the board speeding towards the town.

The wind knocked her hood off as she flew across the scrapyard and over empty fields. When she reached the town, Isle disassembled her airsail and hid it in some bushes. She crawled under the wall through a hole she had dug years ago. The streets were deserted. Skirting around buildings, she kept to the shadows until she reached a rundown shop. Silently, she opened the door and slipped inside. A large man wearing a burgundy robe was sitting behind a counter. His head was leaning back as he tossed pomegranate batels into his mouth. Crossing the room, Isle pulled off her backpack and dropped it on the counter in front of him.

“Where’s my money?” she demanded.

The man dropped his food in surprise. His stubby fingers grabbed at the backpack eagerly.

“I didn’t even hear you come in, girly.”

“My name is Isle, not girly. Now, where’s my money?”

“Give me a minute to examine the goods.” The man’s eyes widened as he pulled out the glass tube with green electricity inside. “Sure as my name’s Greely Gorpchack, I don’t know how you pulled that off.”

“I keep my secrets, and you keep yours,” Isle answered shortly.

“Here’s your pay.”

Greely reached into his pocket and pulled out a small pouch. Isle held out her hand, and the coins dropped into her palm.

“I wish you would change your mind and come work with my crew. You’re the best thief I ever hired. We sure could use a little one like you, girly.”

“That’s not my name,” Isle said, placing the coins in her pocket. “And why would I want to work with your crew?”

Greely stood up and walked around the counter. His heavy body dwarfed Isle’s small frame.

“I worry about you, sweetheart. I just want to help.” Greely started to smile, but belched instead. “A tiny girl like you shouldn’t be on her own.”

“I’ve been fine by myself.” Isle crossed her arms. “I don’t need your help.”

“All right then.” Greely wiped a hand across his mouth. “What about another job?”

“Already?”

“Yep.” Pulling a piece of parchment out of his shirt, Greely laid it on the counter and gestured for Isle to join him. “This one is worth a lot. You get this, and we can all retire.”

Isle looked down at the drawing of a small bronze sphere with silver light trickling out of a small opening.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Don’t worry your pretty head about that. You just focus on getting the target and bringing it back to me.” Greely handed Isle several more parchments. “These are the maps you’ll need to get to the planet and find the object.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes.” Greely plopped his hand on Isle’s shoulder. “Be careful. This is a dangerous one.”

“Aren’t they all?” Isle muttered.

“Not like this one. This won’t be stealing an artifact from a museum or robbing a science lab.”

“Then why are you sending me? Why don’t you send your crew?”

“I can’t. This one has to be you.” Greely heaved a sigh that shook his whole body. “This planet has a defense mechanism that keeps us out. The shield that they’ve created would blast my crew into space. It senses the heartbeat signature of humans within its perimeter, but it doesn’t register kids. You’re too young and small for it to lock onto your signal. That’s why it has to be you.”

“Okay, but why is it so dangerous?” Isle looked down at the maps. “It doesn’t look like they have guards or any protection around the target.”

With a wheezing breath, Greely dropped to his knee beside Isle. “The people on this planet aren’t normal. They’re not even people. If they catch you, there’s no telling what they will do. They’re savages.”

“I can handle myself.” Isle tilted her chin up confidently even though she felt her stomach tightening into knots.

“Sure you can, kid.” Greely patted her head. “Come back when you got the goods, and I’ll give you your cut.”

Isle nodded and put her backpack on. Pulling her hood up, she walked out of the shop and into the night. She just had to get through this last job, and she would be done with Greely forever. She wouldn’t need him or anyone else ever again.

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“Okay, here goes nothing.”

Isle thrust the throttle forward. Her ship picked up speed heading straight towards the planet below. Looking out the windshield, Isle could see flames outside as she entered the atmosphere. Isle clenched her hands around the controls as the ship shook violently. Heat seeped inside and warmed her skin. Pushing the throttle down to maximum capacity, she held her breath. The engine roared and sputtered loudly. Suddenly, the flames died away, and the black space outside transformed to a bright blue. Isle sighed in relief.

“We made it! Let’s go get the last one we need so we can get out of this business.”

