

**CHRYS  
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**THE VORTEX**

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## Blue Moon, White Sun

Dreams of a white sun radiating over the ellipse of the blue moon in the pink stripes of dawn aligned on the misty horizon had become a frequent vision for the pilot who had never actually encountered the landscape before stepping on the white sands of the deserted planet.

When his heavy boots hit the white dust he scrutinized the view around him.

“You can take off your helmet, there is enough oxygen” he heard the voice from the control tower that had been guiding his landing.

He unlocked the safety pin under his chin and took off the silver helmet. Inhaling the sharp oxygen made him dizzy for a second. He staggered, squinting his eyes to the white glaring sun above. Beyond it, there was still the boomerang-shaped blue moon, silent and cold.

“What the hell are we doing here?” he mumbled to himself, turning around in doubt, to look at the metal staircase of the shuttle behind him.

“You know very well what you – we – are doing here. You were chosen for carrying the torch further in the universe: bringing life to a safe haven.”

The voice from the supervising tower was steady and objectively impersonal, but something in the tone reminded him of a careful baby-sitter. He blinked and scratched his head.

“I forgot you're listening to everything I say.”

The voice was relentlessly patient and unwavering in its motivation.

“It's very important to not forget the purpose of your presence on this border planet. You are the first to facilitate the beginning of the Alpha State. Others will follow. Life will advance to a higher consciousness, once we enter that cluster of light.”

“I know how important it is. I'm constantly aware of it.”

“Then what's the matter? Do you have doubts? Are you afraid something could

go wrong? I'll assist you every step of the way.”

He glanced at the blue moon again, above the pink horizon.

“I don't have doubts and I'm not afraid. It's just... I've dreamed of this place long before coming here. It's almost as if I envisioned it – anticipated – predicted this moment.”

“It could be a *deja vu*. Your brain is high on the oxygen and change of pressure.”

“No, it's more than that. I'm sure I had dreams of this landscape before”.

The voice went silent in the chip behind his ear. He knew she was still there, yet she chose not to comment. Sometimes he wondered if the voice came from a computer program, a robot or a real person. He was inclined to believe it was a person, but the tone seemed very well instructed not to appear too personal. It was more like an army officer combined with a psychologist and a diplomatic spy. More like a watchdog, relentless and purposeful, ready to assist in any way needed to get the best results that were expected from a higher rank.

“Hey Rony! Are you done contemplating? We have work to do!”

The pilot hadn't come alone to the border planet. There was an entire crew with him, trained to install equipment for a functional greenhouse and wireless communication with distant solar systems. He had brought four people on the ship.

The pilot went to help the other two men: one was a bio-engineer and the other was a computer expert. The computer expert was a silent reserved and yet optimistic guy, just out of training and eager to discover real life beyond theoretical studies. The bio-engineer had a practical attitude and seemed to enjoy comfort, not being bothered by any possible dangerous situation. The nurse was a vivacious volunteer while the psychologist was observant, diplomatic and refined in manners. What they had in common was enthusiasm for the prospect of new life, exploring the unknown vastness of the universe and contributing to the benefits of starting something positive with infinite possibilities. It was the main purpose that brought them together and kept them out of conflicts: having the same goal of achieving something improbable, innovative and daring – defying odds, making a new beginning that would develop into something amazing.

After they took out the metal bars and the plastic foil they set up the skeleton of the greenhouse and covered it with transparent square meters of isolating shield. Under the white glowing sun its neon light was not as much burning as it was exhausting in intensity. The air was humid despite the dusty surface. After a while the three men felt their shirts get wet and stuck to the skin, so they took off the fabric and continued to work in overalls and heavy boots. It was risky to expose too much skin to an environment not entirely known. The two females in the crew, the medical assistant and the psychologist decided to remain in the shade of the newly built tents, sorting out the electronic files of the camp and the rations.

In a few hours everything was set according to plan.

The men sat down on a group of rocks, passing around small bottles of water that the nurse had brought them.

The tower of control was still silent.

“Why is the air so humid?” the pilot wondered, staring at the distant pink horizon.

“It's because of the vapors from the ocean. The beach is not far from here,” the bio-engineer answered.

“Much like Earth?”

“Not really. Earth is too distant a memory to remember now and I've never known it to be able to compare – but the atmosphere was different there, before we destroyed the eco-system. Hopefully, we're going to build a sustainable life-supporting system here.”

The bio-engineer was a gray haired man who had seen many solar systems where he had attempted to set up colonies, before arriving on the border planet of the white sun and the blue moon.

“The conditions are right to make it happen here”, Rony said with confidence.

“It's possible. Why are you so sure though?”

“I don't know. Maybe it's because the control tower told me. And I believe it.”

He didn't want to reveal having had dreams about the place long before arrival. He thought it would make him appear weak and unstable to the crew and they would not trust his clear mind as a pilot.

“Is the tower giving you information about the future?” the bio-engineer asked a bit amused.

“Yes, maybe so. Why?”

“That must be Vera. I bet she's the one on the microphone with you, talking you through everything.”

“Who's Vera?”

“The tower agent who monitors our missions. I had a chip with her voice instructing me when I used to fly shuttles across the solar systems, looking for a place to set up new stuff. Boy, she gave me a hard time back then. Do this, do that, don't do this, why didn't you do that, you must do better...”

“Really?”

The pilot had a different impression of the assisting voice.

“Is it a person then?”

“Yes, it's a person. Did you think it was a robot?”

“It often sounds like a programmed robot.”

“It's a person and a very well instructed one. She's got highest authority over these missions.”

“She can't be a person. She's too smart, too well informed... too impersonal.”

“Too demanding?”

The bio-engineer grinned. Rony looked at him in disbelief. He kind of liked the voice in the chip that gave him instructions. It didn't feel demanding, but precise. He admired the accuracy of information and the relentless motivation of the transmission. It never failed to answer, it always proved to be one step ahead of him in any situation, to the minimal details. Somehow, the expertise was intimidating, but it provided confidence too and Rony relied on it for advice. If it was indeed a person... it must have been a top agent. The attention he had received implied a lot of work in the control tower. Rony imagined the training must have been drastic to make her perform like that. It was impressive. However, it seemed the other man had a different experience and opinion. Evgheni, the talkative bio-engineer didn't add anything else, noticing the pilot didn't agree with him.

He concluded disinterested:

“I'm better off working as a biologist. I've got more time to do other things.”

“So now you don't hear from the tower anymore?” Rony asked casually.

“No, I quit being a pilot. It was too much strain and pressure, too much responsibility. I'm getting tired of long hours of staring into space. I'd rather assemble greenhouses and watch plants grow.”

Rony looked up at the blue moon. Its ellipse sparkled as it descended towards the horizon, in undetected, delayed motion.

“Where are they? The people from the control station.”

Evgheni glanced up, squinting his eyes to see the ellipse past the glaring neon light.

“On that moon, probably.”

“Do you think they can hear us now?”

Evgheni stretched his arms, relaxed and unaffected.

“No, I think they have better things to do. As you know, the connection with Vera appears when they've got something important to communicate to you, and they instruct her to reach out. Also when she's checking progress or when you call for her assistance by beeping that chip.”

“But what if she's listening and not revealing her presence? Can she do that?”

Evgheni laughed.

“Are you afraid she might?”

Rony shrugged.

“I don't have anything to hide from her. Or from the tower, for that matter.”

“Yeah, they know everything that's going on down here. I'm sure Vera has access to any recorded conversation she wants – and I'm sure she checks on you very often, even when... or especially when you're not aware of her doing it. They've got those x-ray telescopes watching us around the clock. They can probably count the bones from our toes in a blink of a second. They see the plants growing before they come out of the soil.”

The bio-engineer was so amused, it made Rony smile too.

“You're probably right.”

It didn't bother him that the voice assistant was monitoring him; he knew the

control tower was doing it anyway. It was their purpose. At least Vera provided some feedback for his actions. He had imagined her like an electronic eagle – and yet she was a real person. He could still feel the sharp authority hovering invisibly from the blue moon.

He got up, deciding to take a walk and find the ocean. The heavy boots and overalls were getting scratchy against the skin. Dust and sweat made everything uncomfortable.

“I'm going to the beach” he announced to the others.

“Don't forget to come back to make the tent for the guests before sunset”, Sheena the psychologist told him. “They're coming tomorrow, I've just received a message from the satellite. Five recruits between fifteen and eighteen years old, from rehabilitation camps.”

“Why are they sending us disturbed children?”

“They want us to help them to a fresh start. The teenagers are from restricted rehabilitating facilities. They had no chance back there on the space station – but here, they might learn to adapt.”

“So now, aside from growing plants we must also babysit some crazy teenagers who didn't fit in the space stations?”

The psychologist smiled kindly.

“I'm sure we'll manage, Rony. Don't worry: they're only five children. We're five adults. We can handle them.”

“I can handle a bunch of kids, but I'm not sure they will learn to behave in this new environment.”

“We'll make sure they do eventually.”

“How many other camps like ours did they send on this planet?”

Sheena thought for a while.

“I don't know exactly, but there are certainly hundreds of camps like this one. They're spread out separately to implement the establishment by adding power through independent development.”

“It sounds like isolated gangs.”

“The kids are just a group of disoriented youth, Rony. We'll be fine. They'll get

better.”

“It's easy for you to say, you're a psychologist. You're trained to deal with such kids. Me, I'm a pilot, not a counselor. “

Sheena smiled, understanding his worries.

“You'll learn to be both. You'll be great for them. They need someone who can offer them adventures, solutions and courage. Each of us needs to learn to be more and surpass our boundaries with new skills if we want to ascend with this planet to the light cluster Alpha State.”

“If you say so...”

The pilot turned to leave.

“I'm going for a swim, if there's any ocean on this planet.”

“When you find it, show us the way to that beach, so we can go too”, the nurse shouted after him.

He smiled. Of course everyone wanted to go to the beach, after so many days of living confined to the shuttle. They were finally out in the open, under a clear blue sky with a boomerang moon and a pink horizon throwing colored hues on the white dusty surface glowing of neon sunlight.



## Asterius Planet

The ocean was beyond rocky hills.

“No wonder I could smell sand and salty water in this damp air” the pilot thought pausing for a moment on top of the rocks, watching the breathtaking view.

The beach was a white strand of silver and transparent pebbles, appearing like scattered pieces of round glass and marble. Above the purple water the sky was changing to silver light green. Inside the water, luminescent creatures were flowing with the swinging soft waves, glowing like billions of little stars in perpetual motion. The ocean was a fluid reflection of the vast universe, an abundance of colors and lights, as if the galaxies were poured upside down.

Swimming in that water felt magical. The purple flow would sometimes turn light blue and transparent, so clear that he could see the rocks and sand dunes on the bottom of almost twenty meters depth. The little sparkling stars were slipping through his fingers as he slowly paddled the waves and the colors spread on his skin like an oily painting with fluorescent hues. The peace and serenity of the place washed away any worries or exhaustion as he emerged from the water calm and rested like a new-born baby. Even if the ocean was unknown and it could have been dangerous to swim so far away from the shore, he felt as if there was safety in the waves, there was certainty in the swirling dots of light, glowing in the purple vortex of endless motion.

Walking along the beach he encountered something unusual: a group of huge broken pillars, some standing halfway in the water, vertical to the sky, some rolled down on the beach. The marble pillars seemed too well rounded; the cylinders were arranged in hexagon formation, too symmetrical in shape and size to be a random result of natural storms carving some rocks. The pillars seemed to look like the remains of something intelligent creatures would do. Rony touched the surface of one of the pillars. Time had covered it in yellow salt, but the smooth polished trace

of intentional modification was still obvious.

Rony returned to the camp with many questions in his mind.

If there had been an intelligent presence before their arrival, what happened to them? Why had they abandoned the planet?

“Did you find the ocean?”

It was Nicole, the nurse.

“Yes, I found it” he answered. “It's not far, just over that hill.”

“Is it good for swimming?”

“It's great.”

She stopped in front of him, noticing something: his frown.

“What's wrong?”

“I don't know.. I found something disturbing. I don't know how to interpret it.”

“Show me.”

They went together to see the pillars on the beach. At the sight of the multitude of colors and sparkling purple water, the nurse was immediately enthusiastic.

“Wow! I've never seen anything like this!”

She ran towards the waves, plunging her hand in the foam and touching the swirling little stars like a child discovering the universe.

The others had heard them talk and were coming over the top of the hill.

“Amazing!”

Everyone was fascinated by the view. They came closer.

Rony pointed to the broken pillars in hexagon formation.

“Look at that! What do you think it represents?”

The group approached the marble columns with caution.

“It could be a temple.”

“That means it's ancient.”

“It might have been a landmark building or some monument.”

The pilot listened to their opinions and then decided to speak:

“Whatever it is, the main question remains: where are the authors and what

happened to them? Why aren't they here anymore?"

Everyone was silent for a few moments.

"How do you know they're not here anymore?" Sheena asked thoughtfully.

"They wouldn't have sent us to colonize an already inhabited planet", Evgheni argued.

"I think it's best to ask the control tower about this", the computer expert spoke objectively.

"Good idea, Yuri. They'll know the answer."

Rony clicked on the chip behind his ear. It beeped and lit up, feeling hot for a second. The burn used to make him anxious, but he had gotten accustomed to the anticipation and the certainty of the reply. The tower never failed to reply. Never, not even once.

"Yes control tower here. What's the matter?"

He recognized Vera's voice, but it was difficult to sense any emotional inflections in her tone. He felt uncertain of himself after finding out she was a real person. He felt he could make mistakes and change her impression or upset her – had she been just a robot he wouldn't have cared, but her being a person made him more self conscious and it significantly increased his wish to do well and have a better dialogue. For some unexplained reason he was suddenly more attentive and talking to her didn't seem as easy as before. He tried to maintain his composure:

"I'm calling from the base 12 camp Greenhouse. This is pilot Rony."

"Yes Rony, I know who you are. Stop presenting yourself, you called me and I know your frequency. What's your question?"

"I found something on Asterius surface. It looks like the remains of a building or a monument on the beach."

"Can you send me an image?"

"How?"

"Activate the camera in the chip. Blink twice while you keep your hand on it and it will send me the neural signal from your brain, with the image of what you've seen."

He did as instructed and then heard her voice again.

“Okay, I received the image. I'll make a short inquiry and get back to you with a precise answer.”

He waited. The others were watching him.

“What did she say?”

“She said she'll look into it.”

“That means they don't know either.”

“Let's wait. Maybe they do know.”

Rony heard her announcement in his ear.

“Control tower coming in.”

“Shh, shut up” he whispered to the others.

