

Novacadia

By

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CHAPTER ONE

She was panting heavily, and her muscles felt like they were on fire. Huge gulps of air could not seem to satisfy the huge depletion in her lungs, and the pain in her body, in her legs, in her arms, was almost intolerable, yet she knew that she could not stop, not unless she wanted to be caught by the astronauts and taken back to camp--an option she would not, under any circumstances, let herself consider.

She was in the North Forest; that meant that no one could have followed her unless they had done so on foot. But Earthmen were much more powerful physically than Novacadians--thanks in large part to their stronger gravitational pull, but also to biology.

Novacadians did not need to be strong to survive on their planet--or, at least, they didn't until the Earthmen began arriving.

The fauna was small and sparse, non-ferocious, and besides, Novacadians were vegetarians. It was the flora that

was so much larger here than on Earth. A plant resembling a fern could be found to be as tall as a redwood tree here, and trees--strong, thin--were sometimes as tall as the skyscrapers found on Earth.

Humans--most humans, that is--needed their strength to build houses, kill animals, and become attractive to the opposite sex. Novacadians lived in thatched huts. They ate from the many prolific digestible plants growing in the dense forests scattering the continent. And sex--a distinctly human activity--had never been necessary for the Novacadians to reproduce.

Eve swallow the largest gulp of air she could. She had been running for hours. Looking down at her dress, she noticed that the hem was torn and stained with blood.

She closed her large, black, almond-shaped eyes, damning her luck. The last thing she needed was an injury to slow her down. She re-opened them and looked around carefully, and saw the thick mist curling upwards in the warm, damp air. The sounds were those of the tree-dwellers, the small, furry animals that inhabited the forest. Their sounds were like soft moans, interspersed with high-pitched squeals, that echoed within the spaces between the trees.

She examined her wound. She was relieved when she saw that it was no longer bleeding, even though the gash appeared to be somewhat deep. She winced as she touched it, feeling a stab of pain ripping through her long, thin leg.

She wanted to go further, but lack of oxygen to her brain and overworked muscles were making her dizzy. Still panting, she fell to her knees.

In the forests of Novacadia, since the trees were so tall, most of any of the daylight there was obscured, leaving behind the effect of eternal moonlight, unless it was one of those times when all three suns--Jemiah, Arista, and Focal--were behind the planet. At those times, the forests would always be pitch-black. Eve wished for such a time right now. Her being a native, she knew her way around these parts, knew instinctively where to hide, which direction to run, but the Earthmen did not. In pitch darkness, she would be able to lose them more easily.

But no such luck right now. She had had enough of that when she had managed to escape their camp.

Closing her eyes once more, she focused her mind and called, *Papa! Papa!*

Her father had been one of those left behind, along with her sisters and brothers, in the hut they called their home. She could only imagine the horrible things the humans were doing to them right now. She prayed feverishly that they were alright, that the astronauts hadn't gotten to them yet.

They called themselves astronauts, and yet they were more like soldiers...savage, unrelenting. Their purpose in the beginning had been to commune with the Novacadians, but their purpose soon changed, when they realized that they could not communicate with these aliens in a way that satisfy them.

...Eve? she heard in her mind. Her heart leapt, speeding up with the knowledge that her father was still alive. A spark of hope filled her heart.

She closed her large eyes once more, centering her thoughts. In her mind she pictured her father's dear face, his kind, knowing eyes, his crinkled skin like creased parchment. *Papa, Papa, what are they doing to you? Are you safe?*

She heard, with only the clarity of a tin-can telephone connection, his thoughts. *Run, Eve. Don't worry about us. You must get as far away as you can. Run.*

But Papa, will you die? There was a pause.

I do not know, Eve. What's important is you right now. You are the key that will release us from millenia of imprisonment. You must protect yourself as readily as you can. You must get away.

She clung to his words like a child holding a precious doll. *What is happening to you?*

They are counting us. Soon they will discover that you are missing. You must cover as much ground as you can before they send out a search party for you and attempt to drag you back to camp. Again I say, don't worry about us. We will be alright. Save yourself. Save yourself from these horrible creatures.

Eve opened her eyes, and in a flash of understanding received a vision--her village, doused in flames, burning to the ground. It was not her own vision but that of her father's-- weak and like static. The Earthmen in their suits carrying

weapons herding the natives onto their ship, killing all who resisted.