Isle grabbed her steering mechanism and directed her ship to the ground. The earth below was different than her home planet or any others she had visited. Most of them were deserts with a few oases where the wealthy lived. However, this land was covered with green fields, forests, and clear water. Looking back at her map with the navigation coordinates, Isle released her

landing gears. Her ship set down in the middle of a clearing. Isle pressed the lock, and the door swung open upwards.

Stepping out of the spaceship, Isle looked around. She was surrounded by tall trees and bushes. The air felt clear and warm. Isle wanted to explore, but she knew that she had to move quickly before she was discovered. Opening the cargo hatch, Isle pulled out her airsail and assembled it. Her backpack was already stuffed with everything that she thought might be necessary for this mission.

“Okay, you stay here, and I’ll be back soon.”

Isle patted the side of her ship before hopping onto her airsail. She was only a few miles from the target’s location. Shaking back her silky, black hair, Isle braided the strands and tied the end with a strip of leather. Then, she seized the cords and maneuvered her airsail around the trees. It only took her a few minutes to reach the end of the forest. A shining, blue lake stood in front of her with a grassy island in the middle of the water. Isle knew the target was hidden in a hollow section in the top of a tree. Skimming across the lake, she approached the island. Isle could feel the familiar tightening in her stomach that she always felt on a mission. Flying upwards, she urged her airsail to the tree. A faint glow was coming from a hollow branch. Isle smiled. She was almost finished with her last mission. Carefully, she reached into the opening. Just as her fingers closed around the object, Isle felt something hard strike her in the shoulder. She fell back against the sail with a cry of surprise.

A boy appeared from around the other side of the tree. He had flight rollers strapped onto his feet and was holding a sling shooter. Smugly, he grinned at Isle while he grabbed the bronze sphere from the tree branch. Skating through the air, he fired one more shot at her before flying away. Quickly, Isle dodged to the side and fell on her airsail board. The stone whizzed by her.

With a swift jump, Isle got back to her feet. Her shoulder ached where the first rock struck.

Gritting her teeth, Isle stomped on the power lever. She could see the boy skating through the air ahead of her.

“Better luck next time,” the boy yelled over his shoulder.

Isle shook out her sail fully. Instantly, she lurched forward. Within a few minutes, she was alongside the boy. He yanked out his sling shooter and aimed it at her.

“Not this time,” Isle said.

Before he could shoot, Isle knelt and pulled a tiny black triangle from her boot. Flipping a switch on the back of the triangle, she activated the magnetic pulse. Immediately, the bronze sphere leapt out of the boy’s hand across to Isle. She placed the ball into an ivory container and threw it into the air.

“Better luck next time,” Isle shouted.

The boy tried to reach for the container, but a rocket turbo emerged from the bottom and shot it into the sky.

“What did you do?” he yelled. “Where did you send it?”

Isle could see the boy’s green eyes narrowing as he raised his sling shooter. Before he could press the trigger, she jumped off her airsail and tackled the boy. Her attack caught him by surprise, and both of them plunged into the lake. The cold water sent shivers through Isle’s body. Shoving the boy away from her, she kicked her legs and rose to the surface. After inhaling deeply, Isle dived back under and swam for the shore. The moment her feet touched the sand, she surged out of the water and began running. She had only gone a few steps when her legs were yanked out from under her. Swiftly, Isle rolled over on her back and threw a handful of sand at the boy. He turned his face away but kept his hands around her ankle.

“Let go of me!” Isle commanded.

“Give it to me, and I’ll let you go,” the boy replied.

“I can’t.” Isle tried to jerk her leg away, but his grip was too strong to break. “Look, I can’t give you the target because it’s not here. I put it in my space rover which flew out of the atmosphere. It’s already shooting through space now.”

The boy let go of Isle’s ankle in surprise. Gathering her legs under her body, the girl prepared to run once she had caught her breath.

“That was a space rover?” he asked. “I’ve never seen one so small.”

“Yeah because they’re not usually built that size. I made it myself.”

“Where did you program it to go?” the boy said.

Isle shook her head. “I’m not going to tell you. You’ll try to beat me there and steal it for yourself.”

“You don’t understand.” The boy tossed his light brown hair out of his eyes. “I have to bring it back with me.”