Vera spoke nonchalantly, with an abundance of details:

“Here's what I found about the remains of the building. It used to be a landing site for some civilization hundreds of thousands of years ago. The form of life is unknown. The only remains are the pillars – the blue prints of the landing sites. Everything else vanished, including the living beings. It is possible they are still on Asterius planet, in another form and they changed shape and dimension when they passed through the cluster of light. As you know, the galaxy we're in is about to cross paths with the Alpha State cluster again. It does that because the two spin around each other and every hundred thousand years they actually cross paths. When that happens, matter becomes unpredictable and it changes, under the vibration of the two fields altering everything when they merge. We don't know the complete effects yet. We're preparing for the ascension level when energy overcomes matter. That's probably what happened to the former inhabitants of Asterius: they ascended to Alpha State.”

“That means they simply vanished.”

“Exactly, if you see it like that. But you also know nothing ever really vanishes in the universe, it only changes the way atoms and energy are arranged. It simply transforms or it goes somewhere else.”

“That leaves the question what will happen to us.”

Vera was silent for a few seconds. Then she said calmly:

“We'll evolve.”

Rony wasn't surprised by it. He just said:

“You have an answer for everything.”

She didn't comment. It was a personal observation and she didn't elaborate when the dialogue took a personal turn. He turned the chip off. There wasn't anything else to say.

He stared at the glowing stars in the water and wondered if the sparkling creatures were the former inhabitants of Asterius. For a moment, he felt as if their swirling moves were whispering something, trying to make sense of the waves. The impression went away in a few seconds. The blue moon was almost touching the horizon line. Rony seemed to wake up from the reverie.

“Let's go” he said to the others. “I'll tell you at the camp what I heard from the tower.”

After telling the crew the news about the perspective of crossing paths with the Alpha cluster and not knowing what could become of them, or what the ascension meant, or what happened to the inhabitants before them, everyone was troubled.

“We're doomed”, Evgheni said. “The minute I see the plants successfully appear in the greenhouses I'll ask for a transfer out of here. I'm not gonna wait around to dissipate into the cluster of light. One month and I'm back on the satellite!”

“Damn, and I thought this was supposed to be a new life, in a better place...” Nicole mumbled to herself. “Now we'll just turn to dust.”

“You don't know that”, Rony intervened.

“Come on, Rony! You brought us here to disintegrate!” Evgheni argued.

“I don't think the tower control told us the truth. They probably know what happened to those before us”, Yuri said. “But it's a version they can't disclose because it's too frightening for us and we wouldn't agree to remain here.”

“And damn right we don't! I'm the first to leave!”

The bio-engineer was losing his calm, pacing around in the tent like a lion in a cage.

“You can't leave the camp, we hardly got here”, Sheena tried to reason with

him.

“I don't care! I'm leaving as soon as they send a shuttle for me. They must send it! Rony, you have to take me back to the satellite.”

The pilot watched them and wondered about the tower's intentions.

Sheena touched his hand gently.

“Rony... do you think we're an experiment to them?”

His eyes were looking at the dark sky outside the tent, where the blue radiant moon had emerged on the other side of the horizon, glowing brighter than in daylight.

“What I know for sure is that they are going to be in the same situation as us. It makes no sense to expose themselves to something that would mean the end. If they know something, it's not exactly the worst we can imagine. It's probably something they can't explain to us right now.”

“Do you trust the control tower?”

The psychologist seemed to trust him and was waiting for his answer, to decide how to face the unknown future. He knew that most of the crew would stand by his decision, relying on it. It was a big responsibility: he had brought them there and he had to give them motivation to keep staying and achieving what they had come to achieve.

He looked at them. He remembered the relentless determination in Vera's voice and her amazing intelligence.

“I trust the tower”, he answered calmly. “I'm staying to see what happens.”

“Then I'll stay with you”, the psychologist said without any regret.

“What the heck... I might as well finish what we started”, Nicole joined the party. “It could be fun.”

“I guess I'm staying too”, Yuri spoke, shrugging innocently. “It might be interesting from a scientific point of view, to find out what's going on with that ascension phenomenon. I guess it's once in a lifetime opportunity.”

Evgheni was annoyed by their resolve.

“Damn, you're a bunch of crazy lab rats! You'll be fried like monkeys on a wire. Once in a lifetime you say? Sure! I'm not staying!”

He left the tent.

Rony stood up, but Sheena grabbed his sleeve.

“Let him go. He's just angry, but he won't leave. There's no shuttle taking off from Asterius right now.”

Yuri looked at them a bit confused.

“Guys... what are we going to tell the kids?”

Sheena shook her head.

“Oh, the kids... I forgot... They're coming tomorrow!”

“So? You're the psychologist. What do we tell them?”

She sighed.

“Of course, the truth. We'll tell them the truth. But not as soon as they arrive, we'll give them time to adjust to the camp first.”

“That's another way of lying to them.”

“It's not lying. It's delaying the moment of truth until they are ready for it.”

“Great! We'll wait until we're swallowed by Alpha cluster and then when they see their arms flying off, we tell them hey kids, guess what, now we play the game of disintegration.”

“That sounds terrible, Nicole. You don't know if that's what's waiting for us.”

“But nobody seems to know for sure.”

“So life is unpredictable. We chose to come here. We must be brave enough to face it.”

“It's easy for you to say, Yuri. You're a scientist.”

“And you aren't?”

“I'm trained to save lives and cure illness, not sit around waiting for the sky to fall...”

“Calm down, Nicole.”

Rony left them talking and went outside. He needed time to himself, to think – away from the crew's anxiety or arguments. He needed to think and look at the sky.

He stepped in the dark, glancing at the glowing moon. The white dust from Asterius surface was a pale shade of gray in the night. Rony kept staring pensively at

the vast space above. There were no clouds and the stars, the nebulae and countless distant galaxies were visible in their cold greatness, expanding to the infinite space in dots of colorful mist. A day on Asterius had only 20 hours. The neon sun would rise and set in a pink stripe horizon, while the blue moon was always there, day and night.

Rony looked at the blue globe. “Were you lying to me, Vera?” he asked her in his mind. “Can you hear my thoughts? Do we really evolve?” For a moment, he felt as if the moon would glow brighter. He almost could sense her presence in his mind, he could have sworn she was able to hear him thinking. But then again, he knew it could be only his imagination projected on a mysterious distant sky. He asked anyway. “What's around the corner, Vera? Do you know?”



## The Kraken Game

“They're here”.

Rony had gone swimming early in the morning. When he returned, Sheena was waiting for him in front of the big tent.

“The children are here”, she told him. “Yuri's showing them around, the greenhouses and how to use the equipment to take care of what we planted. Come, let's look at their files.”

Rony took a towel, wiping the colorful remains of ocean water in his hair.

“Okay, show me their files.”

Sheena turned on the laptop screen.

“We've got two girls and three boys. First girl: Zenna, fifteen years old. She ran away from her rich parents to join a fighting club. She used to gamble her daddy's money until she got interested in kickboxing. She's probably a fierce temperament and needed to blow off some steam, being the only child, restricted to a house she wasn't allowed to leave. The sport suited her well, but it also got her in trouble. She got into some fights and broke a guy's jaw. Finally, she was taken into custody by the rehabilitation camp. And now we've got her.”

“Great”, said Rony, looking at the picture of an athletic redhead, with steely green eyes and pointed chin. “I get the idea. Go on to the next.”

Sheena scrolled down the screen.

“Next girl: Penelope, seventeen years old. She's rather quiet and reserved, but highly intelligent.”

“So what's wrong with her?”

“Nothing's wrong, she's just a type of rebel against the system. She was caught stealing books, so she was sent to rehabilitation camp. She escaped from the camp twice and was brought back.”

“We'd better keep an eye on her then. She seems unpredictable,” he said looking at the picture of a tall girl with big brown eyes.

“That's right: we must be careful with her.”

“If the girls are so promising, I wonder about the boys”.

Sheena smiled.

“Yes, here are the boys... first one, Joey. The youngest, fourteen years old.”

The pilot looked at the picture of a short slim boy wearing a cartoon t-shirt and jeans.

“What's his story?”

“He's emotionally unstable, very vulnerable. He faked epilepsy attacks to get into hospital and steal medicine with euphoric effect. His father left the family when he was three years old, so he grew up without a male model. He was in rehab institutions many times, but the problem is his emotional neediness. He's very anxious and became addicted very early to all sorts of drugs. If he gets nervous he becomes agitated and will do anything to get something to change the chemical balance in his brain.”

“Okay, I understand. Joey needs attention. What about the other two boys?”

“Martin is a trouble-maker. Eighteen years old, very short tempered. He beats others up. He's very impatient and needs lots of physical activity. We should give him work at the greenhouse, hopefully he stays out of trouble.”

The blond boy with icy blue eyes was staring at them defyingly from the laptop screen. Rony looked at the boy's arms and noticed the round shaped muscles and assertive posture.

“Hmm... I predict a fight between him and Zenna”, he smiled.

Sheena shook her head.

“Heavens forbid, I hope not!”

Then she scrolled down the file.

“Last but not least, fifteen year old Buddy. He's a smart boy, but he gets lost easily.”

“What do you mean he gets lost?”

“His brain can process information like a computer, but he can't remember a

place if he leaves it. He doesn't know how to get back, he can't recognize the way. It's as if he sees every scenery, every landscape for the first time. Somebody must always take him from one place to another because otherwise he gets lost on his own. He likes to talk and follow people around, so he really must be supervised in case he wanders off somewhere. He has a habit of going wherever his feet take him.”

At that moment Yuri entered the tent, staring at the laptop with his blue innocent eyes.

“I've brought the kids back from the greenhouse. Rony, they're waiting for you. I told them you'd show them how to set up a tent.”

“Thanks Yuri”.

He went outside. The teenagers were waiting, sitting down, lined up by the big tent, absently glancing in the distance. They seemed awkward with the new situation and disoriented. Rony sensed they weren't fully comprehensive of why they had been sent to Asterius. They were taking it as a sort of punishment and were expecting harsh attitudes from the adults.

Rony walked past them, taking turns to recognize each one by the pictures he'd seen.

“Hi there. I'm Rony the pilot”, he said to them.

They raised their eyes, watching him distrustfully and observantly.

“Are you the chief of this camp?” the curly haired boy asked him.

“If anything, I'll be the chief!” the blonde boy interrupted, defiantly.

Rony spoke patiently:

“Martin, nobody's come here to act as a chief. You're here to learn to behave and become better people.”

“And the grown-ups too?” the curly haired boy insisted.

“Yes Buddy, the grown-ups must also learn to be better people.”

“Okay. I can accept it then.”

Martin was still resentful.

“I wish they'd sent me to a labor camp instead! It's gonna be so boring here!”

“Shut up already, you're so annoying!” the smallest boy shouted at him irritated.

Rony admired his courage to stand up to the most physically fit of the group, despite his frail appearance.

“You must be Joey”.

The thin boy looked at him with big green eyes like clear water and something lit up his face in a friendly smile.

“Yes, I'm Joey. How do you know my name?”

“I've seen your id info a while ago.”

“Did the authorities gossip to you about us?” one of the girls asked sarcastically.

He turned to face her. Big brown eyes from beyond a long chestnut fringe were sizing him up and down, as if from a room full of information about him.

“Hello Penelope. Nobody gossiped about you yet...”

“They will, and you too. I'm just trouble for you.”

“Why?”

“Because I'm agile and sneaky and sooner or later I'll get out of here. Tomorrow I'll be back on the satellite, I'll steal your shuttle before you wake up.”

“Don't make me laugh!” Martin intervened again. “There's no shuttle for you to steal! I would be the first to leave otherwise.”

“You always have to be the first at something,” Penelope replied with irony. “Why not be the first to shut up for a while.”

Then she turned her eyes to Rony, with a hidden smile:

“Do you have a library around here somewhere?”

“I'm sorry, but we haven't built it yet. Maybe you'd like to do that, while you're here?”

“Sure, why not... Just bring the books, and I'll build a place for them.”

“Or run away with them”, Joey laughed genuinely amused, already imagining a funny vision of Penelope running to the horizon with her arms full of books.

“What are books?” Martin asked in contempt. “And who needs them? Losers!”

“I told you to shut up”, Penelope replied. “Your ignorance makes you the loser around here.”

The only person who had not said anything yet was Zenna. She was listening

somehow absently, her steely green eyes cutting through the white dust of the rocky hills around, her long reddish hair touching her athletic knees. She seemed ready to jump and sprint out of sight.

“Hi Zenna”, Rony said to her, extending a hand.

She looked at him attentively and shook his hand with a firm grip.

“Hi pilot.”

Her eyes flickered for a moment with a friendly light of recognition. Rony understood she appreciated something about him – the uniform, the job, the mission, the attitude... something sparked her interest to actually look at him and smile. It was as if she already knew him from somewhere else.

“Nice to meet you”, she added.

“Nice to meet you too. Have we met before?”

“Nope. But I've checked your file online before coming here” she confessed. “I wanted to know who I was dealing with and if you are who you say you are.”

“And? What's your conclusion?”

Zenna shrugged simply.

“You're the pilot. You said so.”

He was a bit confused about why she had checked his profile before arriving on the planet, but he couldn't figure out what was on her mind, so he just left it at that.

“Ok everyone. First we're going to set up the tents for you.”

“I can do it myself, I don't need your help!” Martin said in a hostile tone, bragging proudly.

“I don't think so”, Rony explained calmly. “These tents are special. They're designed to stand up to storms blowing white dust with a speed of two hundred kilometers per hour. They're also designed with a resistant skeleton that automatically switches on a wireless signal in case of burial in the storm or landslide. You'll be perfectly safe inside these tents, but setting up also requires a certain procedure. I'll show you and you'll learn to do it by yourselves soon enough.”

He started walking to the unpacked tents.

“Come on! Let's go team!” he said and the teenagers got up, following him.

In a second, Joey was already walking by his side.

“What's this?” he asked, touching the electronic keychain attached to his belt.

“It's an infra-blue lamp. It can light up a laser beam one kilometer distance.”

“Wow! Awesome! Can I try it?”

“Right now it's not the best time of day to do that. The sunlight will fade the laser beam and you won't see much of it. I'll let you try it later.”

Before he noticed, Buddy was walking on the other side and had grabbed his hand.

“What about the power of the lamp? Is it sunlight regenerated or does it run on battery?”

“It recharges in sunlight, but it also incorporates a battery in case of prolonged eclipse.”

“Cool! Do we get to have such a lamp ourselves?”

“Would you like to?”

The boys answered at the same time, with convinced enthusiasm:

“Yes!”

