

NUMBERED BOOK ONE

WANT

Magus Tor

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DEDICATION

For my co-founder in Harvest Edutainment Pte Ltd,
Aurelia and Nicholas, our great artist.

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Thank you all my friends who supported me in my crazy
endeavours.

CHAPTER ONE

Aurelia tugged the tight-fitting uniform shirt down and took one last look into the mirror plate. Her long black hair was tied back, not a stray lock touching her collar as regulations dictated. She nodded at her appearance, recognisable even in her new uniform. Well, new in that it was different colours from her school uniform; but still, grey and red were a big improvement over the sickly yellow and black she'd been wearing for the last twelve years.

She shivered a little. Her blood still felt cold. It was a side effect of the coding, and she was more than familiar with it. At the end of every school year, the Trackers injected each child with a genetic code update to embed new information into their genes. For some it was purely because they'd actually passed the year's training; for others it might include distinctions and prizes. For a minority it was the code that signalled they'd failed and training had stopped. Aurelia wasn't sure what happened to these students, since she'd never met any of them again. She assumed they were sent to do some form of low-level work, or possibly even sent back a year to study again. In darker moments she briefly wondered why in her

seventeen years she'd never accidentally run across a Failure that she recognised, but it was best not to think about things like that. She knew the Elitists couldn't read her thoughts; that was forbidden under the Convention, but she was never exactly sure what a Tracker could tell from her twice yearly blood samples, so she did her best to behave herself.

This year's coding had been different, though. Unlike other years when Aurelia had gathered with everyone else in her class on the last day of term, waiting in long lines in the gymnasium, talking and laughing and feeling reckless with freedom and the thought of a whole month of holiday, this year she had bidden goodbye to her schoolmates and skipped the last ceremony. Because she was done. She'd got the news only a few days before. Whilst traditionally coding was done on the last day of school, when graduating many students waited so that their new employment information could be coded at the same time as their graduation code in the Tracker's office rather than in the school gym. Better to have one injection than two, after all. Aurelia already had her assignment, and dammit if it wasn't a plum one. Exactly what she'd wanted. Wanted for years. Except now, she had a wriggling in her stomach that made her doubt if she was really ready for all of this.

“Aurelia!”

Her mom's voice came through the intercom.

“Coming.”

She took one last look around her bedroom pod. It would be the last time she saw it. Once she left, the pod would be detached and sent elsewhere, to someone who had been granted the permission to breed, and it would become some other child's home. When she came home to visit, a guest pod would be attached for the length of her stay. Aurelia took a deep breath. There was nothing here that was hers, she reminded herself. The self-healing skin of the pod meant that there weren't even scuff marks to

indicate that someone had been here, let alone childish graffiti. Her belongings had already been sent to the cargo shuttle, so there really was nothing that made this place her own. Except that it had been hers. She sighed, but she was ready to go.

“Coming, Mom,” she said again, loudly enough for the intercom to pick up.

She closed the door behind her and took the corridor to the right towards the living pod where she knew both her parents were waiting for her. She'd always called them Mom and Dad, old fashioned terminology that her parents liked, though most of her classmates dispensed with this in favour of their parents' names or simple titles like “Sir” and “Ma'am,” depending on how formal their family living situation was.

Her mom looked up and smiled as she entered. “Red definitely suits you better than yellow,” she said, nodding in approval. Mom was from City 04, and Aurelia had inherited her Asiatic features and long dark hair. Dad turned from the console he was sitting at and grinned at her.

“Booked a transport pod to get us to the shuttle bay,” he said.

“Cool!” Aurelia had only once before been in a transport pod, since Workers were forbidden to own them and they were expensive to rent. Generally, she travelled by public transport, as did nearly everyone else she knew.

Dad shrugged. “You deserve it. We're proud of you, Aurelia.” He stood and gave her a hug.

Dad was City 01 born and bred, and while Aurelia hadn't inherited many of his features, she did owe him her 165cm of height and her slightly crooked eyebrows that arched to the sides when she smiled.

“You almost ready?” Dad asked her, pulling away.

“Yep.”

Mom stood, and Aurelia went to kiss the top of her head.

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“Call on the intercom when you get there,” Mom said. “And we are proud of you, Aurelia. Top of your class - we couldn't be prouder.”

Aurelia wanted to tell them that she couldn't have done it without them. Couldn't have done it without their constant help and advice and training. But she was still young enough that to say things like that felt awkward, so she didn't. “I dunno if I'll have time to intercom when I land,” she said, instead. “I'll have orientation, I guess. But I'll call as soon as I can, okay?”

Mom squeezed her hand. “Okay.”

“Come on then, my little superstar,” Dad said. “There's a transport pod waiting for us, so let's hit the town.”

Aurelia knew it was unlikely that she would see her parents for some time to come. It wasn't forbidden to visit them, of course, but it wasn't particularly encouraged either. In fact, some parents completely cut contact with a child after the child began to work, considering that they had fulfilled their responsibilities and could now move on. Aurelia was sure her parents weren't going to do that, but there was still a sense of the end of things. She was no longer a dependent; her parents were no longer required to give her anything or to allow her into their home.

Mom put her hand on Aurelia's arm. “Come visit?” she asked, as if she could read Aurelia's mind.

Aurelia smiled. “Sure thing.”

The main difference between transport pods and public transport was that whilst public transport had to fly high above the buildings, swooping down only at designated stops, a transport pod was allowed to fly between the buildings. That was one of the main reasons why Workers couldn't own them, since the congestion and danger of having so many transport pods trying to use the

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same air space would be disastrous. But, Aurelia thought, as she climbed into the passenger seat, it was pretty nice to have transport right at your door. Her parents' home was on the 43rd floor of one of the many spiralling towers that had shot up after the end of the war to accommodate the increased population. The Elitists had permitted increased breeding during the post-war period, both to bring the population back to its equilibrium and because more Workers were needed to rebuild. Built as large double helices, these spiral towers were desirable places to live. Their structure meant that windows were plentiful, and they had been built close to the centre of cities to allow Workers shorter commute times and, not incidentally, longer working hours.

