

## Prologue

Jalia Quinn stood alone in a classroom full of children. Although these kids were only a few years younger than her she felt generations above them. Her class had graduated a year earlier and Jalia felt it hard to believe that they were ever as rowdy as this bunch. She had given them permission to talk quietly among themselves and now it seemed as though all hell was breaking loose.

Jalia's mother had been giving a lecture on what impact World War II had on racism when the superintendent called her. She calmly hung up the phone and asked her daughter to watch the class for a moment. Although Jalia had only shown up for a visit she really had nothing else planned for the afternoon and agreed.

It started as a few small conversations among the older teens. But as the minutes progressed one group would talk slightly louder to be heard over the others. The end result was obvious and Jalia didn't want any of the other teachers to barge in and quiet the class.

Jalia Whistled as loud as she could and clapped her hands twice to get their attention.

The room seemed instantly eerily silent. The speed in which the kids clammed up surprised her. All eyes were on Jalia as she stood at the front of the classroom, next to the big board displaying a list of World War II victories. She was beginning to feel the slight pain and vibration in her palms from clapping her hands so hard. Public speaking had always been one of her biggest fears, and she hated having the attention of such a large group.

But she had asked for this. She had gotten their attention and now had to occupy them until her mother returned.

Jalia walked to the corner of the classroom and leaned against her mother's desk facing the students with her arms crossed. "You guys don't quite grasp the concept of talking quietly, do you?"

There was a few quiet chuckles and giggles from the 20 or so kids.

Jalia smiled and quickly surveyed the group. It was about 50/50 girls and boys, only of which 1/3 were black or dark skinned. Looking at the clock it was 13:00. She turned to the board, picked up the eraser, and began erasing the small list of victories that her mother had recently written. "My mother will probably hate me for this, but by the looks of it she won't be back in time for you guys to go home. Besides... The whole racism concept is outdated and stupid."

A few more quiet chuckles from behind her.

After erasing everything from the board she set down the eraser, turned to face the class, and clasped her hands together. "Alright! What do you guys want to talk about? It'll help pass the time."

The room was suddenly silent again. Most of the students were staring at her, but some were glancing around the room or down at their desks. After a few seconds somebody in the back with a deep voice cleared his throat. She couldn't tell who it was. After a few more seconds Jalia spoke up, "Oh come on... You mean to tell me that no one in here has anything they're curious about?"

A tall white boy in the front row slowly raised his hand. Jalia couldn't remember his name but remembered seeing him a number of times in the past. He cleared his voice and spoke softly;

almost as if he was trying to keep a person calm, "Mrs. Quinn mentioned that you were leaving. Where are you going?"

Jalia realized why he was speaking so cautiously. Her mother was sensitive to the subject of her daughter leaving. She might have even snapped at a student in the past for inquiring about it.

Jalia, however, didn't mind talking about it at all. Although she wasn't looking forward to leaving her home, family, and friends, the prospect of traveling throughout the colonies and discovering new things was too appealing to turn down.

"I've enlisted in the Draconis Empire Defense Force. I ship out next week and have to report at the Draconis Colony in 4 months."

A short black girl in the center of the class asked, "Why are you shipping out so soon if you don't have to be there for 4 months?"

Jalia Sighed and walked over to her moms desk, "Because it's going to be a long trip." She hopped up and sat on the desk. "There isn't going to be a slipstream capable ship out this far for at least another six months. Because our export is technology and not perishable most of the ships that come and go are limited to sub light engines. They're a lot cheaper to build and maintain. I'm hitching a ride through two colonies before catching a faster ship to Draconis."

The same girl asked: "What two colonies?"

Jalia had to think for a moment, "Uuuhh... Viridis Pulcher and... Novoya Mir. Both are supposed to be nice planets."

She remembered that her family had visited Viridis Pulcher when she was younger. The name was Latin for Green Beauty, and the planet was basically like Earth. Only a small portion of which was colonized. Most of the city around the space dock was a tourist attraction and had a few theme parks and outdoor attractions. A few of the major subspace channels were broadcast from there, including the most watched news channel "CNC" (Colony News Channel).

Jalia found it disappointing that she couldn't find a slipstream flight out of Viridis Pulcher but it was a slow time of year for them and her family wasn't willing to pay the price for a private flight.

Another boy up front asked, "How long are you going to be in Viridis Pulcher? It sounds like a good vacation before enlisting."

"Only two nights. I'm hoping to see some of the sights and then rest at the beginning of my next flight."