“Okay, I'll give you lamps later this evening.”

“Yay! We're getting lamps!”

The unpredictable, unrestrained joy and exuberance was changing the atmosphere of the camp in an instant. Silence was replaced by laughter, loud talking and cheerful action. After installing the tents, which the teenagers were very interested to learn about and skillful at getting it done, Rony told them about the beach.

“There's an ocean beyond that hill”, he said. “If you want, we can go for a swim.”

The enthusiastic cheering covered the sound of his voice. He couldn't stop them, as they started running to the top of the hill.

“Yay! Swimmiiiiing!”

The boys were first to get into the water. The girls were also eager to go find the beach, so Rony was left around the tents by himself. He had to leave everything and run after the kids, hoping they knew how to swim so he wouldn't have to jump

and save them from the ocean. When he arrived at the beach they were already up to their knees in the waves, soaking wet, splashing colorful water at one another and having so much fun that he didn't want to deprive them of that happiness, so he just let them play. None of them was going to deep water, they were only playing at the shore, catching the waves or throwing pebbles in the distance.

Rony sat on a rock, watching them amused and captivated.

He didn't notice when Sheena came next to him, probably intrigued and alerted by the noise.

“Look how happy they are”, she observed. “They've forgotten they're far away from home. This beach is like paradise for them.”

“I'm not sure what to do with them. They're so unpredictable.”

Sheena smiled.

“You're already doing great, believe me. I think you're just what they need. I saw you explaining how to set up the tents, and now this... they need this freedom. These moments are what will stay with them – what will make them better.”

“I'm afraid I can't insist to discipline them enough. What if I can't make them better people?”

“Don't worry, they're already better people. Look at them: they're bonding by playing together. Let them do that. No discipline can replace real connection.”

“Maybe you're right... but they 've got the mentality of ten year olds. They're so impulsive.”

“You have to understand these are children who grew up on a satellite. They don't have enough life experience to be too mature about it. And I don't think they were chosen randomly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it, Rony. We're like a micro-society here, reconstructing the foundation of a new world, at a smaller scale. Each of these teenagers represents something. For example, Martin is the anarchist, Penelope the rebel, Buddy could be the inventor, Joey the justice and peace keeper.”

“And Zenna the revolutionary.”

“I see her as the leader.”

“Do you think they'll grow up to become like that?”

“Nobody knows how they'll grow up, but they were put together and sent to us because each of them is an element of energy that is necessary and inevitable for a micro-society that needs to evolve past its own frames. They were certainly chosen because of their ability to go beyond what is established. I think they'll become an invincible force if they learn to work together. The tower is probably counting on that.”

The children kept playing, unaware and undisturbed, splashing drops of galactic sparkles from the moving ocean.

Rony was so absorbed in watching their frenzy that he hardly noticed how time went by.

“Hey pilot!” Zenna shouted from the waves. “Come and join us!”

“Yes, come and play with us!” Joey and Buddy shouted too.

Rony hesitated for a moment, but Joey and Buddy had already come out of the waves, dripping wet. They reached him and grabbed his hands from two sides.

“Come on! Come with us!” they pleaded cheerfully.

“Go”, Sheena smiled, waving him off.

He realized it was no longer an option not to participate, so he took off his boots and ran to the water, disregarding the fact that his uniform was getting wet and sparkly from the splashing waves.

“What are you playing?”

“It's called the Monster Kraken. You're in the middle and you have to try to catch the others underwater by their feet. If you can sweep someone else off balance, then they'll be the new Kraken,” Buddy explained.

As he submerged under the water, he caught Joey's ankles and lifted him in the air. The boy was light as a feather, laughing and soaking wet, so happy to be the next to chase others' feet under the waves.

As they took turns pretending to be a giant octopus, Rony noticed their dynamic in the game: Martin was trying to overthrow the one in the middle, testing his own powers against everyone's; Buddy preferred to stay out of conflict and was chasing the girls more; Joey liked to shock and surprise others, diving completely



under the water; Penelope withdrew from the game at a certain moment, retreating to the beach and Zenna kept trying to be the winner, but somehow was looking to interact with the pilot, seeking his approval and attention. He thought it must have been because she saw him as a power representative and being an impetuous temperament herself, she was instinctively drawn to that perception of him. In a few hours, everyone was so caught up in the game that they forgot their own motivation and started enjoying just being there and laughing together.

When the sun dimmed its neon glow, Rony decided it was time to get back to the camp.

They returned happy and tired, having the feeling they had spent an entire week on the beach, not just a few hours.

Nicole gave the teenagers rations of soup and biscuits for dinner, then they were sent to their tents to sleep. As expected, they didn't go to sleep immediately. Instead, they kept chatting, giggling and whispering. Buddy and Joey were trying to annoy the girls by playing with the laser lamps, sending the lights on the opposite tent and making shadows.

“Cut it out, boys! Let us sleep!” Zenna commanded from inside the tent, even though the two girls had no intention of sleeping either, as they kept talking and laughing.

Eventually, the teenagers left their sleeping bags and gathered in a bigger tent to play some more games with a water bottle, until Evgheni visited them and scattered the party, on account of having to get up early in the morning to work at the greenhouse.

Then the bio-engineer came to Rony's tent to complain about the noise.

“These kids need some sedatives. If they keep it up, I'm leaving this camp!”

“You already said you'll leave the camp many times now. Go to sleep, Evgheni. They're just children,” the pilot replied and zipped his tent shut.

Going to sleep after such a full day was a real luxury.

For the first time in many days, he didn't think of anything and didn't worry about the next step of the mission. He just closed his eyes and rolled in a deep slumber, in the blue light of the moon.

## A Magnetic Orbit

“We're having a meeting with the pilots of each camp” the voice announced implacably in his ear.

The unexpected transmission from the tower made Rony a bit anxious.

Vera's tone sounded as if there was really no choice but to do what they demanded.

Why were they having a meeting? What was so urgent to tell? Why did they have to go in person so far away? What was so secretive that couldn't be disclosed in a microphone announcement? Many questions flooded his mind in an instant.

“When is that going to happen?” he asked.

“You should be here the day after tomorrow. We have important instructions to tell you about.”

“Is the meeting going to be at the tower?”

“Yes. We'll be waiting for you at the tower, the day after tomorrow at 10 a.m.: tenth floor, conference room.”

The details were so precise, they left no space for doubt or backing out.

Rony was still unsure of many things.

“How am I supposed to get up there on the moon?”

Vera's answer was, as usual, determined and to the point:

“The same way you landed on Asterius: with a shuttle. Pilot yourself up here.”

“There's not enough battery on the shuttle to last a two-way trip to the moon and back. The solar panels didn't supply enough energy to recharge it for another destination after landing.”

“We'll replace your battery with a new one after you get to the tower. Set your course and take off, it will be enough to reach the moon. Just bring the shuttle codes with you and our engineers will take care of it. You'll be able to return to the planet after the meeting.”

She really had an answer for everything, he thought while facing the fact that he had to go to the moon in two days. He wondered what would become of the camp in his absence. The unpredictable children were up to new tricks every new second.

“Any other obstacle?” he heard her inquire, as if she had sensed his hesitation.

Rony realized she was beginning to guess his reactions, she could recognize the meaning of his silence.

“I don't know what happens if I leave the base”, he said reluctantly.

“Nominate someone in charge of the camp while you're away. Your colleagues can manage two days without you.”

He sighed.

“Alright. I'll try to get to the meeting at the tower.”

“Good. We'll be here. Have a nice trip”, she concluded.

*We?* Who's *we*? he wondered.

Of course she was speaking on behalf of the tower authorities, but he had never met any of those people from the blue moon. Sometimes he wondered if they were people or something different: aliens, robots, computers... light beings, energy or just a product of collective imagination. The agents that contacted the pilots didn't display any personal hints of who or what they were like.

Rony went to Sheena's tent.

“I must leave for a meeting on the moon” he told her directly, aware of how unrealistically it sounded.

She seemed surprised, but she believed him. She also understood immediately the purpose of his confession.

“I'll make sure nothing bad happens while you're there”, she said, seeming more concerned about his task than the prospect of his absence from the camp. “Yuri will help me”, she added.

“Yes, Yuri's a good person. You can trust him.”

“But Rony, how will you get to the moon? There's no more battery to fuel the shuttle.”

“It will be enough to set the course. They promised to replace the battery with

a new one, once I get there. I'll come back, don't worry.”

“I hope so... Why do you think they've summoned you?”

The pilot shrugged.

“I don't know. I'll tell you when I find out.”

“Be careful”, she said with a concerned tone, as he turned to go.

He started to prepare the shuttle for the trip.

He couldn't keep it from the children, who noticed everything.

“What are you doing?” Joey asked curiously.

He was the first to approach Rony, walking around the camp and following the pilot like a little puppy, enthusiastic to know every detail.

“I'm going on a trip to the moon”, Rony answered.

“Really? Wow! Are you going to return?”

“Yes Joey, I will return.”

“Great! Can I come with you?”

“Not this time. Maybe next trip.”

Rony expanded the solar panels to the neon light, trying to upload a bit more energy to the half depleted battery.

“This will have to be enough”... he muttered to himself.

Joey was sitting on a rock, watching with attentive green lighted eyes.

After a while, Buddy came by his side too, interested to see the pilot working around the shuttle.

“Is it difficult to fly this ship?” he asked.

“Not after you get used to it.”

“Do you think I could be a pilot when I grow up?”

“If you really want to, you can learn and become a great pilot.”

“I think I will do that”, Buddy concluded, enchanted by the idea. “What about you, Joey? Are you going to be a pilot too?”

“I want to be an explorer”, Joey smiled.

“It's the same thing”, Buddy said.

“No, an explorer is a lot more... “

Rony was amused by the boys' dialogue. For a moment, it made him forget

about the worries that clouded his thoughts concerning the trip into the unknown. He kept wondering about the mighty tower of control where he didn't know who was going to wait for him, with what sort of information or demands. He knew he was finally going to see the place where instructions came from, and it made him eager and anxious at the same time.

“Are you leaving the planet? I knew it!! You're running away!”

Evgheni had noticed he was preparing the shuttle and had instantly flared up in anger, coming in a hurry from the greenhouse.

“You can't run away like that! How can you do this to us? Take us with you!”

“I'm not really leaving. I'm just going to the moon for two days.”

“Like hell you are! And you want me to believe you? You're taking off to the satellite!”

“I was called by the control tower for a meeting on the moon.”

Rony remained calm, being too preoccupied by his work to pay any attention to the other. Evgheni circled the shuttle in disbelief, as if trying to find proof of a significant trip being underway.

“At least think about the children! They deserve to be saved from this planet!”

“Shut up, you'll scare the boys.”

“Why do we need to be saved?” Buddy asked innocently.

“Boys, go find Nicole and tell her it's time for lunch”, the pilot told them and they went off, somehow not willing to leave without hearing more explanations.

They were interested in the conversation, but they agreed to distance themselves from a conflict that didn't concern them. Rony wondered if they had heard too much.

“You've been planning this escape ever since you got here, haven't you! I won't let you do it unless you take me with you to the satellite,” Evgheni said threateningly.

“I can't go to the satellite”, Rony answered undisturbed. “It's too much distance for this used up battery. I wouldn't get that far anyway. This will only take me to the moon.”

Evgheni squinted his eyes, watching the pilot's moves with scrutinizing

suspicion.

“We'll see”, he finally added and returned to the greenhouse.

Rony finished preparations in the evening. The engine was ready to start, but there was still the risk of the battery not having enough power to send the shuttle on the course to the blue moon.

He didn't discuss anything more about the trip and he left early in the morning, before sunrise, when everyone was sleeping. The only ones who woke up to see him leave were Joey and the girls. They knew about his plan, since the boys had told them, but they didn't seem too worried to see the shuttle take off in the dark. Zenna waved at him, smiling, while Penelope was watching reserved, with crossed arms and shaded eyes. Joey jumped up in an attempt to reach the shuttle's smaller and smaller image rising in the night sky, as if grabbing a comet.

From the round window, Rony could see Asterius becoming a pale gray ball, further and further until the neon sun brightly blinded the shuttle shields, blocking the view. He adjusted the direction and turned towards the blue moon that was glowing silently among the shrouds of purple and pink galaxies. On one side, the Alpha cluster was seen approaching imperceptibly, like a vortex of light, spreading its scattered stars and asteroids in a huge display of pouring brightness. Rony noticed it was getting closer, its shape expanding in a disk that engulfed everything in its way, rotating with such speed that the human eye was unable to distinguish its movements. The pilot knew it was approaching fast and with unpredictable effects upon the lives of whoever was in its path. It seemed almost crazy to believe life could be anything else than melted heat in the midst of that spinning madness. Its menacing greatness was so impressive, Rony could feel its pressure on his chest, an unexplained emotion that clenched his ribcage. He couldn't stop staring at the immense rotating fountain of light and stars. He wondered if the universe had looked like that in its very beginning – but everything was a permanent new genesis in the vast universe anyway.

Many hours later, upon approaching the glowing blue surface of the moon, he could focus on the idea of landing and finding the tower control. The moon had an artificial atmosphere. As the shuttle hovered the uninhabited surface, Rony could

see silver pipes everywhere, spreading across valleys, craters and mountains, running towards the big city in the distance. The city was covered by a huge glass hemisphere that kept the oxygen generated by the pipes. The thousands of silver tubes extracted liquid from within the moon and turned it into air, providing conditions for the city to breathe.

The shuttle was allowed to enter the space under the glass screen through a tunnel. Rony transmitted his coordinates and a hatch opened for the shuttle to come through. After two minutes ride in the glass tunnel that seemed more like falling than flying, the shuttle landed in a hangar, on a platform, without much of a trembling shock. Rony was glad to see the initial impulse had lasted enough to reach the moon. He got out and was greeted by an engineer who asked for the codes of the battery.

“I was told you'd come. Welcome to the Blue Moon. I'll replace the battery of this shuttle before the evening. By tonight, you'll find it ready to return.”

“Thank you. Do you know where the control tower is?”

“It's on the main avenue, third subway station if you take the direction of the center.”

Rony didn't seem very sure about where he had to arrive, but he was determined to find it.

He got on the subway and counted the stations. The vehicle was crowded with people in uniforms, very preoccupied to get somewhere fast.

When Rony climbed the automatic stairs to the surface, he found himself on a big boulevard by a river. Huge glass and metal buildings were guarding each side of the river, reflected in the water. Flying vehicles were swaying by in full speed. The rolling sidewalk was moving slowly, so he had to jump on a bench to look around for a while. The tower could have been any of the tall buildings. He knew he had to ask again. He randomly stopped one of the passengers.