“Well, that’s too bad because I’m not telling you where it is.”

“Then, I’ll take you back with me, and they’ll make you tell me.”

Isle stuck out her chin stubbornly. “I’m not going anywhere with you, and you can’t make me.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, the boy eyed her. Isle could tell that he was trying to decide what to do next. Slowly, she inched one hand towards her backpack where she had the airsail remote controller in a side pocket. When her fingers wrapped around it, she jumped to her feet and began running. Isle knew the boy would catch up to her soon, so she raced to the nearest tree and started scaling the branches.

“What are you doing? You’ll have to come down eventually,” the boy called from the ground.

“Or I could just keep going up,” Isle replied.

Looking out towards the water, she could see her airsail hurtling towards her. The boy activated his flight rollers and soared up next to her branch. Isle broke off a stick and held it out defensively, but he wasn’t paying attention to her.

“Take my hand,” he said.

“What?”

“Hurry up! Take my hand and jump on my back!”

“Why?”

Isle turned in the direction the boy was gazing. Her eyes widened as she caught sight of the dark grey shapes moving through the trees on all fours. The figures were thin, bony, and had no faces.

“Do you want to die? Grab my hand,” the boy shouted.

Isle hesitated for a moment. She didn’t trust him, but she remembered Greely’s warnings. Her airsail was not going to reach her before the creatures. Leaning out, she seized the boy’s hand. He threw her onto his back and began skating through the air. Isle glanced back.

“They’re catching up to us,” she yelled.

“I’m going as fast as I can,” the boy replied. “These flight rollers weren’t meant to take this much weight.”

“Head towards my airsail. It’ll hold us both.”

Veering to the side, the boy obeyed her directions. The airsail reached the land and was speeding over the treetops towards them. Isle looked back again. The grey aliens had gained on them.

“Hurry, hurry!” Isle urged.

The boy grunted and sped up. One of the creatures leapt off a branch and reached for them. Its fingers brushed Isle’s braid, but didn’t manage to grab her. As the alien fell, the airsail flew up next to Isle. Immediately, she hopped off the boy’s back and onto the board.

“Get behind me and press the power lever.” Seizing the cords, Isle released the sail and maneuvered them into the wind. “Hold on!”

Jerking the airsail to the side, she dodged through the trees to where she had parked her ship. Isle swiftly weaved through the woods until she could see the clearing. Suddenly, a thick wire wrapped around her waist and pulled her upwards. Twisting around, Isle could see the boy was dangling in the air as well. They were suspended with a metal cable from a tree branch.

“It’s a trap,” the boy said, struggling uselessly to free himself.

“Obviously,” Isle scoffed.

Slipping her fingers inside her sleeve, she pulled out a laser cutter. Isle began cutting through the wire, but the branch holding them shook violently. The laser cutter fell from her hands.

“I think you should stop showing where you’re hiding all your gadgets,” the boy hissed.

Isle looked up. Several of the grey creatures were standing on the branch above them. They grabbed the wire and lowered the kids. Once their feet touched the ground, they were surrounded. Isle’s backpack was yanked off, and her wrists were bound behind her back.

“What do you think they’re going to do to us?” she whispered.

“Guess we’re getting ready to find out,” the boy answered.

In perfect synchronization, the aliens rose up on two legs. One of them drew nearer and held out his palm. A blue mist rose from his hand and blew into the children’s faces. Isle could feel her vision clouding over, and her legs buckled. Before she hit the ground, her body was lifted up by sinewy arms. Isle fought against the darkness, but her mind slipped away into unconsciousness.

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“Are you awake?”

Groaning, Isle opened her eyes. Her head ached, and her mouth was parched. She pushed herself up and looked around. The boy was next to her, and their ankles were chained to the same post. They were in a canvas tent, and Isle couldn’t hear anything outside.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” the boy replied. “I woke up a few minutes ago.”

Scooting forward, Isle pulled the chains on her legs. She could tell they were too tight for her to squeeze through, and she would never be able to pick the locks without her tools.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance that you have another laser cutter hidden in your other sleeve.”

“Nope, I only carry one.” Isle gave up with the chains and sat back. “And thanks to you, I lost it.”