The same short girl who asked her about shipping out asked, "If Viridis Pulcher is 2 weeks away, how long will the trip to Novoya Mir be?"

Jalia was beginning to fill as if she was the subject of a press conference and was starting to regret getting so deep into this conversation. The long trip between Viridis Pulcher and Novoya Mir was the part she hated worst about this journey. She swallowed her regret and continued on, "That trip will last two months."

"Yikes!" Came from a boy in the back. Jalia noticed a couple of eyebrows throughout the room raising.

"There are no public slipstream flights out of Viridis Pulcher this time of year. So I booked a cabin on a cargo ship hauling equipment." Jalia turned and looked at the clock. It was 13:15. She still had to keep these kids occupied for another 5 minutes.

She asked, "Have any of you been to Novoya Mir?"

One boy in the back raised his hand. He was a short white kid that appeared to be around 15 and spoke with a Russian accent. "I was raised there. My great grandfather helped to establish it."

Jalia was surprised and asked, "Why did your family move here?"

"My mother died a few years ago and my father didn't want to live there anymore. He works on shields here now. The rest of my family still lives there. How long will you be there?"

"About 3 days or so."

The boy had obviously opened up and seemed secure talking about his homeland. "You'll like it there. It's green as far as the eye can see outside of the city. My uncles own a few farms and ranches and one of my aunts own a small chain of grocery stores. I'll tell my dad about you coming."

"Why, thank you." Jalia replied to his kindness with a sincere smile. "What's your name by the way?"

"Jonas Kachko Jr."

The name rang a bell in Jalia's head. She had heard her father use that name before. Maybe they worked together. "Where does your dad work?"

"Level 10. All he says is that he works on shields."

Jalia's father worked on level 10 also. He worked with a team that fine-tuned new defense systems for ships and stations. He was never allowed to discuss what he was working on at any one time, but had mentioned designing and building shields and various counter measure devices in the past. "I think my dad knows yours. They might even work together."

The bell rang to dismiss class and frightened Jalia into jumping off her mother's desk. She felt foolish, but the class didn't notice. They were too busy collecting their stuff and rushing out the door.

As Jonas walked to the door he paused and said, "I'll talk to my dad. Most of my family is really friendly and I'm sure you could save some money and stay with one of my cousins for a few days."

"That'd be nice, but I wouldn't want to put anyone out."

"We'll see," he said. And with that he was out the door.

Jalia walked around and sat at her mother's desk. She had enjoyed talking about her trip to the class. It made her feel a little better about traveling so far. She had always looked forward to arriving at Draconis but feared the long trip. Now she was looking forward to Novoya Mir. Jonas had put a kind face on the place that was going to take 2 months in a cramped ship to reach.

With a soft sigh Jalia pulled a blank sheet of paper out of her mother's printer and began writing a note. She had an exercise session on level 2 in ten minutes and couldn't wait anymore.

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Jalia arrived at the gym right at 13.30. Her friend Jeannine was lifting without her, but had saved the weight machine next to hers.

"Been waiting long?" Jalia asked as she laid her duffle bag down and sat in the machine.

"Nope." Was all Jeannine could muster in between breaths.

In being from a short family of cooks Jeannine Forester herself was short and slightly overweight. Since she began working out with Jalia she had lost 30 lbs. Now she was just short, and that suited her just fine. "One thing at a time," she always said jokingly when looking in the mirror. She used to think that she was giving Jalia an advantage when they hung out together. Jeannine used to say, "A short chubby white girl next to a cute, tall, thin, black chick... That's hurting my love life if anything." And then they'd both laugh and continue on.

Saying that used to hurt Jalia but she kept it to herself. She now honestly believed that she felt just as good with Jeannine's new figure as Jeannine did.

Jeannine was a glutton for punishment and that made her the perfect workout partner for someone who was getting ready to leave the colony. Since gravity on the asteroid was only about 80% of the norm a person born there could develop medical problems if they left without conditioning their body first. Jalia had been working out daily for the past 3 months. Currently she could squat 150 lbs (in her own gravity), and that was more than enough for her to function normally at 100% gravity.

Jalia sat back against the weight machine, "I'm not going to ask you if I'm doing the right thing, because I've already made up my mind and can't wait to get out there." She took a deep breath and sighed. "But do you think people are mad at me for leaving?"

After her next lift Jeannine laid down the dumbbells and leaned back too. "I doubt it hun... It's just tough for them to get used to. Hell..." She wiped her brow with her gym towel "Even I plan to leave here eventually."

"Yea, well. You'd think that my mother would've gotten used to the thought of my leaving by now, but she's still giving me hell about it." Jalia stood up and began her stretches.