Aurelia's father was staring at the programming console in the centre of the pod as Aurelia strapped herself into the three-point security belt.

“Umm, you know how to work this thing, right, Dad?” she asked, only half joking.

Her father was a tech Worker, but he was also extremely absent minded, and it was perfectly possible that he'd forgotten to download the pod instructions before setting off.

He looked a little insulted as he said, “Of course, I just...”

Aurelia grinned. “Just what, Dad?”

“Well, I've programmed the destination in and got a clear route.” He fiddled with a couple of icons that were shivering on the screen. “Just...”

“Just what?” she asked again, biting back a giggle and fully aware of what the problem was.

“Just, I can't get the damn thing to go anywhere!” he finally admitted, looking puzzled.

“Er, you forgot something, Dad.”

Aurelia leaned over and pulled the security strap over her father's head.

“Ach, that was pretty dumb.” He shook his head at

his own stupidity.

The transport pods had locks that wouldn't allow vehicle movement unless the security straps were tightened and fastened. As soon as both sets of straps were done up, the pod began humming. Aurelia felt a small vibration under her seat as the vehicle detached from the housing pod and lifted itself away. Then they slid down a level and began to glide out of the block.

Block 3358 was where Aurelia had spent all seventeen years of her life so far. The block was just like any other: It contained ten buildings, each building comprised of a hundred floors, each floor with twenty-five living pods, each living pod with one family made up of either two Worker adults or two Worker adults and a single child. Each living pod had a designation number made up of its block number plus its building, floor and pod number. In Aurelia's case that was 1-3358-7-43-22. Each inhabitant of the pod had his or her own unique identification number, so Aurelia was 1-3358-7-43-22-3, her father being number 1 and her mother number 2. The 1 at the beginning of the number indicated that they were members of City 01, rather than any of the other four Earth cities still in use.

Aurelia had had something preying on her mind for several weeks. As the transport pod navigated itself out of block 3358 and into block 3357 and her father settled back into his seat, she decided that now was probably the only opportunity that she was going to get to ask him.

“Dad?”

“Mmm?” He was studying the control panel, making sure their marked route was going to get them to the shuttle bay in time.

“Have you and Mom thought about having a 4?”

He looked up at her, surprised.

“I mean, I know it's not my business or anything, and I don't know if it makes any difference, but you'd have a fair chance of being approved, and, well, I, you know, I wouldn't mind or anything,” she stuttered.

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All paired Workers could apply for breeding permission whenever they liked, which was generally known as requesting a 3, since any child would naturally become a number 3 as their parents were numbers 1 and 2. A child's 3 didn't advance until they paired, at which point a boy 3 would become a 1 and a girl 3, his pair mate, would become a 2. Very, very rarely Worker parents would be permitted to have a second child, a 4. This was so unusual that Aurelia had only ever known one 4. However, due to her extreme success in training and the fact that she was being given a top work posting, Aurelia was relatively sure that if her parents requested it, they would at least be considered as potential 4 parents, since they had bred so successfully and created a high-class Worker.

"Aurelia," her father sighed. "If your mom and I were going to apply for a 4, don't you think we'd have told you?"

Aurelia shifted uncomfortably. "I guess," she said.

"Of course we would have. And of course we've thought about it. We're still young enough to request, and you're so very special and brilliant. But we decided that since you've given us so much pleasure, it was only right to allow other pair mates the chance to breed. It didn't seem fair to ask for a 4."

She smiled. One of the reasons that she was so close to her parents, closer than many children were, was because they were both such nice and generous people. "Won't you miss having a child around, though?" she asked.

Her father raised his eyebrows. "Miss that awful racket you call music, and the panic every year come exam time?"

At this she laughed, and her father patted her hand and went back to examining the transport pod's console.

The pod was gliding through blocks now, keeping to its designated floor level to avoid other pods taking the same route. City 01 was big - huge, Aurelia knew. But she

was only familiar with a ten-block area or so, since that was all she needed to know to go from home to school and back again. Even the vacation centre was within that ten-block area, so during holidays when Aurelia and her parents had been given a week to go into the holo-programme and see sights, she had never had to leave her home district. There would have been no point, anyway; Aurelia knew that the majority of the places loaded into the holo-programmes no longer existed. The beaches and historical cities had all been destroyed or rendered uninhabitable aeons ago, and they survived only as programmed holographs where Worker families could spend seven days every year. Still, when you felt the sun beating down on your skin and the sand creeping up between your toes and smelled the rich, salty tang of the sea air, it was kind of hard to remember that all of this was simply a collection of 1s and 0s programmed into a code that resembled a place long gone.

Through the transparent roof bay of the transport pod, Aurelia could see the soft pale shadow of the moon. Pollution fans blew the smog out of most of City 01, leaving the sky relatively clear. The moon was visible even during the day, a silent, lurking shadow watching over the city. Aurelia shuddered a little and turned her eyes away from the moon, her eventual destination. It wasn't that she didn't want to be there - she very much did. It was all she'd ever wanted; all most Worker kids wanted was to be posted to Lunar City, the Elitist capital. It was just that she didn't want to think about leaving, not right now, not when it was so close. She wanted to remain earthbound as long as possible, eking out every last second of her time here.

Her father sensed that she was feeling nervous. "Ready for the big time?" he asked her.

She sighed. "Yes, I think so. I mean, I'm not sure."

"It's a big step," he said. "It's natural to be nervous about starting your posting."

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Aurelia looked down at her hands. "I'm not nervous about work," she said, which was true. Lunar City Hospital would hold no surprises for someone who had graduated top of her class at Medical Training School. "I'm just a bit, well, sad, I guess, about leaving."