“Hey, excuse me... is the control tower around here?”

“No, you have to walk four hundred meters ahead. It should be on your left side, there's a fence and a gate. Go inside the garden, the tower is at the end of the park.”

“Thanks.”

He resumed his walk. The whole city was overflowing with rays of blue, reflected upward from the ground to the metal buildings. The atmosphere under the glass was warm but mysterious and it gave a tingling feeling, as if electricity would radiate from everywhere around. Rony eventually arrived in front of something that looked like a gate. It was guarded by an automatic speaker.

“Is this the control tower?” he asked.

“Who are you and why do you want to go in?” the speaking box replied.

“I'm here for the meeting with pilots from Asterius planet. I was told to come.”

The gate door was suddenly opened. The speaker said briefly:

“Tenth floor, conference room. At the end of the park.”

Rony entered the garden. He was surprised to see plants, trees and bushes growing along the alleys. At the end of the park there was a tall round building, getting lost in the mist of heights, towards the glass ceiling covering the city. He went through the door, without anyone asking him anything.

Inside, he could have gotten lost among the many corridors and elevators, so he decided to take the stairs instead. He was alone in the dark staircase that spiraled up endlessly. It seemed nobody else wanted to go that way. The lights on the walls lit up instantly as he started to climb. “Movement sensors”, he thought. The building was quiet and elegant – and strangely empty. When he got to the tenth floor, he stepped out of the staircase hall. Bright light blinded him for a moment. There were many people going in many directions.

“Conference room?” he asked around.

“That way. Second door.”

He saw someone in a pilot uniform, going the same way. “I'm in the right place”, he thought.

The conference room was already getting full of pilots, waiting for the agents to come and start the meeting. Rony took a seat somewhere close to the door, instinctively ready to leave if something went wrong. He felt curious and nervous about the people who had sent him instructions for such a long time. Pilots were



chatting around him, but he kept to his thoughts. Finally, the agents came in and the room was silent.

“Welcome to the control tower. We have so many news for you”, a tall blonde agent spoke clearly. “I'm Dawn and this is my colleague Vera”, she said, turning to look at the other person standing by her side.

Rony looked at the second agent: Vera, the voice that had talked to him for many years hadn't said anything yet. She looked more human than he had imagined. Her slim silhouette in the silver uniform made her seem fragile, and yet he recognized the determined attitude in the chin pointed upwards and the deep eyes guarded by thin angular eyebrows. However, there was something unusual about her appearance: her brown hair and thoughtful glance gave him a warm impression, contrasting with what Rony knew about her behavior. He could tell, just by looking at her, that she was observant and thoughtful, almost caring, though trying to remain emotionally guarded, aware of the power and responsibility that she officially represented. Rony had expected an authoritarian presence, and was finally meeting a thoughtful girl with mysterious eyes.

“This is why we've asked you to come here”, Dawn continued to speak clearly and decisively.

She turned on a big screen in front of them and Rony recognized the spinning flooding light of the Alpha cluster approaching them.

“The encounter will happen sooner than we estimated”, the agent said. “You have to be prepared for the effects, once it reaches Asterius orbit. The temperature and weather of the planet will change drastically and unpredictably. The day and night sequence will also be altered, because the spinning speed of Asterius will increase and keep increasing.”

“How will we survive?” a pilot asked.

“Your body will adapt to the new vibration of energy. The atoms will join the new frequency of light particles and you will maintain consciousness, but will gain power to assemble yourself in any moment of time, in any place within the Alpha State.”

“You mean we will disintegrate”, another pilot said skeptically.

“You won't disintegrate”, Vera intervened calmly.

She spoke distantly, crossing her arms in defense, as if she had expected chaos and rebellion from the crowd, upon hearing the incredible predictions. Both agents were speaking from a rational viewpoint and their intelligence seemed to surpass the audience's expectations.

“You will be able to reach a higher state of consciousness by ascending to the level where you control matter, not the other way around. Your physical existence is an illusion of inflexible vibration. In truth, you are flexible and you can choose to arrange your energy in any way you want. You will become aware of that once you enter the light cluster. It's just a matter of perspective.”

“Easy for you to say. Have you been there to know for sure?”

The question that came from the room didn't throw Vera off her speech.

“It's also easy to understand”, she answered, dodging the other question that she remained silent about.

Rony wondered why she hadn't answered it directly, when it would have been simple to just say something scientific. Instead, she left the question in the air. “Has she been there indeed?” he asked himself. The girl looked like she knew so much more and was reserved to reveal it in that moment. She let her colleague take over the conversation. Dawn explained:

“We're telling you what's going to come because we don't want anyone to panic. You have to tell the people on the planet what to do. Life means adapting to new conditions. Life is moving and changing as we speak. Right now, we're heading on through the galaxy with 100.000 km/h. Alpha cluster is approaching with light speed. Everything will change so fast, very soon.”

The murmur of the disturbed pilots filled the room. Rony was thinking silently. He had many questions, but he doubted the agents would take the time to answer, with so many people raising hands and wanting to speak. He wished he could ask Vera if she had been to the Alpha State before, even though it seemed absurd and impossible to imagine she had traveled thousands of years in time. He tentatively raised his hand at a certain moment, but gave up when he saw the agents were letting others speak first. Both Dawn and Vera noticed he wanted to say

something, but they didn't react. He decided to delay his question, so he let his arm down. Somehow, he felt as if Vera knew who he was and what he wanted to say would be off limits. "She probably knows everyone's profile in this room", he thought to himself and continued to watch the discussion, a bit detached.

After a while, a man looking like a scientist came in the room, watching the pilots severely.

The two agents interrupted their explanations, standing up.

"Is everything going okay?" the man asked, frowning behind his glasses.

"Yes, just as planned", Dawn replied.

"Is this the chairman?" Rony whispered to the pilot next to him.

"No. He's got a higher rank, but he's not the chairperson. The main head of the control tower is not going to show up. She's never been seen anyway."

"She?"

"We're taking a break" Dawn announced.

The pilots went in the hall.

Rony listened to them speaking for a while, then went to look outside the window, to the metal city flooded by silver pipes. From that height everything was covered in a blue glow.

"Did you have something to ask?" he heard a voice and he turned around.

Vera was standing in front of him. Seeing her so close was overwhelming.

She had come to look for him in the hall. He didn't have time to warm up to the idea: her presence was an event in itself, taking over his thoughts completely. He spoke immediately, before she could change her mind:

"Yes, I wanted to know: what happens to us when we get to that level of atoms switching to change mode?"

She replied kindly:

"It depends on what you want to be. You're free to decide."

"You've been there before, haven't you?"

Her deep eyes sustained his stare, a bit defyingly. She didn't answer.

Something from the mystery of her glance was infinite and deep like the ocean of galactic colors and sparkling waves where he had gone swimming. Anything could

have appeared in the abyss of those eyes: sunbeams, storms, bright lightning, galaxies unfolding... Looking in the shaded colors was like plunging underwater and losing direction, never coming back.

He felt both intimidated and warmed by her presence. He hoped she couldn't read his thoughts, revealing he liked being there by her side. He tried to conceal it, in fear it would make her judgmental about it. He envisioned she could even decide to cease communication in order to remain impersonal. Her training was no doubt including instructions about not acting on any feelings. His eyes involuntarily wandered to the beauty of a strand of her hair, falling on her forehead and her eyes noticed his stare. She raised her chin, her eyes becoming more steely and firm. He immediately averted his glance to the window.

“I want to replace the bio-engineer on the camp”, he said to her, looking in the distance, at the galaxies beyond the glass shield.

“Why?”

“He wants to quit the mission. He's refractory and stubborn about it. We need someone else to look after the plants. Can we get another person for it?”

Vera shook her head.

“It is better to keep the people who were assigned for the base. I'll ask how to solve this and I'll tell you later.”

She turned and left.

Rony remained there, staring at the walking girl in silver uniform who seemed fragile and yet had so much power and determination. She came back after ten minutes, looking observantly around the hall, then changing direction towards him. Her eyes had turned darker. Something had upset her in the brief time she had been gone.

“Your bio-engineer received a message to improve his attitude”, she said reluctantly. “Let me know if he causes anymore trouble.”

And then she left again, returning to the conference room.

Rony wondered if she had been scolded by a higher rank because of her intervention. He wondered if she had an argument with the bio-engineer or someone else. Something had not gone well and he felt it was his fault for

mentioning it. He hoped he didn't get her in any trouble. Although she kept her head high, determined and unyielding in her motivation, she was a part of the tower hierarchy and Rony had no doubt the instructions she received from higher orders were much more severe than what he could imagine. He felt sorry to cause any disturbance and then realized he already cared about her in a way he hadn't expected – and in a way she couldn't guess. He felt he was one step away from being completely fascinated by the tower agent, and that could mean he would be totally exposed to a complicated outcome. And yet he couldn't resist being responsive to her, getting more wrapped up with each minute he spent in her presence. He felt as if he had become an asteroid orbiting a magnetic field, irrevocably drawn to its center of light, only to be dissolved into pieces by its intense energy.

## A Spinning Force

“What am I gonna to do with this feeling?” he wondered as he was coming back to Asterius.

His thoughts were slipping in the zone of dreaming with open eyes, wanting to know more about her, despite being aware it wasn't allowed. He couldn't stop seeing her in his mind, until he got more conscious of the imminent meltdown of his thinking instead of the approach of the Alpha cluster. Disintegration and change in his atoms had already begun by meeting the presence of the voice behind the microphone. He knew he could never go back to being indifferent to her, the moment he had seen her eyes and had felt the kindness beyond her fragile but elegantly determined posture. It was an irresistible encounter that he couldn't forget. Communicating with her would never feel the same again after having been so near. As much as he had admired her intelligence and determination, he had become equally spellbound by her complex and mysterious personality.

For a while, it seemed as if his shuttle was drifting into space and he didn't even worry if he would land back on the planet or be engulfed by the spinning force in the distance. His cabin was lit up by the neon sun, then the blue moon was back in sight, finally the view expanded to the light vortex... the shuttle was rolling on, just as his mind. Conflicting emotions appeared and disappeared with each second. Flickering flashbacks, brief pieces of images and instances of the encounter were passing through his mind.

He knew his interaction with the tower agent was restricted to receiving information about the mission as it was most certainly forbidden to become emotionally involved in any way. He also feared she would assign someone else to deal with him, once she realized he cared about her as a real person.

He knocked his fist on his head.

“What to do now? What, *what?*”

The answer was obvious: nothing. There was nothing to do about it: no way to stop it and no way to solve it either. He had to just go with the flow and accept the reality of it.

The shuttle landed in the colorful ocean with a splash, but soon floated to the surface.

As he unlocked the door, he saw someone on the beach.

“Hey! Welcome back!” Yuri shouted.

Rony jumped in the water, swimming past the hexagon pillars.

The cool splash of foam was refreshing, taking his mind off the endless labyrinthine thoughts.

“Why are you here alone? Where are the others?” he asked, emerging from the waves.

Yuri explained:

“While you were gone there was a fight between Martin and Zenna. First, Joey and Buddy told the others something was threatening their lives. Penelope sneaked into your tent and accessed the data from the control tower. She actually hacked into their database through your laptop and learned about Alpha cluster coming this way. Then the kids decided to take action to save themselves. Martin wanted to be the leader and make them run away. Zenna challenged his leadership and they eventually started a fight. Then us adults broke the fight off and sent them to their tents.”

“What about Zenna and Martin? Are they okay?”

“They're fine. Martin has a sprained elbow from when Zenna knocked him to the ground. And she's got a bruise because Martin threw a rock at her. Nicole's taking care of them both, they're in the medical tent. You should talk to them about what's going to happen. They're disoriented. But first, Sheena wants to talk to you.”

“And Evgheni? Has he caused any problems?”

“No. He received a message from the control tower while you were on the moon. He's grumpy about it, but cooperating. He hasn't argued anymore since then.”

Rony looked up at the pale blue moon in the afternoon light. He remembered Vera's mysterious eyes as she was returning to the hall.

Yuri's question woke him up:

“Did they replace the battery?”

“Yeah, they did.”

“Did they tell you what's coming?”

Rony stared at the neon sun.

“Yeah.”

“And? What is it?”

The pilot placed a reassuring hand on Yuri's shoulder.

“A new life is coming, Yuri. A new universe with it.”

And he smiled, feeling suddenly liberated and exuberant.

He had finally understood something essential: it was up to them to decide what was going to happen. They had the power. It was as simple as that: it would be as they imagined. Vera had tried to tell him the truth for a long time: life was flexible and it would arrange according to their wish. They only had to wish hard enough – and know what to wish for.

“Let's tell the children”, he said cheerfully. “Come on.”

The children were having dinner, so he let them eat while he discussed with Sheena.

“How was the trip?” she asked him, relieved to see him at the camp again.

“It was interesting.”

“Did you find out anything that can give us hope?”

“I think so. The people at the tower believe we're gonna be able to change our lives in any way we want, once we enter the light. We'll be masters of atoms and arrange space, time and matter just the way we want.”

“That would be wonderful!”

Sheena's eyes lit up with enchantment.

“And do you believe it too, Rony?”

“Yes, I want to believe it. It's just...”

He hesitated.



“What? Tell me”, she said confidently. “I'm listening.”

He looked down at his boots.

“I'm afraid of feeling too much. I'm afraid I'm imagining too much because of it. I'm sorry I can't stop it.”

Sheena smiled.

“Life is not real life without feeling anything. Don't apologize for what you feel. It's the path to the truth. You should trust yourself.”

“But what if I'm not allowed?”

“Holding back or burying your emotions is not the answer. How you feel and how you act are two different things. You decide what to do and what feelings to keep. In time, you will know.”

The children accepted his story that the storm that was coming could be vanquished by having a good shelter against it. The shelter would be the greenhouse.

“We must make more space in the greenhouse, to protect the plants and make room for us”, Buddy said.

Penelope had an idea:

“Let's split the space in circles, so we can grow more plants.”

“What we need are not circles”, Zenna spoke audaciously, somehow bored by the lack of confidence in everyone's speech. “If you want more space we must make hexagons. Have you ever seen a bee hive? That's how they make the most of it: by hexagons.”

“Yes! You're right!” Joey applauded enthusiastically. “We'll make a hexagon greenhouse.”

Rony thought about the hexagon pillars on the beach. He wondered what they had been, and what had the previous inhabitants of Asterius tried to achieve or build – a greenhouse? A shelter? A landing site? He wondered if they had failed or simply gone to another place. Were the pillars a gate to a different universe? Were the sparkling dots in the ocean what had remained of the entities, like billions of shiny bees, tiny stars in the galactic liquid? And who had built those pillars? What force had destroyed the construction?