“How was that my fault?” the boy protested.

“If you hadn’t tried to steal the target from me, neither of us would have been captured. I could be safely back at my place.”

“If you would have given it to me instead of running off, we could have had time to escape,” the boy argued back.

Isle huffed angrily. She had never been caught on a mission before, and this one would have settled her for life. The silence was held for several minutes before the boy spoke again.

“What’s your name?”

“What?”

“What’s your name?” the boy repeated.

Isle narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “What’s your name?”

The boy extended his hand. “I’m Kadon; I’m from the Silverstream Galaxy.”

Slowly, she took Kadon’s hand. “Isle, and I live in the Glowcourse System.”

“Why were you trying to get the generator?”

Isle hesitated.

“Come on.” Kadon flashed her a small smile. “It’s not like I’m going anywhere.”

Isle laughed for the first time in months. “I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am. Plus if we’re going to die soon, you might as well tell at least one person your story.”

Biting her lip, Isle considered Kadon for a moment. Finally, she sighed and shrugged. She hadn’t trusted anyone since her parents died, but there was no point in keeping quiet now. Neither of them were in a position to betray each other.

“I’ll tell you everything if you’ll tell me,” she bargained.

“Done.”

Isle took a deep breath and began her story. She told Kadon everything including the death of her parents, her life on the streets, and working for Greely.

“So you built everything?” Kadon whistled in amazement. “Your airsail, rover, laser cutter, and spaceship? That’s incredible. How did you do it?”

“My parents were both inventors, and they taught me.” Isle explained. “They said that I had a knack for it. The scrapyards provided lots of material.”

“No kidding. You’re a genius.”

“Okay, now your turn,” Isle changed the subject, embarrassed. “Why were you after the target? What did you say it was again?”

“It’s called a generator.” Kadon ran a hand through his tousled hair. “I was sent to retrieve it for the Silverstream Galactic Alliance.”

“You work for the government?”

Kadon nodded. “Yeah, my parents gave me to the SGA when I was six because they were too poor to keep me. The SGA has been training me for seven years.”

“Why do they want the generator?”

“They told me that the aliens are building weapons to attack other planets. The generator creates a shield that keeps the SGA from seeing the weapons or their plans.”

“How did they find out about the weapons?”

“They sent an experienced, adult agent to infiltrate this planet. He saw the weapons being built and managed to send a message out.”

Isle frowned. “That doesn’t make sense. How did an adult get through the generator shield?”

“What do you mean?” Kadon asked.

“The only reason Greely sent me instead of coming himself or sending his men was because only kids can get past the generator shield. How did the SGA get an adult through?”

“I don’t know,” Kadon answered. “I wasn’t told about that part of the generator. They said that they were sending me because they wanted to see how I would do on my first solo mission.”

Isle started to speak, but the tent flap swung open unexpectedly. Four grey aliens entered and unlocked the children’s ankle chains. Wrapping their bony fingers around Isle’s upper arms, they pulled her outside and led her forward. The bright sunlight blinded her. Isle blinked several times until her vision adjusted. She was standing next to Kadon in a field. One of the tall, bony creatures was standing in front of them. It bowed its head towards them, and a small silver light came from its chest.

“What’s it doing?” Kadon whispered.

Isle shrugged. The alien tapped its chest, and the light flowed from its chest to thin strips zigzagging across its empty face. Soft clicking and hissing came from the light.

“I think it’s trying to speak to us,” Isle replied.

The alien cocked its head and pressed its chest again. Squeaking sounds came from the crossing strips of light on its face. The creature repeated the process multiple times.

“How many languages is it going to get through before it reaches ours?” Kadon said.

“Hello humanoid children, the planet of Tellman hails you.”

“Well that answers my question,” Kadon murmured under his breath.

“Hello,” Isle greeted the alien nervously.

“We apologize for the treatment you have received, but it was necessary for the safety of our people. The generator shield for Tellman has been stolen, and our defense force believed you had taken it. However, it was not found on your persons or in your possessions. Therefore, we are releasing you from custody.”

“Great, can you point me in the direction of my ship?” Isle asked.

“Of course, we are pleased to escort you to your transportation.”