Her father patted her knee. "It's normal to be sad about leaving a place, but remember this isn't just an end - it's a beginning. And with your skills, it could be the beginning of something big."

Aurelia knew what he was referring to, but she preferred not to talk about it. Whether it was because she was afraid of what the future could hold or because she didn't want to jinx herself, she wasn't sure. "It's a big opportunity," was all she said.

"It is that," her father responded. "Very big. And a big responsibility."

Since the establishment of Lunar City as the capital of United Earth fifty years ago, it had become harder and harder for Workers to get permission to move to the Moon's surface. The Elitists allowed only the most skilled Workers to apply for postings there, and even then many Workers were employed only on temporary contracts which would eventually send them back to Earth. Aurelia, as a talented Medical Worker, would be allowed permanent Lunar City residence for as long as she was able to work. Lunar City had everything. It was the home of power, politics, the rich and the famous, and the Ruling Class, those whose families made up the Elitist Club. But Aurelia wasn't interested in those things. What she was interested in was getting on with her job, which she already knew she was going to love, and eventually, hopefully, finding a pair mate and even requesting a 3 when the time came. And if she wanted to be the best of the best - she very much did - then moving to Lunar City was by far her best bet.

"Sometimes I wonder if things were better before," her father said, breaking into Aurelia's thoughts.

"What do you mean?"

“I mean before all this, before the war, before Lunar City.” He glanced over at her, and Aurelia could see that he was truly troubled.

Aurelia knew her history. It had been drilled into her as a small child as it was into all Worker children. She could recite the facts from memory. In 2220, the huge population centres of Old Earth went to war. A combination of pollution, lack of resources and global warming had meant that living space was at a premium, and eventually this drove the Old Earth cities to the brink of destruction. For eight long years the free states had fought battle after battle, destroying many of the only remaining habitable districts with nuclear weapons and chemical bombing. In 2228, the Elitists had stepped in, leaving their home in Lunar City to rescue what remained of Old Earth. The Elitists’ Private Military Company, made up of Human Clones, had rapidly subdued the war-weary troops of the Old Earth states, and in the armistice known as the Convention that followed the end of World War 3, the Elitists had been nominated as the neutral governing body. By popular approval, the Elitists declared the five remaining Old Earth cities to be the Earth Empire, and stated that governing powers would be centred in Lunar City.

The order promised by the Elitists after years of bloody warfare and instability was irresistible, and, for most of Earth Empire's population, was more than satisfactory. Everything was now controlled, there were no shortages, and everyone had homes, jobs and even children should they want them. These changes had come at a small price, though. For Workers such as Aurelia, it meant strictly controlled lives, down to asking for permission to breed. For Human Clones, however, life was much more regimented. Only the Ruling Class had some form of freedom. Still, most people were content enough that they never questioned the order of things. That was why what Aurelia's father said shocked her.

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She cleared her throat. "I'm guessing that you don't mean starvation and war and no living spaces or order?" she said, dryly.

Her father snorted. "Gods, no," he said. "What I meant was before, when families could stay together. That's all."

"But they sometimes stay together now," Aurelia countered. It was unusual for children to be posted outside of their home city. "And during migrations, many children left their families in the past."

"I know." Aurelia's father stared out at the white skins of the passing buildings. "I know. But things were different. Families were different. That's all I meant, I guess."

She knew what he meant. She'd read books - approved books, certainly, but also classic ones from before the Earth Empire. Family units had been closer before, though that sometimes meant whole families starving together. And she knew that she'd been lucky. She'd been brought up by parents who had loved her, rather than parents who had bred as a requirement. Requesting a 3 meant getting an extra bedroom pod, larger food quotas, and salary raises, things that many people saw as inducement to have a child they may not have otherwise wanted. Plus, having a 3 meant a certain kind of respect, providing more Workers for the Empire, sacrificing your time to help produce skilled adults who would one day take your place. Aurelia's parents had genuinely wanted to have a child, though, and Aurelia had genuinely enjoyed spending time with them. That was why leaving was more of a strain than it would have been for most children.

Children. She kept thinking of herself as a child, but she wasn't. She might still be a 3, but since her last Tracker injection she was very much an adult, responsible for her own actions, with a posting to fill and a duty to do.

"Your father, my..." she struggled to find the unfamiliar word, one she'd read but never heard, "my, er,

grandfather?”

Her father nodded.

“Did he remember the way things were before?”

Her father grinned. “He wasn't that old,” he teased.

“C'mon, Dad, I'm just curious.”

“Your grandfather was very young during the war years; he didn't remember anything,” her father said. “But he did sometimes tell me stories that he'd been told by his father.”

“Who would be my...?” Genealogy was not important in a society where, for the most part, even children and parents didn't have close ties.

“Your great-grandfather,” Aurelia's father said. “And they were generally horrible stories that gave me nightmares and meant that my mother, your grandmother,” he added, for Aurelia's benefit, “forbade him to tell me them before bed.”

Aurelia smiled. “Like when you told me those fairy tales about Clones and Mum yelled at you?”

Her father laughed at the memory. “Something like that.”

The city was beginning to change slightly now, the housing blocks becoming further apart, interspersed with hydroponic farming pods. Aurelia gazed out of the transport pod windows with interest. She'd seen such pods in books but had never seen them before in real life.

“It's hard to believe that we can support the city with just those pods,” she said.

“Hah, I can remember before we could,” her father said. “When I was a kid, at least three times a week we had to eat some awful synthetic slop. Cabbage and potatoes once a week might not be nice, but trust me, it's better than Synth-Porridge.”

Aurelia smiled, watching the farming pods slide by. The shuttle bay was on the edge of the city and was one of four that serviced City 01. Aurelia had seen pictures, but this was going to be her first look at a bay in real life, so

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she was anxiously surveying the view to get a glimpse. As they moved further away from the centre of the city, the skies became darker and Aurelia could see the grey sheen of pollution on the skins of buildings. In the conditioned environment of the transport pod she couldn't smell the air, but in these districts the smog could get bad enough to require automated breathing masks that filtered the air before it hit the lungs.