That night he had a dream that he was walking through a hexagon corridor.

From the other end he could see Vera walking towards him, in her silver uniform, advancing in slow motion, determined, silent, her eyes watching him. And then the metal walls around them started to collapse. He woke up abruptly, as the tent was shaking from a storm. Rain was turning to snow and white dust was thrown onto the tents.

The teenagers were outside, alarmed by the falling snowflakes and stones.

“What's happening?” they asked in the stormy dark night.

“Get inside the tents and stay there”, he told them.

It had never rained or snowed on Asterius before. Rony realized it meant the beginning of change: Alpha cluster was already approaching with devastating effects.

In the morning he checked the greenhouse. The roof had been damaged here and there, but the plants inside were still intact. Small green leaves were adding color and hope to the barren planet.

Other phenomena were soon rising from above: the sky turned a mixture of colors, from orange, to purple and sometimes crimson or copper.

They started modifying the greenhouse to make it a shelter of hexagons. Rony hoped the teenagers believed in it hard enough to make it come true: to turn it into a strong shelter against what was about to happen.

The storms became more frequent in the coming weeks. The sky was constantly changing. Sometimes there was a rain of meteorites at night and it looked like a fireworks display. On certain nights the ocean would roar and splash agitated waves against the rocks and the fallen pillars; other times the snow would cover the beach in a thick layer of cold fluff that would melt in the morning, leaving patches of icy water on marble pebbles.

One day, the blue moon changed its color from blue to purple. On that evening he got an unexpected message from the control tower.

“I'm coming tomorrow to check your camp”, Vera's voice said in the microphone.

Rony was surprised. Nobody from the tower had ever visited Asterius before.

“It's just a routine visit to monitor your progress”, she added, sensing his fear through the silence.

She was getting way too good at reading his emotions. After their encounter he kept feeling that she had a different approach, guessing his thoughts too easily. Besides, she wasn't so severe anymore. There was something cautious in her tone, he could swear it was a caring protecting attitude.

“Let me know where your shuttle is landing, so I can come and pick you up” he said.

He was impressed she would dedicate so much attention to them - she was actually coming to the camp in person.

Something must have happened at the control tower, since the moon turned purple, he thought, but didn't dare ask her what was changed.

“I'll contact you tomorrow morning before landing”, she said. “I might need your assistance to show me the way to the camp”.

“I'll be there with a boat”, he said.

She was a guest of honor, so he made a raft from a solar panel. He couldn't let her swim to the shore and get wet.

Rony was happy and anxious at the same time, thinking about her arrival. He felt actually more eagerness than fear, although he kept thinking she might not evaluate positively what he had done to set up the greenhouse and the equipment around the camp. He knew her perfectionist attitude would easily find missing pieces and decided to have everything in order by next day. If it could ever be enough.

He announced to the others that the control tower was sending a visitor to monitor their activities and he needed to tidy the base.

“I'll take the children for a walk, so you can show the agent the camp without having to worry about them doing something unpredictable”, Sheena offered.

“That's a good idea”, Rony agreed.

He spent the afternoon arranging things around the camp. Yuri helped with moving the equipment outside the tents, closer to the greenhouse. Rony was confident she wasn't coming to take his head off. He sensed she wanted to help him by personally checking the base. He was already grateful for her anticipated assistance.

The next morning he waited for Vera to call. It was like having a date with her and an exam at the same time. He was happy and nervous without realizing it. He wondered if she would really come. It seemed like such a big step, he worried she might give it up. He hoped she wouldn't change her mind, canceling the trip. If he knew one thing for sure about her, it was that she kept her word each time, without any doubt. He counted on her doing as she had promised - and her call finally arrived.

“I think I'm going to land in the ocean”, she spoke a bit shyly, which was unusual for her. “Can you come and get me? I see some pillars in a hexagon shape.”

Rony's face lit up with joy.

“I know where that is. I'm coming right now.”

As he started going over the hill, he saw a bright light falling slowly from the sky, above the beach. The sound of the shuttle engine was replaced by the waves. He carried the raft to the shore and jumped in the ocean, rowing with the paddle he had made from a water pump propeller.

The shuttle's door opened and Vera appeared, climbing out. She looked even more beautiful than he remembered. Her determined eyes turned to him, serious and observant.

Rony extended a hand to her.

“Here, let me help you. Step on this raft”, he invited her.

She agreed to take his hand. As he briefly touched her delicate fingers, he noticed a golden wedding ring on one of them. “Damn, she's married” he thought to himself with a bit of regret. Her eyes instantly saw what he was looking at. There was nothing he could hide from her – he was exposed to her sharp attention and nothing went unnoticed. Either she had a higher sense, or they were so synchronized that she had access to his thoughts and understood each gesture. She didn't appear upset that he had noticed her ring, even if it was something strictly personal. She seemed unaffected by the fact that his attention went beyond official boundaries.

She sat down on the raft, looking around attentively. The solar panel was gathering the sunbeams, warming up its metallic shiny surface and reflecting light in

her hair and her silver uniform. She looked like a creature of light, glowing above the ocean, swaying with the waves.

Rony tried not to think about the implications of the little object he had seen on her hand. He was reasonably aware it wasn't his concern and from a logical perspective, he realized he didn't really know much about her as a person – however, he couldn't help feeling a sort of melancholy, as if the golden ring was another implacable barrier that kept Vera out of his reach. After he had helped her get on the raft, he let go of her warm hand, despite the elating feeling of being able to touch her for real. He hoped once again that he could conceal how he felt in her presence. He started rowing towards the shore, being silent like an awkward teenager on a first date. Her eyes watched him seriously, but there wasn't anything hostile in her attitude. She was almost curious and interested in the visit - and him.

“Did you make this raft yourself?” she asked casually.

“Yes.”

And then he was silent again. In a few minutes they stepped on the beach and walked towards the camp.

“How's everything going?” she asked him eventually, because he wasn't saying anything to encourage conversation, but he answered her questions without reserve.

“Everything's going great. We built hexagons in the greenhouse. The children learned to take care of the plants.”

“That's great. Are you prepared for the Alpha State?”

“I believe we are.”

“Can you show me the files with calculations about the speed and time until Asterius merges with Alpha cluster?”

He was caught off guard. He blinked, looking in her eyes.

“The files with calculations?” he asked feeling like a schoolboy without homework.

“You're supposed to have calculated the time until impact.”

“I don't think it was mentioned at the meeting.”

She was still serious.

“It was mentioned. I specifically mentioned it.”

He couldn't remember. He remembered the tone of her voice and her eyes... but calculations? No. It was lost in the many words she had said, while he was dreamily contemplating her.

She stood in front of him, waiting.

“Do you have them or not?”

“I don't... I'm not sure. I might have calculated something... I don't know.”

He stared in her eyes and couldn't help smiling, hopelessly without answer. She could have slapped him in the face, and he wouldn't have protested. But she didn't say anything reprimanding. She shrugged and then sighed, as if resigned to the situation, and her eyes went darker. She didn't seem to want to punish him in any way at that moment – and somehow he instinctively knew she was on his side.

“You should do those calculations as soon as possible,” she concluded, realizing that no matter how severely she might have behaved, he would have been still smiling at her, for a completely different reason than the monitoring process.

“And that's a recommendation you should follow” she added, in case he missed the meaning again.

He hoped she wasn't too disappointed that she hadn't found everything she had expected.

*“I'm not perfect like you”*, he wanted to say, but continued to smile.

He was just enjoying her presence.

It was unique to be able to see her move, blink, glance at him with those deep unpredictable eyes, after so many months when she had been only a voice. She was much more interesting as a real person.

They walked around the camp, as time went by without either of them realizing it. Before they knew, many hours had gone by and the evening was coming.

“I must get back to the tower”, she said eventually.

He knew he would have to watch her go.

“You can stay more if you want”, he said casually, only expressing how he felt.

He wished she could have remained longer. She smiled.

“No, I've already stayed too much. If there's anything you want to ask me, you know you can ask me now - or call me anytime. It's not a problem.”

He couldn't think of anything. His mind was overwhelmed by her standing so close. He smiled silently and shrugged. She looked at him in disbelief.

“Isn't there anything you want to ask? Go ahead.”

She was still waiting, somehow disappointed he was silent. So he said the first thing that he could think of:

“Can we go wherever we want, once we enter Alpha State?”

He was thinking of being able to fly to the moon in an instant, to be near her again.

She nodded.

“Yes, if that's according to what you wish for. You must have a purpose for it.”

*I have a good reason and purpose for it*, he thought.

They started walking back to the beach.

Rony was getting more courageous and asked another question about something that had been on his mind and he needed confirmation to it:

“Why did you choose this camp for the visit?”

“I didn't choose it”, she replied simply and to the point, somehow slightly amused by the implication of his question. “We're checking every base on Asterius, to make sure everyone is prepared for Alpha cluster arrival.”

He had remotely hoped she had visited his camp because she was interested in him and his activity. And yet her answer was again in tune with the control tower instructions.

Before stepping on the raft, they looked at the sky. The spinning disk of light was already visible, hovering by the neon sun, immense in its menacing greatness, getting bigger with each hour.

“Look at that...” she said, staring at the brightness in the distance. “It's getting closer and closer.”

“Why did the moon change its color?” he asked, staring at the little purple globe that paled in comparison to the huge light vortex.

“It's just an optical effect generated by many particles from Alpha cluster entering the solar system. It's nothing to worry about.”

They climbed on the raft. Rowing back to the floating shuttle, Rony wondered

if he would ever be near Vera again, as they were right that moment.

“We'll meet again soon”, she said as if guessing his thoughts effortlessly. “The control tower has already planned it”.

“When will that be?”

“When we reach Alpha State.”

He wondered if they would be the same persons after the galaxies merged and changed everything in their path. He looked at her. She returned his glance silently. Change was something not even she could predict. The only guarantee was the present moment.

Vera got inside the spacecraft, closing the door. He retreated to the shore, as the shuttle started spinning, sending concentric waves on the ocean, in a whirl of speed... and soon it ascended to the sky. Rony remained on the beach, watching her fly away, feeling inexplicably connected to her in his mind and soul.

That night he had another dream: he was standing on a marble hexagon platform above the ocean. The tall pillars sustaining it were rising to the sky, like an ancient temple. Purple waves were splashing against the marble. The hexagon edge was adorned with red roses, swirling around the columns and across the sculpted vault, as if they were growing from the ocean water. Rony was waiting there for something or someone. The sky was light pink and peaceful in the horizon and everything seemed serenely blissful. He was happy and he didn't know why. And then he saw her, climbing the stairs of the platform one by one. She wasn't wearing her silver uniform, but a long gown of white lace and a bouquet of flowers. She was breathtakingly beautiful. Rony realized he wasn't dressed in a pilot uniform either: he wore a light blue suit that felt like silk on his skin. The dreamy atmosphere was interrupted by a spinning vortex of light zooming in from above, an open funnel engulfing everything like a tornado of colorful beams. The ocean waves started splashing higher, wildly beating against the pillars. Rony grabbed a marble column, almost swept away by the tornado. Vera's bouquet was taken astray into the waves; while she staggered to remain on the platform, her eyes turned to him with an alarming calm and an intense meaningful glance. She whispered against the roar of the ocean:



“Do you see it now?”

Rony woke up startled. There was a storm outside and the tent was shaking its metal bars. He was certain her voice had resonated in his ear – the dream seemed so real. He wondered if he imagined it or it was a vision she had sent him somehow. If there was anything he was certain of, being connected to Vera was an effective interaction at a deep unconscious level, for both of them. There was something impressive and powerful about the magnetic link between them, as if the entire universe would open its infinite possibilities above them both when they advanced towards each other like the spiraling energy of the Alpha cluster merging with Asterius orbit.

He realized the vortex was approaching fast and there was something he hadn't finished yet.

“The calculations!” he said out loud and jumped to his feet, grabbing the laptop.

He introduced the data, the estimated speed and distance. The result was disturbing.

“One week! Only one week before we turn to dust...” he said, staring at the screen.

His thoughts went to the children and his colleagues. He had to tell them.

And then he looked around, noticing it was still the middle of the night. He couldn't wake them up. He let his head fall back on the pillow. Images of the marble columns, the roses and Vera's eyes came to his mind. He wondered who she was married to. Maybe a man from the control tower, with a higher rank. Maybe some big authority. He could only imagine it was someone with power and influence. What it meant to her was another unknown enigma. “It's not my business”, he told himself.

It was better not knowing. And yet he couldn't forget her delicate fingers and the irrevocable presence of her locked commitment. He tried to dismiss the memory. The most intense feeling was that he could sense her thoughts through the distance, in an endless open transmission directly to his mind. And he knew she was thinking of him. Wanting to be close to her was enticing and overwhelming. It

became an unresolved wish to know her mind, her dreams, her feelings and daily existence. Rony felt mesmerized by her and couldn't deny it to himself anymore. It was as powerful as the approaching galaxy collision.

## Alpha State

The first thing that happened when Asterius was engulfed by the Alpha cluster was a sweeping storm that made everything seem to evaporate, being replaced by flowing strands of transparent colors. The sky became an undulating view of unlimited vision, mixing pieces of comets, flying meteorites and vaporous beams of multiple suns in a carousel of random speed. The edges and the borders of everything simply vanished: actually, everything disappeared completely in an instant. There was only a thick field of colorful light, trembling like heat waves. The pilot could see his boots on the dusty surface of the planet.

“Am I dead? Am I alive? Is this afterlife or Alpha State?” he wondered.

He looked at his hands: the contour of his arms and fingers had started to dissipate. He felt detached and adrift, with each particle of his body, every atom being set free to exist independently and disconnected. He didn't feel cold, but not burning either. Temperature was undetectable. His mind was still there and he could watch his boots on the dusty surface. The moment he wished he could see the planet from a bigger perspective he started being lifted in the air with sudden speed. He could see his feet turn transparent above the ground. He realized he could do anything he wanted: space was no longer functioning as it had before. It was open to action and wonder.

Rony's conscience was intact: he still knew who he was, but he could no longer see himself. He felt more like invisible energy, suddenly liberated from the material limits. The revelation was that life had to be flexible, in its best form. It was an

exhilarating sensation, to finally be able to rise weightlessly in the air, not knowing exactly where the infinite universe ended. And that was the main certainty: that nothing really had an end.