“Wait,” Kadon interrupted, “that’s it? You’re just letting us go?”

“What are you doing?” Isle hissed. “Shut up.”

Turning away from the creature, Kadon pulled her to the side. He lowered his voice so they could not be overheard.

“Look, there’s something wrong here. We were told that these aliens were dangerous creatures that would kill us immediately. They are the complete opposite of that. Aren’t you curious to know what is going on?”

“No,” Isle whispered back. “I just want to go back and get my money.”

“What is it with you and that money?”

“I just need it.”

“Why? Why is that money more important than the truth?”

“I need it to get my home back!” Isle exploded. “You wouldn’t understand!”

Looking away, she blinked her tears away rapidly. Gently, Kadon placed a hand on her shoulder.

“You can tell me anything.”

“I’ve been saving my earnings for years, so that I could buy back my family’s house someday. This last job would give me enough. I just want...”

“A home,” Kadon finished her sentence.

Isle nodded and pressed her lips tightly together to keep them from trembling.

“I understand,” Kadon whispered. “I barely remember my home, but I miss it. I miss my parents and brothers and sisters. But do you really want to buy your house back with this money?”

Twirling her hair around her fingers, Isle hesitated. This was supposed to be her last mission before retiring from being a thief. Finally, she sighed and shrugged.

“Okay, we might as well find out what’s going on since we’re here.”

Kadon clapped his hands together. “Great, come on.”

The two children crossed back to the alien with the glowing light. It turned toward them as they approached.

“So we were just wondering why someone would have stolen your generator,” Kadon said. “We could look for it on our planets just in case. Not because we took it. We would definitely return it to you and not sell it.”

“Real smooth,” Isle muttered.

“The generator shields us from outside forces that wish to harvest the natural resources from Tellman.”

“How do you know that’s what people would do?”

“It has happened before.”

The alien lifted its head up, and a rich, sweet note came from the strips of light on its face. Nothing happened for a moment, and then the wheat in the field around them lifted into the air. Isle watched open mouthed as the wheat transformed into multiple golden butterflies. Their flight patterns in the sky transformed into a story. Several large warships landed on a planet. The soldiers came off the warships and ran across the land. As they moved forward, they stripped the

land bare and killed everything. Finally, one of the aliens stepped forward with a small sphere. A surge of energy came from the sphere and knocked the soldiers off the planet.

“Since our ancestor invented the generator many seasons ago, it has shielded us from harm.” The alien repeated the same note, and the butterflies fluttered back to the ground and changed back to wheat. “We were able to rebuild with its protection. Whoever stole it did not turn it off. Therefore, the protective shield is still in place. However, whoever holds the generator can penetrate our defenses and enter Tellman.”

“And then they would destroy everything again,” Isle said.

“That is correct.”

Isle looked at Kadon. His green eyes widened as he absorbed everything the alien told them.

“That’s the real reason they sent me,” he whispered. “They lied.”

Placing her hands on her hips, Isle thrust out her chin defiantly. “And they’re not going to get away with it.”

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Isle pulled herself onto the platform. Standing up, she gestured for Kadon to follow her.

“This is where you live?”

“Yep, I’ve been here ever since I got kicked out of town.” Isle pulled on a cable, and the screen in front of her shelter lifted up. “Come inside.”

Kadon wandered around the house while Isle opened a small hatch on the wall. The rover had landed safely inside. Opening the container, she pulled out the bronze sphere.

“I’ve got it,” she called over her shoulder. “Let’s get out of here.”

Kadon shimmied down the rope first while Isle tucked the generator away. Grabbing the knotted rope, she went hand over hand until she reached the ground.

“We better hurry before your people come after us,” she said.

“It’s a little late for that.”

Isle whirled around. A group of men in dark red uniforms were standing behind her. Two of them were holding Kadon with a gag over his mouth. One of the men stepped forward and held out his hand.

“We know you two have the generator. Now, give it to us.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Isle replied, placing a protective hand on her backpack.

“We can track the generator’s location. It is on this planet. Your skill as a thief has led us here.”

“Well, you’ve been led to the wrong place then.” Isle moved back a few steps. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Give us your backpack, and we’ll leave you alone.”