“Who lives out here?” she asked.

“Low-level workers, mostly,” her father replied, regarding the view with equal interest. “Cleaners, public transport workers, that sort of thing.”

“Hmm.” Just the sort of people who wouldn't be able to afford an automated breathing mask, Aurelia thought.

In City 01, as in all Earth cities, Workers were graded by the kind of job that they did. As medical personnel, Aurelia had achieved top grading, which her father, a tech Worker, also had. Other professions with top grading included Trainers and Trackers. Aurelia's mother had second grading, as she was a chem Worker, spending her time synthesising foodstuffs. Her job was considered important but no longer as indispensable as it had been before the farming pods took over the strain of feeding the city.

With top grading came increased privileges, which were seen as the rightful rewards for working hard and educating yourself. Privileges were usually given in the form of monetary compensation. Though money wasn't required to live in the city (Workers didn't have to pay rent for their accommodation, and they received food quotas, for example) it did make life a little easier. There were luxuries, things like additional food or candies, as well as spare clothing outside of what was issued to you, and even seriously luxurious things like alcohol and home decorations. However, privileges also came in other forms. Aurelia knew that in a trauma situation, for example, it would be her job to attend first to those injured who had

high Worker ratings, since these were considered to be the patients who were most valuable and hardest to replace. She didn't question this as right because she knew it was. Earth Empire could least afford to lose those Workers who had most to give; that just made sense. Still, though, she knew that she would strive to save everyone under her care, no matter what their rating was.

The transport pod dropped down a level as it turned onto a new block.

"Sorry," Aurelia's father said, noting the surprise in her eyes at the brief falling feeling. "Roads are getting busier now; we're getting closer to the shuttle bay, so we needed to drop a level to get a clear route."

Aurelia scanned the block even more carefully. As the familiar white-skinned buildings parted to one side of her, she saw a darker-coloured building loom between them. Unlike the spiral forms of the white buildings, this one was firmly cubic.

"What's that?" she asked her father, pointing towards the dark hulk.

Her father shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe a manufacturing plant."

He could be right. But Aurelia's geography marks were as good as all of her other grades, and she didn't remember any manufacturing centres in this district. Still, with the rate that the Empire was growing, it should be no surprise that even her information could be so soon out of date.

"You should see the shuttle bay in a second," her father said.

Aurelia looked at him. "Have you been here before?" She hadn't thought to ask him until now. She definitely couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been at home with her and her mother, though.

"Once - well, twice if you count going out and coming home," her father said. "I was sent to Lunar City for a consultation about a project I was working on."

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Now Aurelia was eager for information. “What was it like?”

“Couldn't tell you. Sorry.” Her father grimaced. “I was only there for a couple of hours to make my presentation and then leave. All I saw was the transport pod and the conference room. All that way for two hours.” He sighed at the memory of it.

“Oh.”

“It's going to be great, though,” he continued. “Don't you worry. And don't forget to grab some holo-vid when you have time and send it down to us. Your mom has never been up there, so she'd like to see it.”

Just at that moment, the pod again switched directions, though it kept to its own level this time. Buildings fell away to each side, and stretched wide in front of the pod's viewing screen was the largest open space that Aurelia had ever seen.

“That's it,” she breathed.

“That's it,” her father agreed. Once more he bent down to check that the route planner was functioning correctly and was going to take them around the edge of the launch pads, then he sat back, satisfied.

“It's so empty,” said Aurelia.

“It has to be,” her father explained. “When the shuttles launch, there's an expulsion of gases that are poisonous, so habitation pods can't be built around the launch pads.”

“But all that space,” Aurelia said in wonder. “All that space and nothing in it.”

Her father laughed at her awe. “I know. Makes you feel a bit weird in your stomach, doesn't it?”

She nodded, not taking her eyes off the shuttle bay.

“We'll go around the outside of the launch pads and then to the terminal on the far end. Do you see it?”

Aurelia looked to her right and saw a towering white building with arms sticking out of it like some kind of demented space creature.

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“Those are the transport arms,” her father said. “When a craft lands, the arms connect onto the hull, letting you get on and off a shuttle without touching the ground and delivering you safely into the terminal.”

As they watched, one of the arms began to move around preparing for a shuttle landing. Automatically, Aurelia looked up into the sky and saw a large object descending towards the shuttle bay. Silver skin reflected the thin sunlight that pierced through the smog, and the tapered cylinder sank gracefully to the ground, hovering for a moment before settling itself firmly pointing back towards the Moon.

“Gods,” said Aurelia, unable to believe that in just a few hours she'd be on board one of these shuttles.

“Gods, indeed,” her father said. “Pretty amazing, aren't they?”

Aurelia looked at him, her face shining with excitement. “I can't wait to go up!”

“Well, it won't be long.”

As he said the words, their transport pod began to slow. Its humming became more high-pitched as the braking mechanism worked to smoothly bring it in to its destination.

“Ready?” said Aurelia's father as the pod finally stopped.

“Ready,” she said, fumbling to undo her security belt.

“Hold up there, tiger,” said her father, gesturing to her door where an automated walkway was swinging around to meet the vehicle. “You can't open up until the walkway docks.”

Impatiently, Aurelia waited for the familiar click of a docking mechanism, then, with a deep breath, she unhooked the clasp on her safety belt and opened her door.

CHAPTER TWO

The entrance hall of the shuttle bay was enormous. With shuttles easily being a hundred floors tall and the shuttle bay needing to be able to access all areas of a shuttle, the immense hall was as tall as any building Aurelia had ever seen. The echoing space above her made her stomach feel watery so that she clutched her father's arm.

"It's not as empty as it looks," her father said, noting her discomfort. "Look more closely."