Rony learned to adjust to the new way of life very fast. It was much like flying a shuttle in space, but a lot easier, without any restrictions or obstacles of any kind. It was like a roller coaster ride. He could effortlessly roam above the planet, circle it as many times he wanted, as fast as the blink of a thought. He felt powerful and enthusiastic: there was no hunger, no fear, no worry whatsoever. Instead, the particles of colorful light, millions of bright hues flying around him, fueled his energy like rain washing over growing leaves. He remembered a dream as a child to have eagle wings. Suddenly, he felt huge wings on his invisible shoulders. He looked at the image: there were wavy feather-like wings made of particles of energy and his body had taken the shape of a cone, similar to an eagle. He flapped his wings, rising to the sky, going round and round above the stormy atmosphere where comets and flashes of firing suns flew by in a bright mess. It was interesting to be a bird and have wings. He understood he could have been anything.

For a while, he remained an eagle, looking for the others. Where could they be? He was certain they hadn't evaporated. At the moment when the storm hit the planet they were together at the camp. He couldn't see them anymore, just as there were no more objects, no more tents, no greenhouse, nothing... Trying to find the others in the thick layers of colors and energy wasn't easy. An idea came to his head. "I'll just think about them". The first one to appear was Joey. He recognized the boy even though the image was not the same: Joey was a tall and powerful metallic robot, with firing engines on his feet. The pilot remembered he had seen the robot in some comic books in the teenagers' tents. He figured the boy's desire to be tall and mighty according to the drawings had come true.

"Hey Rony-eagle! It's me!" he heard the boy laugh.

"Yes, I recognized you."

"How did you know it was me?"

"I just knew, but the energy you have. And because I saw this robot before in your comic books."

“What about you? Why are you an eagle?”

“I guess I wanted to fly.”

“We can be anything we want! Isn't it awesome?”

Joey flew by his side for a while.

Suddenly, a sharp arrow went past them, cutting the colorful waves of light with high speed.

“That's Zenna. She chose to be a weapon”, Joey joked. “I think she wants revenge on Martin, cause he's so annoying. Let's follow her!”

They followed the arrow. She led them to a valley where a beautiful peacock was arranging its colors, trembling waves of energy that reminded Rony of another teenager.

Joey was again amused.

“Penelope, you've got a pretty tail”, he laughed.

“Aren't you envious, you iron robot!” she replied undisturbed.

“What happened to you?” Martin asked them from the ground.

He was sitting on a rock, still looking like himself. He watched the others fly around him effortlessly and he seemed frustrated. At that moment, Zenna the steely arrow went past his ear, scaring him so he lost balance and fell off the rock. She laughed and Joey seemed to enjoy the show too.

“How can you change like that?” Martin asked them. “I wanna fly too! Why can't I do that?”

He jumped up and down, trying to take off, but he remained on the ground.

“It's probably because you haven't got enough imagination”, Penelope told him, spreading her colorful wings and rising to the sky.

“And you're too full of yourself”, Joey added. “I feel sorry for you. It must be so boring to be unable to change into anything.”

“Sure I can. There must be something I can become. I'll prove it.”

“You can't because you never like anything or anyone.”

“That's not true” Martin said thinking and his face lit up suddenly. “Pigeons! I've always liked pigeons. Maybe I can change into a pigeon.”

He tried to concentrate and for a while his hands trembled and started taking

the shape of wings, but then they flipped back to their usual form.

“And that's because you also don't believe it's possible!” Penelope added.

“Where's Buddy?” Rony asked them.

“He's probably lost. Let's call him. Budyyyy!” Joey yelled in the air.

They suddenly saw a huge dinosaur advancing like an earthquake.

“Buddy! Why are you a dinosaur?”

“I've always wondered what they were like. And they seem powerful fascinating creatures. They're actually nice.”

“You could have been anything - and you chose a dinosaur?”

“Fine! I'll be a flying tree with atomic branches!”

And Buddy instantly changed his wavy image, turning into a tree with little engines at the end of its shiny branches shaking off jewels instead of fruits.

“Wow this is so funny! I have an idea”, Joey said. “Let's play hide and seek. One of us must find the others. In the meantime, we can change to whatever we want. Whoever guesses the new form will have to take the shape that the seeker tells him to.”

“That's like truth or dare.”

“Not exactly. For example, I turn myself into a lion. If Buddy guesses it's me, he can tell me to become a turtle or a mosquito, if he wants. And if he can't guess it's me, I can tell him to turn into a mouse.”

“It sounds like fun”, Buddy agreed. “Who's playing?”

“I won't play”, Martin said indifferently. “I'm going for a walk, although there's nowhere to go now. I want things to be back as they were.”

“I like it better this way! Who's playing with me?” Joey was radiantly shiny, beaming with enthusiasm, reveling in the new freedom of being able to make his thoughts come true in an instant.

“I'm playing!” Zenna said, returning as a fairy princess with wings.

“Penelope, aren't you playing?” Buddy asked the other girl, turning into a knight in shiny armor riding a unicorn, to be more enchanting.

“Maybe”, Penelope said, making circles as a racing car. “Let's see who outruns me now!”

Rony smiled. The new Alpha state was a never-ending fairy tale and playground for the children.

He let them invent new games and went looking for his colleagues through the thick waves of energy. He decided to change into the shape of an astronaut, to be easily recognized by the others. He finally found Evgheni as a tree with eyes and feet - and Nicole was just herself, trying on different types of dresses and hairstyles. Yuri had become a cyborg and had an electric brain, drawing energy to his mind from the distant suns. Rony couldn't see Sheena. "Maybe she's at the beach", he thought - if there was any beach left in that colorful mess of stormy atoms.

"Are you looking for me, Rony?" he heard her speak.

The sound of her voice resonated majestically above the planet. He looked up and saw a bright sphere of light, right next to the sun. It was so similar that Rony had a hard time distinguishing the two. He recognized Sheena by the way he felt in her presence. She radiated kindness and understanding. And yet her energy was proving so powerful that sustained her to embody the greatness of a sun.

"I won't ask you how you managed to become so bright", he spoke.

"It's not difficult. Alpha State seems to bring out the truth from everyone's soul. Now we can see who we really are and what we really look like in our minds."

"That's a stunning realization... I knew you're a kind person, but who would've thought you can be a sun!"

"I'm afraid I'm a simple imitation", she laughed. "I'm not going to create a solar system around me, as much as I'd like... I prefer connections with living beings instead. Although, if you seek the truth, you'll discover that the whole universe is alive with energy and everything is connected somehow. There are no random coincidences. You meet who you're meant to interact with. What you see is just a matter of perspective. In fact, everything is energy that moves around and advances."

Rony thought about the tower agent. He knew it was not a random encounter with her. It was much more: he was drawn to her because they were right for each other. There was a higher reason why they had met. He knew they were able to become - or create - something great together, much better as one than apart. He

just didn't know what they would do if they could let that attraction manifest to its full potential.

Rony kept flying, wondering if the moon was still up in the sky. It wasn't easy to see through the diffuse nebulae that had enveloped Asterius.

His mind focused on the feeling of missing Vera.

“Meet me at the beach” he told her in his mind and flew in the direction of the ocean. He was sure she would meet him there – that she would come. He was certain she could hear his thoughts when he called her, especially in that free zone of pure energy where atoms were traveling to their destination in fractions of seconds.

As soon as he saw the ocean he knew Vera was on the beach. He felt her presence, but didn't know in what shape or vision she would come. He looked to the horizon: the ocean waves were higher than before and inside them the abyss of another universe was flowing with stars, comets and swaying galaxies, a reflection of a moving cosmos in a liquid undulating sky. And then he saw something like a bright crown of a multi-colored lotus pallet, its petals like blades of light, glowing and spinning from the distance, a multi-dimensional wheel in motion, gaining speed as it approached above the waves. “She's perfect” he thought, admiring the beautiful brightness that was as impressive as her presence had always been. He wanted to match her choice, so he changed his energy atoms to form a bright water-lily. When she got closer, the lotus multicolored crown leaned vertically towards him, and he did the same, so they faced each other in half spheres, the multi-dimensional pallets still spinning, but adjusting the pace to a new rhythm until they were completely synchronized, melting together in embracing rotation.

“I'm so happy you came”, he said.

Being so close to her felt as if they were directly connected, thinking at the same time and touching without obstacles while their colors imperceptibly merged and mixed, erasing any borders and contours. They were turning into a spinning sphere together, amplifying their power the closer they got.

“I know. I feel the same”, she answered and her energy waves seemed to envelop him like a kiss, melting and altering his vibration.

At that moment he realized that the ocean was just as eternal as everything else, including them as they had found each other: being together was the truth beyond illusion. He felt that was the way he was most alive and he belonged with her energy as if it had always been like that. Alone and separated from her it had been difficult, distressing and dark. Reality was just a fragmented distortion of the truth of life. His dreams had been the essence of light that had been shadowed by the rigid material view. The layers of unnecessary opaqueness had finally peeled off. He could see everything so clearly. And he just knew, in an instant, that it wasn't the first time they were together. It felt too good to be just a moment.

"I've been here before with you", he said. "In this Alpha State – we met before, haven't we? We experienced this galaxy collision together... long ago. Say it. It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes", she answered. "It happened before."

"Was it a hundred thousand years ago?"

"Years are not important. Time is an illusion and the energy of life is everlasting."

"Did we love each other in that time too?"

The question was irrelevant: love could only be eternal, not connected with time. She was silent but he could feel her hesitation.

"Come on! Are you afraid to say it? Say you love me. Admit it... Love is not a mistake. It doesn't matter what they told you in the control tower."

"You don't know enough about the control tower."

"So tell me. What is it really about?"

"It's the lighthouse in the storm. It's making sure we advance – we evolve."

"Let me speak to the person in charge. Who's the highest authority?"

"You know who it is."

"No, I don't."

"You know her very well."

Rony thought about it. And then he felt they were watched by someone. He looked up above, at the big bright sun that doubled the neon sphere like a twin star.

"Sheena!" he exclaimed.



He couldn't say more. It was a huge realization to understand who was actually the greatest power of Alpha State. It made sense: nobody else but the psychologist could have maintained a functional society on the brink of galactic collision. He smiled, somehow relieved that it was someone he trusted and appreciated. It didn't matter anymore why she had kept it a secret from him – it was an advantage that she was actually the leader of the control tower and everyone and everything on Asterius was under her observant watch. The twin neon sun glowed brighter, as Sheena's voice could be heard through the thick light:

“Vera, explain to him why things are this way.”

Rony listened to Vera's thoughts:

“The control tower appeared as a consequence of previous disasters. The marble platform – the hexagon station that connected many worlds was taken apart by forces that surpassed lack of organization and general neglect from the part of many people who didn't assume responsibility to ensure its condition would be lasting. The chaos and panic that took over Asterius made everything difficult to handle. In the end, the system collapsed and much energy was wasted, absorbed into darkness and negative anti-matter whirls. The control tower is trying to make sure this doesn't happen again. That's why everything is so strict now.”

“But why is love forbidden? Love can't be wrong!” he affirmed with certainty.

“It's not forbidden... and it's not wrong, we both know it. However, love is an emotion that can make people act in unpredictable ways that sometimes can interfere with what needs to be done. The control tower banned emotions in general because some of them can affect people negatively.”

“And you agree with this?”

She was silent for a second. Then she continued calmly:

“If I feel love for you, it has never stopped me from what I have to do.”

“I know. As I see it, love only makes us better, not worse. Love is the most motivating and powerful force of life.”

“If you think it helps, tell it to the chairperson of the control tower.”

“I'll talk to her later”, he said, captivated by the moment.

Holding Vera was the most complex and amazingly beautiful spiraling bouquet

of colorful blades of light he had ever experienced. He didn't want to let go.

“Some things are eternal and some things are meant to be the impulse generating change”, she spoke.

“I love you and that's eternal”, he said.

“I love you too... and I always have” she answered sincerely, although hesitating to express it so directly.

Her affirmation confirmed what he had sensed for a long time. He knew he couldn't feel so much for her unless it was fueled by reciprocal magnetic attraction.

He suddenly remembered the dream he'd had about her and he understood it wasn't a dream: it was a memory. Then the flashback of the wedding ring on her finger crossed his mind again. He knew what it was.

“It's me”, he said, happy and amazed at the same time. “I can't believe it! It's been me this whole time, hundreds and thousands of years... You're married to me. I'm the one!”

“It took you a long time to remember” she smiled, her radiant spinning colors turning brighter. “I waited patiently for you to realize it.”

It felt perfectly right, as if they had belonged together since forever and were just finding their way back to each other, as the disorder became harmony again.

“But why did we grow apart? What happened, why did we separate?”

He couldn't shake the feeling that something had gone wrong a long time ago.

“The spiral of evolution isn't smooth and steady, it takes us through leaps and turns; it has to destroy before it can create something new - something better. The hexagon platform was the central station of connection between Asterius and other worlds. The storm tore it apart and it broke the link between us. We used to meet there because you and I come from different directions. That is why what we share is so valuable for us and for the universe as well. The Alpha State only brings the best to the light and makes the most of the real energy that is hidden beyond layers of illusionary matter. Everything else is just a shield that blurs the vision. After the disaster we were sent apart again and the control tower decided to separate us for a while. It seems they couldn't keep us from each other forever. I was meant to help you with your mission, but not become too personal with you. Our objective is the

future of Asterius.”

“Is it going to be alright now?”

“I hope so.”

“This Alpha State isn't going to last forever, is it?”

“It comes and goes, but we're supposed to become better each time. The revelation enlightens our spirits by the core of our existence and we can ascend to a higher level.”

“Is ascension ever going to end? What are we meant to become when we get to the highest level possible?”

She smiled.

“You know things are infinite in the universe... and so are possibilities. Based on what we are now, imagine it multiplied by an immense power from the vast energy that exists and you'll get an idea... right now, our minds can't really understand how intense life can be higher up the spiral of evolution.”

“As long as you're by my side, I don't care if we have an infinity of levels to work out.”

“Ascending can be the most elating feeling. I promise I'll be by your side... ”

He didn't notice they were rising above the beach, keeping so close to each other that they had become a fountain spring of light and colors together, spiraling above the waves. He felt his energy enhanced by her presence, as if he could become more and more powerful from the effects of the spinning dance with her. The hues of their colors were brightening in tune with the feeling of blissful happiness.

“I don't want to lose you again”, he said.

“You can't ever lose me. I'll always be here”, she said softly but with invincible determination.

And even though it seemed that everything was fluid, changing, unpredictable and unstable, he believed her without any doubt because loving her felt like the most probable certainty of bliss, the most irrevocable, irreversible eternal truth.