Jeannine felt bad for her. She was giving up everything to pursue an exciting life. In her opinion she was leaving one of the most boring places in the known galaxy. And still, her mother was giving her a hard time. Jeannine could understand the pain involved in a mother's chick leaving the nest, but it had to happen some time.

Her father's reaction was another thing altogether. Jacob Quinn's two brothers were enlisted in the Defense Force. One was a Lieutenant and the other was a Lieutenant Commander. He respected what they did and he was proud of his daughter for her choice. If it wasn't for him all hell might've broken out in the Quinn household.

Despite Jalia's mother Jeannine still envied her for what she was doing. She had even entertained the thought of doing it herself, but it was a big step and required a lot of thinking. Gallivanting around the galaxy would be fun, but extremely dangerous. Jeannine wasn't sure she was ready for that yet.

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Standing in the airlock unsettled Jalia. She'd watched countless people come and go from the various locks throughout the colony, but had never actually stood in one herself. She was nervous about a great list of things...

What would it feel like when the doors opened? Would her ears pop? What if there was an accident? Once she crossed the threshold to the other ship would she ever be able to come home again?

That past week had gone by fairly quickly. There had been no more arguments with her mother. The grace period for enlistment had past so there was nothing anybody could do if minds were changed so everybody got along.

Her family stood outside the airlock behind her. Jalia turned and smiled at them. Her father stood in the center. He was tall (about 6 foot) and starting to gray. He had his right arm draped around his wife's shoulder.

Her brother stood on the other side of his father. Jay was about 5' 4" and was dressed in typical teenager clothes (jeans and a blue tee shirt). He was sad to see her go, but happy to get her (slightly larger) room and waved with a smile.

Her mother, however, was crying. Not sobbing uncontrollably but tearing up rather quickly. She reached down into her pocket and pulled out a tissue to dry her eyes. Even sad Milia Quinn displayed an "Aura of Discipline"; maybe that was why she was such a successful teacher.

Jeannine and her family came to see Jalia off as well. They were next to the airlock watching the ship. She'd be able to see and wave to them once the outer door opened and she started walking down the main gangway.

Jalia blew her mother a kiss and turned back towards the outer door. If the airlock had been operating in the past few seconds since the inner door closed she hadn't felt a thing.

The light above the door in front of her turned green. This meant that the seal was pressurized and the doors were about to open. Jalia wasn't sure if she should hold her breath or exhale. The ongoing joke in using an airlock for ship-to-ship transfers was that "The only protocol is to quickly kiss your ass goodbye if a seal fails, because you won't have time to do much else". She decided to take a deep breath and hold it.

The doors quickly opened and Jalia felt a slight breeze across her face. Her ears didn't pop but she felt a little pressure behind them. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a pack of gum that her father offered her when she entered the airlock. She tore out a piece, popped it in her mouth, and stashed the rest back into her pocket.

Jalia reached down to pick up her backpack and slung it over her shoulder. "No use in dilly dallying." Her voice was low but seemed to echo down the long gangway ahead of her.

As Jalia crossed the threshold onto the gangway she lost nearly 80 pounds. The transition was unexpected and startled her enough to release a load of endorphins into her body. She quickly grabbed both railings on either side of her for fear of floating up accidentally. Normally her pack would've slipped down her arm but now it was light enough to stay put. Even though her home colony had less gravity than what was considered the "norm" this feeling was new to her. She smiled and almost laughed at the strange way it made her feel.

Then she noticed the labels on the floor of the gangway:

**WARNING:**  
Gravity plating operates  
At minimum efficiency

She then remembered that most ships save power by cutting gravity down in parts that weren't used much. Jalia continued slowly down the gangway, she felt as though she'd lose her balance or float up. The feeling was strange and her brain couldn't predict which could happen.

Halfway to the ship she turned and looked back towards the colony. It was a magnificent sight for her. From this angle she could see the floor the dock was connected to and the connecting two floors below. These levels went into the asteroid and it blocked the rest. She knew that above the ridge that loomed over her were the top 20 levels of the colony Nova Domus... Her home.

Her eyes started to well up. She fought back the tears and looked back towards her family. She could now see Jeannine and her family through the windows in the gangway as well. Jeannine smiled and gave Jalia a big wave, following it up by holding her thumb to her ear and picking to her mouth and mouthing the phrase "Call me".

Jalia smiled and replied with an "A-OK" sign. She took a deep breath and one more look at the giant rock she called home.

With a big soft sigh she turned and started back towards the ship.