Gazing into the height of the hall, Aurelia could just make out the movement of semi-transparent drones flitting around. "What are they for?"

"Most of the ones in here are simple message drones," her father said. "They're programmed with messages from Lunar City to the Ruling Class in Earth Empire cities. They're good messengers because they can be programmed with a message and then programmed to destruct if they're messed with, as well as sending back an alert to whoever programmed them saying that a message was safely delivered or that the drone was forced to destroy itself. They'll ride on the shuttles too."

"Aha," said Aurelia, taking in the information and filing it away in case it became useful later.

“Most of the ones in there,” said her father, pointing towards a large gate that marked the entrance to the terminal waiting rooms, “are security drones. They're there to make sure that no one gets on a shuttle who shouldn't be on one, though mostly they redirect lost passengers to their allocated shuttles.”

Aurelia glanced over at the gate. “I guess...” she began.

Her father nodded, looking at the time reader on his wrist. “I guess so,” he said.

Aurelia swallowed. “You can't?”

“No, I can't go past the security gate. You need travel coding to get past,” he said. “But you need to go on through. If you're not through in time, your reservation will automatically be cancelled.”

“Okay.” She hesitated for a moment, then hugged her father.

People milling around the entrance hall looked over at them. Such displays of public affection weren't common in the city, at least between parents and children.

“You're gonna do great, Aurelia. Don't worry.”

“Thanks, Dad,” she said, into his shoulder.

“Go on then,” he said, pushing her away. “Off you get. And don't forget to intercom.”

“Right.”

He turned quickly, but not quite fast enough that Aurelia couldn't see a glint in his eyes. Tears. She swallowed again and sniffed, willing herself into control as she watched her father in his grey-and-blue tech Worker uniform fade back towards the entrance doors and the walkway that would take him to the transport pod.

After several seconds Aurelia took a breath and squared her shoulders. *Let's do this thing*, she told herself, and she started walking towards the security gate.

There was a line of passengers waiting to go through the gate, and Aurelia joined them. As she waited she passed the time watching the elegant fluttering of the

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messenger drones circling inside the hall. About halfway through the line, the one queue split up into several different channels, and Aurelia waited for an orange indicator light to tell her which channel to join, then resumed waiting.

At the front of the line was a Worker dressed in a drab uniform coloured light grey and dark grey, marking him as a transport Worker.

“Number,” barked the Worker.

“1-3358-7-43-22-3,” said Aurelia without thinking. She'd repeated the number so many times in her life that it was as familiar to her as her name.

Suddenly, a buzz sounded and a red light began flashing over the head of the Worker she was speaking to.

“Incorrect,” the Worker said. “You lack the appropriate travel coding.”

Aurelia was so shocked she didn't know what to do. “But that's impossible!” she said. “I know I have the coding.”

There was a gentle cough from behind her. Aurelia turned to see a young military Clone standing there.

“Sorry,” he said, in a gentle voice. “Couldn't help but overhear. Are you on your way to your first posting, by any chance?”

Aurelia nodded dumbly.

“Ah, and have you already been given an accommodation number?” he inquired.

Again she nodded.

“That'll be the problem, then.” He grinned at her, his deep blue eyes twinkling. “You've just given him your old accommodation number, and your travel coding will be under your new number.”

Gods, she'd forgotten all about that. Of course, since she was moving her number was going to change. Her old number reflected her old address. The only problem was that she couldn't remember her new number. She was sure she'd committed it to memory, but in all the excitement it

had escaped her. This fact she admitted to the military officer who had come to join her at the desk.

“No problema,” he said. Turning to the Worker, he asked for a Tracker to be sent over.

The Worker sighed in irritation, but he pressed a button on his desk. “Wait over there,” he said to Aurelia, pointing towards a small table directly behind his desk.

The military officer gave his number to the Worker and then came to join her.

“I’m Nicholas,” he said, holding out his hand.

“Aurelia,” she said, shaking it. “And I feel like such an idiot.”

“Don’t worry, I’m sure it happens all the time; must be the excitement.”

“Bet it’s never happened to you.” She smiled, then could have bitten off her own tongue. Of course it had never happened to him. He was military, which meant he was a Human Clone. Clones’ numbers not only never changed but were also ingrained onto every single part of them in a microscopic pattern of dots.

Nicholas smiled at her, knowing that she hadn’t meant to insult him. “Well,” he observed, shooting his cuffs to hold out his wrists with their raised dot numbers, “these do come in handy from time to time, like when I’m too excited to remember who I am.”

Aurelia laughed. “Sorry,” she said, meaning it.

“It’s fine. And I think I see your Tracker.”

The Tracker in his white uniform bustled over to the table. Without a word he produced a small device from his top pocket, and Aurelia rolled up her sleeve and presented him with the crook of her elbow. She felt a slight pressure as the Tracker pressed the device onto her skin. Her new number, including her new accommodation number, had been coded into her with her last injection, so all the Tracker had to do was take a reading. Aurelia rolled her sleeve back down and pulled a wry face at Nicholas as she followed the Tracker back to the Worker’s desk. Taking

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the device, the Worker read off her new number.

“Fine,” he said. “You're cleared to pass through. Try and remember your number next time.”

Aurelia rejoined Nicholas, and together the pair made their way down a corridor and into the waiting areas.

“What now?” Aurelia asked.

“Never flown before, huh?”

Aurelia shook her head.

“Well, now there's an agonisingly long wait until the shuttle is ready for boarding, during which time you may avail yourself of the many facilities in the pre boarding area.” He spoke solemnly, gesturing to the small snack bar that was in a corner of the hall.

“You make it sound so glamorous,” Aurelia said.

“Oh, travel is very glamorous. You get to meet all kinds of people. Like me, for instance.” He grinned again, and Aurelia saw how his sandy hair was styled to fall just so over his forehead, making him look younger than he probably was.