## After the Storm

Time didn't exist in Alpha State, but when they went out of the galaxy collision they realized everything would return to the sequence of day and night, weeks, months and years. Asterius looked different from what they had known before the storm. The white dust had been replaced by fields of dense green grass, plants, flowers and trees. The sky was no longer pink in the horizon, but light blue. The neon sun was still shining as brightly, but it was further away in the sky. The purple moon was blue again and it orbited the planet from a greater distance.

Rony found himself in his pilot uniform and heavy boots again. Vera was gone. And the camp was back in its place, only the greenhouse was taller and covered by ivy. The glass hexagons had become home to wild trees, bushes and huge vegetables.

“Who did this?” Buddy asked perplexed, watching the new view of fresh savanna.

“We did”, Penelope answered. “You... us... we made this happen. Because we wanted to see it like this. Don't you remember? While we were playing with our powers in that colorful field of flying comets.”

“Yes, that's true. We made a bet if we can turn this planet into something more like Earth.”

“I wish I still had those powers”, Joey spoke disappointed.

“You still have them, it's just not that obvious”, Rony told him.

He wanted to believe they could still do anything they wished for and make any idea come true.

He looked around. Yuri, Evgheni and Nicole were coming from the hills, a bit confused.

Rony was not surprised that Sheena had disappeared. He looked at the little blue moon in the sky.

“Where's the psychologist?” Nicole asked, noticing there was one person less.

“You wouldn't guess where she went”, he spoke almost to himself.

At that moment they saw her coming from the beach. He felt her return was just a strategy to prevent him from telling the others about who she was. She kept smiling peacefully, and when she got closer she said:

“I think the most important thing is that everyone is safe and the planet has a better environment, thanks to the children who imagined it could be such a wonderful place. Rony, I must talk to you” she added and went inside the tent.

“Me too, I wanna talk” he said following her. “Where's Vera?” he asked when they were alone.

“She's back at the tower, as you can easily understand.”

“Why can't she be allowed to stay here with me?”

“She can't stay here because she has things to do up there. And you're not going to remain here either.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have a new mission. You must go to another solar system to make another base there.”

Rony blinked, trying to process the information in his head.

“Are the others coming with me?”

“No. There will be some new people with you and you'll find out more details after you land.”

“What about the teenagers?”

“They are the ones responsible for Asterius now. It's their home and it will be their creation, to take care of. Don't worry, you'll be able to visit them if you want.”

“And Vera?”

“Yes, what about her?”

“Is she going to be there?”

“She'll be contacting you by the microchip, as usual.”

Rony sighed.

“Am I going to see her again?”

Sheena smiled.

“I'm sure you already know that you two will meet, just not anytime soon.”

Rony went outside, lost in thoughts. His mission was over on Asterius. He understood he was needed for some new task, in another place. He worried he would be sent too far away from Vera, but he also knew they couldn't be kept apart, not matter where they would be in the universe. Space and time didn't have enough power to break their magnetic connection. They were too perfect together to be kept apart for too long. It was in the natural harmony of things.

He embarked on a ship the next day. He didn't say good bye to the teenagers: he didn't want to sadden them with the moments of watching his shuttle take off. He told them he would return soon, but he didn't know how long the new mission would last.

At the departure take-off station, the flight auditor refused to give him a check out ticket.

“This ship is not authorized to leave”.

Rony knew his mission had been rather classified and under the radar.

“I can't explain it to you, but I must take this ship out”, he insisted.

“You're not taking anything out”.

Rony had no other choice. He had avoided to talk to Vera, since he knew neither of them was allowed to reach out for personal reasons, and he had too much to say that was not according to the rules. But the moment required her official assistance, so he had to beep the chip in his ear.

“Hello”, he said uncertain if she would answer.

“Yes, I can hear you”, she spoke clearly.

It was almost like before – except nothing was like before anymore.

It was a thrilling relief to have Vera with him again, even though not looking in her eyes was depriving the conversation of an essential part. He didn't have time to think about it, while he quickly told her the situation and why he was calling:

“I'm having a problem with this flight auditor. He's supposed to give me a check out ticket and he refuses because he doesn't know my mission. Can you tell him to let me go?”

“Put him on the microphone”.

Rony detached the chip from behind his ear and passed it to the other man.

He watched the auditor talk to Vera. She was doing most of the talking because the man barely muttered monosyllabic answers and when he would attempt to contradict her she apparently had more to say to him, her reasoning being unquestionable. Rony stood there, admiring her determination. Even though he couldn't hear what she was saying, he imagined her voice talking and talking... he was amazed at her intelligence and her power of persuasion. In the end, as he expected, the man obeyed her and agreed to give Rony what he needed in order to take off.

“Thank you”, the pilot said to her, placing the chip back to his ear. “I've got the ticket now.”

“You're welcome”, she answered a bit distantly.

They were silent for a moment; neither of them wanted the transmission to end, or to interrupt it, although they weren't allowed to discuss anything personal. Being restricted to a wireless dialogue in a chip after having shared becoming a colorful sphere together felt diminishing and darkening like being confined to a box after experiencing the vast infinite possibilities of a cosmic encounter. There was so much Rony wanted to say and felt he wouldn't even be allowed to begin, so silence seemed heavy with the burden.

She was the first to decide to interrupt the call.

“Good bye”, she said.

“Bye”, he answered, but he didn't want to.

*Please don't say those words*, he pleaded in his mind.

“You know I must” she answered loud and clear.

Her reply startled him out of his mood.

“Did you hear what I was thinking?”

“Yes. I've been able to do that for a long time, but I didn't tell you. We're in tune with each other. I'm by your side, whether you're aware of it or not.”

“That's good to know. Why do I need this chip for?”

“You don't need it, the tower does. Good luck with your new mission.”

“Are you going to monitor it?”

“Yes, I'm the one who's responsible with it now”, she said and she sounded glad and about it.

At least she would be present as a voice along the way, he thought. Being with her in his mind had to be enough for the moment. There was the sharp awareness that present reality didn't allow any hope for anything else. He wondered if she remembered the happiness they shared, embracing in the Alpha State. He could still feel her energy around him, touching his mind, running imperceptibly through his soul. Longing for her presence was almost painful, but he focused on the mission and he started the space ship, finally taking off.

While he was passing by the blue moon, getting out of the solar system, he told her in his mind:

“In another time and another place, Vera. In another life and another galaxy collision...”

He wondered if his thoughts could still reach her in the distant silence.

It didn't take her more than a second to respond.

“I do hope we'll meet sooner than that”, she replied.

The dynamic of her answer revealed that she was listening attentively.

“Are you going against the rules for the first time, talking to me about personal feelings?” he teased her.

“No, you simply heard what I didn't say.”

Rony smiled. They could talk outside the transmission because their thoughts were connected. He enjoyed the idea that nothing could keep them apart.

And that was another miraculous effect of the unpredictable universe and the energy of life being infinitely motivated and inspired by the positive brightness of love that could find many ways and many possibilities of existing despite apparent restrictions. Its essence was more powerful than random obstacles of space and time.

“It's the truth they have yet to understand.”

“Maybe one day they will”.

Asterius planet was a green ball, getting more and more distant by the minute.

Rony was absently piloting the ship when he heard movement behind the boxes of sprouting little plants that had just emerged their leaves out to light, ready to be transferred to new soil, on another welcoming planet. He turned around.



Somebody – or something - was there, beyond the cardboard boxes, hiding.

“Come out now! I see you!” he said decisively, grabbing a metal bar to defend himself in case the presence would be hostile.

And then a chestnut red head appeared slowly from behind the pile of plant compartments. Zenna smiled at him, innocently.

“Surprise!” she said jokingly, extending her arms in the air.

Rony stared at her in disbelief, too shocked to say anything at first. Then he was alarmed.

“What are you doing here?”

“I'm coming with you.”

“You can't!”

“Why not?”

She was serenely contradicting him, as if it was the easiest thing to do.

“Because it's not so simple. You're supposed to be on Asterius, becoming the leader of the new generation of inhabitants.”

“I've got better things to do now than become a leader of a planet. I'm coming with you. There's enough time to be a leader later on.”

“This is not funny, I must take you back. I've got to turn this ship around.”

He checked the course and frowned.

“I can't alter the route now. I have to wait until we land to change the direction.”

“It looks like you're stuck with me here”, she said happily, her eyes shining enchanted. “Yay! Where are we going?”

“We're not going anywhere now. You'll be going back to Asterius the moment I can set a different direction. I'm supposed to meet the crew on a new planet in another galaxy and start a new base there.”

“Great! I can't wait to see a new galaxy!”

“Zenna, you shouldn't be here with me. How did you get on this ship?”

“I was hiding in the cargo chamber.”

“That's so risky! You could've run out of oxygen or have too much pressure in your head. You're fortunate to be alive! How did you enter the cargo chamber?”

“I had some help from someone. I got the password to unlock it.”

Rony was confused.

“Who gave you the password? I had a hard time getting approval to take the ship off - and you got a password to enter the cargo? Who gave it to you?”

She shrugged, amused.

“You wouldn't guess: Sheena the psychologist gave me the password.”

Rony's confusion increased even more.

“Sheena?... Why would she do such a thing?”

He couldn't see the reason why the chief of the control tower would risk so much and allow a teenager to do something completely against the rules, defying the logic of action.

“You don't believe me?” Zenna spoke confidently. “I don't know why she wanted to help me, but she did. I told her my story and she agreed to let me come with you.”

“But why?”

“Well, maybe you should know my story first – then you'll see why.”

“Okay, what's the story? Tell me. We've got plenty of time.”

Zenna sat next to him at the flying board, looking at the many switches and lights.

“This is so fascinating! And the seat is so comfortable... Can I stay here?”

“As I see it, you're already staying. Now, what's the story?”

## The R-evolutionary

Zenna started explaining directly:

“You know from my file that I liked to get in kickboxing matches.”

“And your rich parents didn't let you leave the house, so you ran away.”

“Actually, they were my adoptive parents. Yes, they were afraid to let me get out too often. They thought I was always getting myself in trouble.”

“Like now.”

She laughed.

“No, much worse. I was getting into fights and breaking people's bones a lot.”

“That sounds like an active childhood.”

“Yes, go ahead and joke about it. I'm aware I wasn't very easy to get along with. But I improved a lot since then.”

“So why are you here now?”

“I want you to help me find my family.”

“You mean your rich parents. I think they already handed you to the rehabilitation institution and they're off on the satellite.”

“No, I mean my real parents.”

“How am I going to do that? I'm on a mission to another galaxy. You're on the wrong ship.”

“Sheena said you can help me.”

“I have no idea why.”

Zenna became more serious.

Rony felt sorry for the disoriented girl who needed his approval and his solution to a situation he knew nothing about.

“What do you know about your real parents?” he asked her.

“My mother is said to have been a top secret agent and I was taken from her at birth because it was dangerous place and time, she was on a diplomatic mission

then. Soon after that I was given for adoption and she lost track of me. I think her memory was changed through the Alpha collision.”

“Do you know her name?”

“No.”

“What about your father?”

“I heard he was a pilot – like you.”

She smiled at him. He looked at her not knowing how to interpret her words. He had noticed the girl was seeking his approval and admired him somehow, but it hadn't crossed his mind to be a father figure to her. He could easily think of Joey or Buddy being like sons he would have liked to have, but the warrior girl had taken him by surprise. He realized she had qualities that would have made any parent proud. She was assertive, determined and strong. She was also resourceful and courageous, honest and friendly.

“I don't remember having any daughter, but I wouldn't have given you up if that were so.”

“I didn't say it's you. It would be such a coincidence if you were my daddy, but I don't have that information about you. I just know Sheena said you could help me.”

“I'm honored that you and Sheena chose me to find your parents”, he told her. “They would be happy to see how you've grown up to be so independent and smart.”

She giggled.

“That's nice of you to say.”

He wondered if she could have been his and Vera's daughter. He suspected she had made the whole story up just to have a reason to come along on his ship.

“How old are you... fifteen?”

“Yes.”

He tried to remember what he was doing fifteen years ago. He was twenty-one at the time, just starting on his first long journey across the galaxy, as co-pilot to a big ship. “*There's no way I am this girl's father*”, he thought. And yet, something about her was making him doubt his own past. He was aware that many memories of the time when he'd been with the tower agent a hundred thousand years ago in another

universe were inaccessible to him. What if memories could be lost just by passing through the portal that erased time and space? Nothing was impossible in the Alpha State and age was also irrelevant for any life arriving in the light zone centre of galaxies that merged and rearranged everything into something new. What if the teenager hadn't been randomly chosen to be on his camp on Asterius? And if Sheena had facilitated Zenna's access to that ship, he knew she must have had an important justification. Maybe the fact that the girl was looking up to him was enough. Rony kept thinking about it. He wasn't sure of anything anymore: he knew he'd had another life in another time and another universe – and Vera was a part of it. Zenna might have been as well.

“What's that light blinking?” Zenna pointed to the transmitter.

“There's a message coming through”, he said and switched it on.

“Hey Rony”, Yuri's face appeared on a small screen on the panel. “I have bad news for you: one of the girls ran away.”

“I know. She's right here with me.”

“What?”

Zenna got in front of the screen, waving cheerfully.

“Can you see me?”

“Yes, what are you doing there?”

“Having a good time! How's everyone on the camp?”

“You should get back here. Martin wanted to take over the leadership again. Evgheni and I had to confine him to his tent because he was getting out of control. We'll send him back to rehabilitation on the first ship that goes to the satellite. And Buddy got lost two times but Joey found him and brought him back to the base.”

“Great! I see you guys are doing fine without me.”

“It's not a joke. You're needed here, you should return.”

“I'll return when Rony does”, Zenna answered and switched the screen off.

Rony looked at her perplexed.

“What did you do that for?”

“He was getting annoying. Are you hungry?” she changed the subject as if nothing had happened. “What can we eat around here?”

Rony got up and showed her the food supplies. She heated two portions in the microwave and set the table.

“How long before we reach that planet?” she asked, gulping down the food.

“Long enough. I see you have a healthy appetite. Slow down, you'll choke on that.”

“Don't worry. I was starving in that cargo chamber for many hours. So is there any life on that planet?”

“I don't think so, not yet.”

“Are these plants going to sustain the future?”

“I hope so.”

They finished eating and Zenna gathered the dishes from the table.

“You don't have to do that”, Rony told her.

“I want to.”

He watched her clearing the table. Something about the girl's direct determination was familiar to his observant eyes. And yet he couldn't be sure.

Zenna was tired, so she went to sleep in another room.

Rony remained awake to pilot the ship. Soon after midnight he suddenly noticed a spiral of light in the distance, a vortex that was accelerating the ship's speed with a gravitational force. He wondered if the course was wrong and realized the direction was taking them directly into the vortex: they were actually following the Alpha cluster and would be engulfed by it.