Isle narrowed her eyes. “Not a chance.”

“In that case, we’ll hurt your friend.”

The man snapped his fingers, and the gag was ripped off Kadon’s mouth. He was dragged forward by his captors.

“You can’t hurt him. He works for you,” Isle protested.

“We have plenty of other agents. He’s expendable,” the man responded, emotionlessly.

He nodded to his men, and one of them pulled out a short club. An electric current crackled at the top of the club.

“Don’t tell him anything,” Kadon said.

“Give me the generator!” the man ordered.

Slowly, Isle pulled off her backpack and held it in front of her. She looked at Kadon and raised her eyebrows. He nodded back slightly.

“Come on, girl. Hand it over.”

The man reached out, but Isle unexpectedly hurled the backpack at the men. Kadon took advantage of their surprise to wriggle free, scoop up the backpack, and run. Both kids began racing through the scrapyard. Kadon tossed the backpack to Isle who put it back on.

“Whose ship is closer?” Isle panted.

“Yours, mine is on the other side of the scrapyard.”

While the two dodged around the piles of metal and trash, they could hear the men close behind. As soon as they could see the ship ahead, Isle pulled out a green cube and pressed a button on it. Her spaceship’s engine powered up, and the door hatch swung open. Isle put on an extra burst of speed and sprinted the last few yards. Kadon leapt through the door and began the liftoff process. The ship lifted off the ground, and the turbo engines flipped down. Isle jumped towards the opening, but a hand seized the collar of her jacket and yanked her backwards. Twisting around, she tried to punch the person who held her, but her arm was wrenched behind her back.

“Whoa girly, it’s just me.”

“Greely?” Isle gasped. “What are you doing here?”

“You did good, kid.” Greely patted her head. “We got rid of those government goons, but you did good hanging on to the target for us.”

“We have to return it,” Isle interrupted.

“What?”

“If I don’t return the generator, the planet of Tellman will be destroyed. I can’t have that on my conscience.”

“Look kid, you’re too young to understand.” Greely clicked his tongue, and his men surrounded Isle. “Just hand over the target, and I’ll make sure you get your share of the money.”

“It’s not about the money,” Isle protested. “It’s about doing what’s right.”

“This is what’s right.” Greely belched and squatted down. “I know you want this money to have a family, and you can have that. Just give me the target, and we can be your family.”

“No, don’t listen to him,” Kadon yelled from the ship.

“Come on.” Greely held out his hand. “Be a part of my family, girly.”

“Please don’t do this, Isle,” Kadon begged.

Isle looked away from Kadon and slid her backpack off. She dropped it onto the sand in front of Greely. Immediately, the men clustered around the backpack and ripped it open. Greely plunged his hand inside. He grasped the object inside and pulled it out. A pouch of coins was in his hand. He turned back to where Isle was standing, but she was gone. Looking up, Greely saw the girl’s small figure in the window of the spaceship as it blasted into the sky.

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Isle dipped her toe into the flowing river. The cool water brushed over her skin. She sat down and stared out at the dark purple and pink night sky with silver constellations.

“Can I join you?”

Looking up, Isle nodded her head. Kadon plopped down next to her. They sat in silence for a moment.

“What made you decide to refuse Greely’s offer?”

“It wasn’t too hard.” Isle tucked her hair behind ear. “Greely only cares about himself. That’s not family. He didn’t even know my name.”

“Why’d you stick the generator in your pocket instead of your backpack?”

“I figured that we might need a decoy just in case.”

“You lost all your money which was your chance at getting your home back.”

Isle shrugged. “I realized that a house is different than a home. Houses are just spaces to live, but a home is where your family is. There are worse things than money that I could have lost. Like a friend.”

Kadon smiled back. “So what do we do now? The people of Tellman have said we can stay here.”

Isle turned back to the horizon. “Have you ever wondered what’s out there? All my life, I’ve been told that only vicious monsters lived on other planets, but that wasn’t true on Tellman.”

“Let’s go find out.”

Isle looked at Kadon. “You’d go with me?”

“I’ll go anywhere with my family.”

Kadon held out his hand and helped Isle to her feet. The two stood, hand in hand, staring out at the vast space before them.