“Treat you to a coffee?” she asked. “As thanks for your help,” she added, not wanting him to think that she was asking him for a more personal reason.

“Sure,” he said, and they began walking towards the snack bar.

“This isn't everyone waiting, is it?” Aurelia asked him as they walked.

“Nah, we're all divided up. The Ruling Class have their own waiting room, obviously, and then the rest of us are divided up by which decks we'll be flying on. Makes the shuttles easier to load.”

“Right.”

“You know, coffee used to be made from beans,” Nicholas said idly as they joined yet another queue to get a hot drink.

“Mmm, I know,” answered Aurelia. “Weird, isn't it, thinking of drinking something made from beans?”

Aurelia knew as well as Nicholas probably did that

what they called coffee was nothing more than a chemical formula designed to stimulate certain taste buds and replicate a particular taste in the mouth.

"Here, there's a table over here," said Nicholas, as Aurelia paid for the coffee with a small token.

"So, which shuttle are you on?" Aurelia asked him, pulling back a chair.

"The 18:30," he answered. "You too, right?"

"Yep. I'm a bit nervous about flying, though. It's a whole lot higher than a public transport shuttle."

Nicholas laughed. "It's a piece of cake. Nothing to it. You won't even realise we've left the atmosphere, promise."

"Are you stationed in Lunar City?" Aurelia said, stirring her coffee and then taking a sip.

"Something like that, I..."

But he was interrupted by someone shouting Aurelia's name. Looking up, Aurelia saw a familiar face: Jaki, one of her classmates until recently. Hurrying over to the table, Jaki squealed with excitement.

"I can't believe you're here too!" she said. "Are you on your way to your posting?"

Aurelia nodded. "Yep, and what about you?"

"Ugh, no such luck," Jaki said. "But I do get to do a week of training at Lunar City Hospital before coming back down. After that I'll be at Hospital 1-24 right here in the city."

"Cool," said Aurelia, knowing full well that Jaki would kill to have her posting in Lunar City.

"It's pretty exciting. There's a group of us going up, all for the same training," Jaki told her, her eyes lingering on Nicholas.

"That's nice." Aurelia knew damn well that Jaki was angling for an introduction and wondering just exactly what Aurelia was doing sitting with a Human Clone, but she wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of an answer. Jaki could be so nosey, a quality that wasn't much admired

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in a society where everyone lived so close together. Plus, if Aurelia were being completely honest with herself, she felt a little uncomfortable about the situation. She hadn't really given much thought to the fact that she was sitting opposite a Clone, but, well, it wasn't exactly normal.

"So, er, well, I guess, you know..." Jaki trailed off, her eyes still directed towards Nicholas, who was smiling blandly.

"Yeah, I guess," said Aurelia. "Have a safe trip."

"You too. And congratulations." Jaki took one last look at Nicholas, then gave Aurelia a fake smile and walked off to rejoin her group.

"Sorry about that," Aurelia said, turning back to Nicholas. "Just an old school friend. That's all."

"And does she have a name?" His smile was gone, though he looked more sad than angry.

"Yeah, Jaki."

"I see."

Aurelia shifted in her chair, feeling uncomfortable but unable to quite put her finger on how to solve the situation. "I think I owe you an apology," she said, finally.

Nicholas nodded. "And why is that?"

"I, er, I should have introduced you. It was very rude not to, and I'm truly sorry." Once she'd made up her mind to do something, Aurelia generally just did it. Life was easier that way, she'd found.

Nicholas smiled again, but he still looked a little sad. "It's okay, I understand. You feeling a little strange?"

Aurelia raised an eyebrow at him. "Strange?"

"Well, I'm guessing it's not every day that you have coffee with a Clone, right?"

Gods. At least he was joking about it, though. "No, it's not. I'm a bit unsure about the etiquette." She smiled.

"You're having a big day, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Nicholas. "Your first shuttle flight, the first time forgetting your new number and now your first

time having coffee with a Clone. Jeez, it must be exciting to be you today.”

Aurelia started laughing, and Nicholas joined her. His openness encouraged her to question him more closely. She knew what Clones were, of course, and knew their role in the Empire. She also knew that their lives were far more strictly controlled than her own as a Worker. Clones weren't allowed to breed, for example, though there was good reason for that. Clones' being copied was considered dangerous, since the more times a code was copied, the more chance there was of a mutation. All Clones were created directly from source material rather than from other Clones. Even as medical personnel, there was no chance that Aurelia would be called upon to treat a Clone. They had their own doctors more skilled in the kind of specific genetic diseases that could occur in Clones, so she knew little about their biology. But she was curious.

“You can drink coffee,” she began.

Nicholas laughed at her. “As you can see, yes.”

“Do you eat the same things as we do?”

He shook his head. “For a future hot-shot medical girl, you're not exactly making a good impression,” he said. Then he grinned. “Let's take it from the top. I'm a Human Clone, right?”

Aurelia nodded.

“Which means that I've been cloned from original Human source material, right?”

Again she nodded.

“Which means, in turn, what?”

She bit her lip, annoyed at her own stupidity. “That your body systems are identical to that of the material you were sourced from, so essentially you're human.”

“Right. In every way except one I am exactly the same as you are. Well, not exactly.”

Aurelia looked puzzled, and Nicholas leaned a little closer over the table as though about to impart a secret. “You're a girl,” he whispered. “I'm not.”

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Aurelia startled herself by laughing at this. "Indeed you're not," she said.

"So really, the only difference between us, other than that, is that whilst you had a mother and father, I simply had a donor. That's all."

"Not quite all," Aurelia said, draining her coffee cup. "I mean, you were bred to be a particular way, right? I mean to specifically be a soldier, so you're strong and agile."

Nicholas nodded. "Yes, that's true. But that's not me. I mean, it is, but only because my original human donor was chosen because he had precisely those qualities. And then I've been trained to nurture those qualities, that's all."