He was alarmed and immediately tried to establish contact with Sheena at the camp. The laptop in her tent responded and her face appeared on the screen, smiling subtly.

“Yes Rony. Is everything alright?”

“You tell me. Where am I going and why is Zenna on this ship?”

Her smile gained more self assurance. She seemed to have expected his questions.

“It's an elaborate plan, but it's going very well so far.”

“You think so? You might be the chief of the control tower, but this time I think you defied your own principles.”

“I'm not the chief of the control tower, I'm just temporarily making sure things develop well and we reach the evolution we're meant for. Our full potential has been concealed and it needs to be revealed somehow. I'm not some authority that wants absurd rules, Rony. There's a higher energy above me and I try to be in harmony with it. I know what you wish for, it's what everyone wants: happiness. But in order to achieve that we must do our best to get higher on the spiral of evolution.”

“These words sound very nice, but you still haven't explained why you're sending me and Zenna back into Alpha cluster, just after it passed by Asterius.”

“I'm not sending you back, I'm sending you forward.”

“How is that going forward?”

“You'll see...”

The menacing vortex was beginning to look brighter, getting closer and bigger by the minute.

Rony had one more question to ask.

“Is Zenna my daughter?”

“Not exactly. If anything, she's mine.”

“Yours?”

Sheena nodded.

“In a manner of speaking, not in the traditional way. She's not an ordinary child. She was born in the Alpha cluster and was lost after that. I knew from the start that her destiny would be a great one as a leader. I recently found her and facilitated her arrival on Asterius.”

“Why didn't you tell her the truth about her parents? You lied to her and you sent her away with me.”

“I didn't send her away, I'm helping her achieve her full powers. She'll discover the truth by herself. I told you, I'm not her physical mother, she wasn't born the same way as children usually are. She was created from the particles of light and energy from inside Alpha State. In a way, she's the child of the vortex. I was wishing for a child and could not have one for a long time. And inside the Alpha cluster you know how easily wishes come true. She appeared as a result of my wish. Remember

the ancient gods? They were real just like you and I, only they lived in Alpha State, so they were more powerful because they were higher up on the spiral of evolution. Athena, for example, was born out of her father's head, like light of evolution coming into the world by one strike. The moment she was born, snow and gold fell on the earth's surface. What do you think that gold was? Alpha particles of pure energy. Another goddess, Aphrodite, was born from the bright foam of the sea. And she was the goddess of love. In Alpha State anything is possible. It is the same with Zenna: she's my daughter because she is the creation of my deep desire to have a child. I saw her appear but I didn't get to keep her and now I want to make up for lost time."

"By sending her into the vortex?"

"I'm sending her into the past and the future at the same time. If you want to change the past you must go towards the future to erase it and if you want to improve the future you have to reach into the past to create something new. Alpha cluster is where the beginning and the ending meet, because time doesn't really exist, it's a linear illusion of an actually spheric existence."

"It still sounds complicated to me. What are we going to do in the Alpha vortex?"

"You're going to change the world. You will leave the plants to grow and she will find her destiny of becoming the leader of Asterius. Because she's had a difficult childhood, deprived of affection, she knows the value of it and how its absence can damage life, so she'll bring a new approach that will remind people how love and positive emotions are important for their evolution. I trust her to be able to do that for the world. It's important to understand life prospers with that truth. If we want happiness we must become positive. Negative attitudes can only bring obstacles to the spiral way of light. Instead, focusing on what is good increases everyone's potential of becoming better. I see a bright future if Zenna understands her contribution to it."

"Why didn't she get what she needed when the galaxies collided? Why are we going into the vortex now?"

"She needs to get to the center of it. When Alpha cluster passed by Asterius,



she didn't get access to the core of light. I had to send a ship to take her in that direction.”

The ship started to tremble, shaking as if it was going to be torn apart by the intensity of the vortex getting closer, spinning its spirals wider like a spider web, loops and released beams of light flowing around everywhere. The screen was blurred and Sheena disappeared. The transmission was interrupted. At that moment Zenna came into the room, rubbing her sleepy eyes and yawning.

“What's happening?” she asked confused, but fearless anyway.

“We're going back to the fun zone”, he told her. “It seems that's where you'll find your family.”

“You're kidding, right?”

“Nope.”

“How are we gonna come back from that abyss?”

“We'll figure it out once we're there.”

“Can we turn the ship around?”

“Absolutely out of the question now.”

“What are we going to do about it?”

“Be ourselves and believe we can.”

## The Awakening

The ship went right into the spinning vortex, diving in the center of light.

The interior of the shuttle was filled with floating particles of colors and the edges of everything disappeared. The contour of the ship melted away.

Rony found himself on a planet, but it was dusty, empty and dark. He was holding the boxes of plants. He put them on the ground, looking around. "Is this the past or the future?" he wondered.

The planet looked a lot like Asterius, but it was deserted. He felt as if he had passed through the vortex and arrived on the other side of the Alpha cluster. The spinning spiral was up in the dark sky, somewhere distant. He wondered if Zenna was up there in the light.

He beeped the chip behind his ear, but Vera was silent. The chip was not functioning anymore. She couldn't hear him and his thoughts felt isolated and stranded in a world where he was alone.

He started planting the small sprouts on the dusty surface. There was a storm roaring beyond the empty rocks and hills. When Rony finished spreading the plants in long rows of soil, he saw the shadow of a ship sliding on the ground. Looking up, he noticed the shuttle, beaming its light above his head. The door opened and a cone of light lifted him in the air, until he was inside the ship.

"Hey there", Zenna smiled from the control board.

He realized she was piloting the ship. There were many new things on the pilot desk he didn't recognize.

"What's this new technology of transport?" he asked. "I was beamed up here so fast!"

"It's a long story. I just improved the traveling equipment, it was so boring the way it was designed. Come on, sit down over here. We're going back."

"How did you learn to fly this shuttle?"

“It just happened because I wanted to. Remember the power we had in the Alpha State? We can keep on having it if we access the energy field of our living force. We can do anything if we really want to. For example, you can reach into any moment of time in any place you want and improve it according to your vision. Right now, I have a clear image of what you're thinking of. So we're going back to Asterius to find your agent sweetheart.”

“How do you know about her? And she's not my sweetheart.”

“Don't be shy to admit it, pilot. I know everything. My father is the Alpha cluster.”

Zenna smiled, very sure of herself and changed the direction of the ship towards the distant neon sun in Asterius solar system. Rony thought she was joking, but he noticed many things were different on the ship. His thoughts drifted to Vera. He had longed for her for what felt like an immemorial time.

“Why are you taking me to meet the agent?”

“It's my mission. You two belong with each other, there's a higher order in the universe that means it that way.”

“Are we going back to Asterius?”

“We're going forward. You'll see Asterius has changed a lot since we left. I was actually there, changing things myself, while you were planting those greenies on the new planet. I think you'll like how things are now. By the way, I'm the new chief of the control tower.”

“Are you indeed?... Congratulations.”

He was ready to accept anything she was saying. He believed it was possible. She laughed.

“Don't worry, I was only joking. There's no more tower and no chief.”

“So you're not the leader of the planet?”

“I see myself more like a protector and a guide, not an actual leader. In fact, Asterius doesn't need a leader anymore. It doesn't have and doesn't require a control center either: the previous tower building on the blue moon has become an amusement park for children. We don't have a government or any form of political organization. The only power that matters is the creative energy of imagination and

positive wishes that elevate life further. Everyone does more than what they've always been doing, because they've awakened to their true potential. There's no more arguing, fear, authority rules, restrictions, misunderstandings or wrong deeds. People have reached a higher attitude of cooperation and benevolence, a wiser approach to everything. It's a graceful planet now, without conflicts. The main principles are positive interaction, good will, love and respect for any form of life, creation and happiness because people see the infinite essence of life now instead of previous limitations. It's much easier to find harmony in this new way of living. There's no more fighting over resources because everyone has access to the energy of the universe, which is limitless. Nobody needs to worry anymore about sustaining life. You can feed your energy by the light particles in the air. It sounds like an unbelievable ideal dream, but it's just another level of life that wouldn't be understood by inflexible views. You must go through Alpha vortex to see the possibilities and make them happen. It can only be this way because people have evolved beyond expectations. We are free of atom limitations now.”

“And how did this happen so fast?”

“It wasn't fast. It took us one hundred years to wake everyone up to the truth.”

“A century? But you're still fifteen years old!”

“Age is an illusion to you. I am ageless and my particles arrange to appear whatever I want. I took this form so you can recognize me. I am, in fact, much more than a teenage girl.”

He stared at her radiant eyes. An immense force and energy seemed to hide within the smiling girl that was casually flying the ship. Her skin was shining intensely, as if there was sunlight beneath it, hardly concealed and waiting to spread around any second.

“Did you get this power while you were inside the vortex? How did you succeed?”

“The energy of light simply flowed to me like an intense concentrated sun that rose from within. I had instant access to knowledge, wisdom and power to change everything. It was like opening my eyes to see the entire universe, in its infinite unfolding multi-dimensional view. I felt I became the flow of life itself, infinite,

eternal... I realized I had this power in me, I just wasn't aware how to reach it. Anyone can be like this, if they surpass their illusion of limited existence and understand they are connected to the endless source of the vast universe. There's so much we can do... there's so much we already achieved in one century, and so much left ahead of us: the endless spiral, going on to become the best that life can be: happiness and absolute light.”

“So was I really absent from Asterius for an entire century?”

“If you want to see it like that, yes.”

“And everyone there has remained the same as you are?”

“People never remain the same. They are in continuous motion, they progress endlessly. But they can look in whatever way they want now, because modifying the atoms is no longer difficult on Asterius. The Alpha cluster has made everything flexible to new arrangements by the simple power of positive wishes. It's like a timeless zone: chronologically it doesn't exist anymore, only the energy of life is important – Asterius planet is on the infinite spiral of ascension. Improving life is what matters to us now. I think you'll find that everything is changed for the better, with the new way of handling things. It's a new approach that made the planet like a paradise. Happiness is a side effect of positive creative energy.”

He touched the chip behind his ear. It was silent.

She noticed his gesture.

“You won't need that anymore: the tower is not transmitting anything. We don't send messages through technology now. We communicate by direct thoughts.”

The shuttle landed in the middle of a golden spiral of sparkling light particles that were floating in the air, in imponderable serenity. It was a large marble hexagon platform with fountains of shiny water in the corners and high pillars with roses going around them. In the distance, the purple ocean with galaxies was shuffling its waves peacefully under the neon sun.

Rony stepped out of the ship, and the shuttle instantly disappeared in the sky, in a flash of light. He was certain someone was waiting for him at the edge of the hexagon platform. He looked around and he saw her. She was peacefully staring at the pink horizon, apparently absent minded, lost in thoughts. Her white dress

revealing her neck and bare arms in sunlight reminded him of a vision from long ago. As he advanced towards her he realized that he had seen that view before, only it had been disrupted by a storm. The present serenity seemed eternal and irreversible. He felt instantly connected to her mind and fascinated by the depth of her soul, as if he could feel it only by being near her.

“Are you really here?” he heard her voice ask in his mind, even though she hadn't spoken.

“Yes Vera, I'm here. I've come back” he answered silently.

Above the ocean and beyond the horizon many flying vehicles were going in multiple directions. The spiral of light was rising to the sky, up to the little blue moon.

“I've been waiting for you. I knew you'd come”, she said again, interfering directly in his thoughts, as he got closer behind her.

She still didn't turn. Sunlight was playfully coloring strands of her hair in bright hues of purple and brown, reflecting lights from the ocean. He touched her slowly, running his fingers through her hair, going along her delicate ears and the thin line of her face. It felt like velvet. Her magnetic presence was a waving energy that reached his soul, drawing him nearer. He wrapped his arms around her, breathing the warm touch of her skin, and she leaned her head back on his shoulder.

“Have you been traveling for a hundred years?” she asked.

“I don't care how long it took me to get here to you: we're together now.”

He took her hand and turned her around to see her eyes.

He had missed looking into those deep mysterious eyes so much. She glanced at him directly, smiling as if she knew the effect she had on him and the irreversible truth that nothing could have stood between them anymore. There was a cosmic depth in her stare, galaxies spinning mysteriously, ready to make him drown in the mesmerizing mix of colors, as he kept his arms around her, not willing to move. The intensity of the feeling of having her in his embrace was overwhelming. His heart started racing faster. It was like a galaxy collision again, only the sensation was smooth, sliding into the magnetic attraction without fear or possibility of going back to leave. It felt right, as if they belonged with each other since the genesis of

the universe itself. The exchange of energy was intensely amplifying, announcing something incredibly powerful that would soon overwhelm them both.

“Tell me”, he said leaning closer until he almost reached her ear, speaking secretly.

“What's your question, pilot?” she asked amused, letting his arms hold her tight, as they were already inseparably bonded by invisible energy flowing around in concentric circles.

“Did we evolve, Vera? Is this the past or the future?”

She placed an arm around his neck, making him lean closer to her until she could whisper softly in his ear, with the same determination he recognized so well:

“It's both: this is the past of our future and the future of our past... We're on the spiral of ascension and the process of evolution is infinite ahead of us.”

“Is this moment going to last?”

Her reply was delayed. She didn't say anymore because they were thinking the same thing, looking in each other's eyes with deep longing. They couldn't resist one more second being so close without kissing, so giving into the desire was a sudden reciprocal decision, a synchronized motion of feverish approach.

While their lips met in warm anticipation, her thoughts reached his mind like an echo through the heating wave:

“Some things are eternal... and this is one of them.”

He responded from the swirl of sensations that was scattering the words away:

“I love it when you talk... but right now I just need you to kiss me.”

“As you wish...”

They let everything else disappear and went drowning in the dizziness of giving and receiving each other's endless love, locked in the magical wonder of the kiss. It was awakening immense powers inside them, stirring the beginnings of the universe and eternity running through them at the same time, the infinite glow burning in higher intensity, brightening everything around.

Losing their thoughts in the blissful embrace surpassed the mesmerizing power of the Alpha lights that erased boundaries, edges and contours, the intensity of happiness went beyond the blinding brightness of liberating energy of a galaxy

collision. The fascination of the swirling spiral going up became an overwhelming rotation of dazzling atoms dancing around their embrace, as they were swept away, lifted in the air and changed into a bright sphere of light glowing from within, gaining speed, spreading energy and expanding, spinning round and round with a force that was the beginning of a new vortex, enhancing the mystery of the universe and amplifying the endless power of life.