"I understand."

"And," added Nicholas, grinning again. "I don't eat exactly the same as you do."

"No?" she asked, furrowing her brow.

"Nope. I bet I get way bigger rations than you do. Gotta build up these muscles, after all," he said, flexing his arm like a cartoon macho man.

Again, Aurelia laughed. She was starting to like this cheeky young man. Clone. Whatever. "So, it looks like we've exhausted the possibilities of the snack bar. Unless you want another coffee to build up your muscles?" she asked him.

"Nah, I'm cool. Wanna check out the viewing deck?"

"I presume that's where we can go and watch the shuttles land, right?"

"Yep, come on, I'll show you. It's pretty fascinating if you haven't seen it before." Nicholas pushed his chair back and stood.

He led her to an elevator shaft in a corner of the waiting hall. No one else was waiting, and when he hit the button, the elevator dinged and the door opened.

"After you," he said with a mock bow. "Looks like everyone else is too jaded to want to come up and have a look."

The viewing deck was a circular room on the very top of the terminal building, with huge glass windows so that Aurelia could glimpse every angle.

"Whoa," she said, watching as a shuttle shuddered, hovered for a moment and then pushed itself off the ground and began its vertical climb.

"Yeah, I know," Nicholas said, coming to stand beside her at the window. "Amazing, huh?"

As the first shuttle disappeared into the gloom, a shimmering silver reflection began its descent.

"There's just so many of them," Aurelia said in wonder, watching the next shuttle grow bigger as it neared the Earth.

"There's a lot of business between here and there," Nicholas told her. "And they're not all carrying passengers. Most of them are cargo shuttles, or even just messenger shuttles. The trip is relatively cheap these days, especially now that we can use syntho-fuel, so most people don't think twice about sending a shuttle down with a couple of drones in it."

Aurelia could feel his warmth, though he wasn't touching her. He seemed to emanate heat, making her aware of her own pulse under her skin.

"Come here often?" she asked jokingly, turning to him.

"Here? Or here?"

Aurelia raised an eyebrow.

"The viewing deck, not so much, not since my first couple of trips. Earth, yeah, a few times. Whenever I'm sent. I trained here for a while, but I was stationed back at Lunar. Every now and again I come down for more training, or sometimes just with a message pack that can't be trusted to a drone." He shrugged. "It's no big deal - just a long trip, that's all. Tiring sometimes."

He didn't look tired. But then, Aurelia wasn't sure if

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Clones ever did. Since they were bred for their strength and fighting abilities, she assumed that whilst they weren't exactly superhuman, the Clones were more than just regular human.

Nicholas looked up at the sky, where the faint ring of the moon was just visible. "And what about you?" he asked, still gazing upwards. "Going to be back and forth a lot?"

Aurelia sighed. "I doubt it. I've got a lot of work to do up there; there's not going to be much time for travelling. Besides, I won't get my seven vacation days for another twelve months after I start."

"Are you excited?"

"Yes. And no." She paused to collect her thoughts. "I'm excited about the work. This is what I'm good at; it's what I was trained and bred to do. It will be challenging, but I can make a difference. Like..." She started to blush. "I mean, it sounds grandiose, but I'm a med Worker. I can literally make the difference between life and death."

This caused him to turn and look at her. "Life and death."

"Yes. You know, in the old days they believed that life was given by God and that when you died you went back to him. Some even prevented med Workers from giving treatment because they felt it was interfering with God's plan."

Nicholas nodded.

"Now, we do it for the Empire. Every person I save will give more to the Empire than I could give individually. They will work again, produce again, contribute again. Does that make sense?" She looked at him earnestly.

"Yes," he said. "But what about the ones you don't save? The ones that you give to death?"

Aurelia had never struggled with this idea before. It had been a part of her training for so long that she didn't question it at all. "I give them to death because it's better to die than to be a drain on Earth Empire. I do it only

when there's no other option, only when there's no way that the patient could be a productive member of society if they survived.”

“I see,” said Nicholas quietly. “And do you not think about the right to live? What if those patients wanted to live, even if they no longer worked? What if they wanted to see a sunrise again, or have one last cup of coffee?”

Aurelia shook her head. “It doesn't work like that,” she said. “Part of having my responsibility is sacrificing one to save many.”

“Or sacrificing many to save one,” Nicholas murmured, looking up at the moon again.

“What?” Aurelia thought she had caught his words but wasn't sure; they hadn't made sense.

“Oh, nothing, don't worry about it.” He looked down at her again and grinned. “We're getting awfully serious here, don't you think? Far too serious for someone who should be celebrating a whole day of firsts. You can't get on your first shuttle all depressed.”

“I'm not depressed!” Aurelia protested, and then something caught her eye. “Whoa.”

“Ah,” said Nicholas, looking up at the looming ship blocking out the light. “That's a merchant shuttle, bringing resources back and forth. Ore, that kind of thing. Big, isn't it?”

They watched as the humongous shuttle delicately floated down, seemingly not moving and yet growing bigger and bigger by the second. Finally, just when Aurelia thought the ship would crash into the earth, long ropes were thrown down and the ship was tethered.

“Back and forth?” asked Aurelia, who had just taken the words in. “Stuff goes from Earth back to Lunar City?”

“Of course.” Nicholas looked puzzled at her question. “Why?”

Aurelia tried to fit the information into everything else she knew, but it just wouldn't work. “I don't know,” she said after a moment. “I just sort of thought that Lunar

City was organising Earth to be self-sufficient, but taking resources from the planet up to the moon doesn't really fit with that, does it?" She lifted her shoulders. "Oh, well. There are plenty of things that I don't understand." She turned away from the window. "Tell me about Lunar City."

"Ah, so that's what's worrying you about going up there?" Nicholas said, looking amused. "Look, you've no need to worry. Lunar City is definitely special, but for the most part it's not going to be terribly different from right here. I mean, everyday life is pretty much the same. The only real difference is that you're likely to see more Ruling Class up there than you've met before."

Aurelia looked a little disappointed and yet relieved at the same time. "Oh," was all she said.

"Well," Nicholas added in a conciliatory way, "you might find a bit more trouble to get into in Lunar than you're used to."

"I don't want trouble!" Aurelia said, horrified at even the thought of making waves.

"I didn't think so," Nicholas smiled.

The two spent another ten minutes watching the shuttles land in the increasing twilight. Pollution made the nights fall faster, and it would be fully dark before their shuttle left at 18:30. The big fans that cleared the centre of the city had some small effect on the outskirts but not enough, and they were switched to low power at night, anyway.

"Why do we have to wait so long?" Aurelia asked after a while, growing bored.

"Told you travel was all about glamour," Nicholas teased her. "Wanna go back down?"

She nodded.

"Mostly we're waiting for security reasons," he explained as they waited for the elevator to return. "They need to check everyone getting onto the shuttles. The longer passengers are kept waiting, the more impatient and

nervous they become and therefore are more likely to give away tell-tale signs of being up to something. It's simple psychology."

The elevator doors hummed open, and they got inside the cabin.

"Plus, we're all given different arrival times so that the roads around the terminal don't get too clogged up. There's enough pollution around here as it is."

"Really?" said Aurelia. "I didn't know that. About the arrival times, I mean."

Nicholas nodded. "One of the privileges of being Ruling Class is that you can swan up ten minutes before your shuttle is supposed to leave. Some of these low-grade Workers, on the other hand, have been waiting since this morning."

He found them both seats in the waiting area and then excused himself. "Got some things to take care of. I'll be back in a while. Definitely before we get called for boarding."

Aurelia looked around at the other passengers, and then, to distract herself, she reached into her top pocket and pulled out what looked like a pen. Pressing a button on the device caused the pen to unroll into a screen, and Aurelia loaded up some of her training notes and began to get a head start on what she guessed would come up during orientation.

Wriggling in her seat to find a comfortable position, Aurelia found herself constantly scanning the hall for signs of Nicholas. Weird. They'd known each other for just a few hours and already she felt a connection with him. If she didn't know better, she'd say that she might just have a little crush on him, like the ones she'd had on fellow students in school. Of course, Nicholas was a Clone, though, so she didn't have a crush. Nope, not at all. He did make her laugh. He was funny, that was all.

Her stomach writhed a little again as she checked the time. Only an hour until the shuttle left. Gods. She just

wished it could be over with by now. After spending the trip with her father and wanting to remain earthbound as long as possible, now she just wanted to already be in Lunar City. Or Lunar, as Nicholas called it.

“Guess who?”

His voice came from behind her as he covered her eyes with his hands.

“I hate this game!” she squealed, trying to escape from his grasp.

“Oops, sorry.” He removed his hands and plopped down onto the seat next to her.

“You’re back,” she said, rolling up her screen and putting it back in her pocket.

“Obviously. Told you I would be. We’ll be boarding soon, so I wanted to keep you company for a while.”

Three bells rang in succession from an intercom in the hall, and a garbled announcement was broadcast.

Aurelia looked worried. “I didn’t hear a word of that,” she said.

“Yeah, it’s just the pre boarding announcement. If you’ve got a good reason, you can board first. Like flying with a kid or having one leg or something,” Nicholas said airily. “You don’t have a good reason, do you?”

“Two legs,” said Aurelia, looking down at them. “Nope, no good reason.”

“They’ll call us soon, and then we board by deck number. It’s easy. See the channels over there?”

She nodded.

“When they call your deck number, go stand in the channel that has an orange flashing light and follow everyone else. When you’re on board, the steward will show you your seat.”

A thought struck Aurelia. “You mean we can’t sit...” She was about to say can’t sit together, but she caught herself in time. “We can’t sit where we want?”

Nicholas shook his head. “You should know better than that. Everything in order. You’ll have a seat number

in your coding. Don't worry, you'll figure it out.”

“Could we change seats?” Aurelia asked, knowing the answer and feeling childish for asking. “I mean, it'd be nice to have some company on the flight, someone to talk to.”

Nicholas looked uncomfortable. “Sometimes you can, but we, er, well, we just can't this flight. Sorry.”

She kept forgetting. She guessed that maybe Clones had to sit on their own decks or something. Then she was sorry she had embarrassed him. She didn't know why she kept forgetting his status. His uniform obviously marked him as a Clone. Though even without it, Aurelia thought she would probably have known. Clones always had the look of being a little too perfect, something you couldn't quite figure out, but something different. Then she realised she was thinking about Nicholas with no clothes on and hurriedly put a stop to the thought process.

“We could maybe get a coffee in Lunar?” she asked. “Is that allowed?”

“Worker and Clone mixing, you mean?” Nicholas said, arching his eyebrows. “Well, as long as we're not planning on breeding there's no law against it. Not common, though.” He saw that she was looking disappointed again, so he added, “It would be cool to hang out a little. You know, if we can. After work's finished and all that.”

Aurelia smiled. “Let's try.”

Another announcement came over the intercom, and a light began flashing in one of the channels. Several people stood up and went to queue.

“Do you remember your deck number?” Nicholas asked.

“Er...” Was her memory really getting so bad?

“It'll be between 25 and 35,” he said.

Aurelia closed her eyes and thought carefully. As she took a deep breath and calmed herself, all the carefully memorised numbers came back to her. “27,” she said.

“You'll be up soon then; they start from the bottom.”

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She wasn't sure what to say to him, this person - wait, Clone - who had become so strangely close to her in such a short time. Then there was no time to say anything. Nicholas poked her.

“Go, that's you!” he hissed.

She stood up and then turned back to look at him.

He smiled that charming smile again. “We'll meet again,” he said. “Now go.”

And with that, Aurelia went to join her line.