Hold tight, Papa. Don't let go.

Before she had left, the Novacadians were confined to their houses. Powerful force fields were set in place, over the doors and windows so that they could not leave. They were prisoners in their own homes by night, slaves by day. Eve could not have stayed and let these monsters degrade her in this way any further, could not sit idly by and wait for them to lead her to slaughter.

They should not have been slaves to these physically superior beings. That would have been foolishness. But the Novacadians were far superior to Earthmen in a way that they passionately coveted--intellectually.

But to burn their village to the ground? *What did these humans want with us?* she wondered, speaking to no one in particular. *They have our dignity, they have our intellect, what more could they ask for?*

Anthony Harding peered at a reproduction of a Picasso painting which was hanging on his wall. It was chipped on the corners, and the paint was fading. Terrible reproduction.

Beside it hung the crucifix that his Catholic parents had left him before they had died. Anthony gingerly took it off the wall and laid it face-down on the table. He had never bought into their theology and now was certainly not a time to start.

He'd been up all night, worrying about the upcoming mission to Novacadia. They were supposed to leave tomorrow, provided the ship passed all its tests.

In all honesty, Anthony didn't know what to expect. He knew that ten years ago, when the astronauts first landed on Novacadia, the Novacadians were the first extra-terrestrial intelligent life ever to be discovered. Worldwide rejoicing ensued. He knew that, initially, the planet had been scoped out as a potential colony for humans--an alternate home for a planet that was rapidly heating up, rapidly becoming an unsuitable habitat for its living beings. The people of the world rejoiced, not only because the first discovery of intelligent life had been made, but also because they knew that in time, if need be, people could migrate to this new, temperate planet.

But if he were truthful with himself, he would admit that that wasn't the real reason he was up until insane hours of the morning, pacing in his apartment, rapidly going over notes.

It was Kate. For some reason, last night all he could think about was Kate, and their life together.

Five years ago she had been the shining presence in his life, the one happiness that seemed to bring meaning to his otherwise dull existence. She had been his wife, his lover, his friend, and one evening, without warning, she had been ripped away from him and from his life forever.

His car was old. Kate had been teasing him for months to break down and buy a new one--after all, he had the cash, didn't he?

It was an '08 Corolla and it served the basic purpose of transporting him to and from work. Besides, he loved that old thing. The new cars were faster and more fuel-efficient, but you couldn't gun the engine like you could the '08. And even though its safety features were behind the times, Anthony didn't see the risk in driving a vehicle that barely passed its inspection.

They were going out to dinner, going to meet her parents at a Japanese restaurant in downtown Chicago near where they lived. Kate was dressed in a lavender silk dress with spaghetti straps and rhinestones. She looked absolutely charming in it. He remembered eyeing her bare, shapely legs--all her pantyhose had been ripped or runned or potato'ed, and admiring them as they drove on the freeway towards the city at lightning speeds. Her earlobes were adorned with the diamond studs he'd gotten her for Christmas, and her golden-brown hair was waved, resting lightly on top of her shoulders.

Traffic was heavy, but moving swiftly. The speed limit was one-seventy, but most drivers were travelling at a swift two-hundred. Anthony chose to keep up with the pace, rather than snail it.

He looked over at her and she was touching up her makeup with a compact. He smiled, thinking in that moment how much he loved having someone ride next to him in his car. How much he loved having her in his life; how much he loved her.

It was late in Autumn, and the skies were already dark. Anthony glanced back at the traffic, not seeing anything

unusual. The lights that dotted the highway zoomed by, and everything looked just right.

But a drunk driver appeared out of nowhere. Travelling at high speeds, the car in front of theirs swerved from side to side, in and out of their lane several times. Anthony picked up his phone to call this jerk in.

Kate placed a hand over his. "Don't," she said.

"But he'll cause an accident."

She sighed. "He'll be in jail for life, what with the regulations these days. Just let the poor man go. He's not swerving all that much."

Anthony couldn't believe what his wife was saying, but he decided not to call the authorities anyway. But he kept a hawk's eye on the man in front of him, just in case.

But this proved to be his downfall. Not looking to his left, where the oncoming traffic was, he was unable to swerve to the right to avoid the truck that had crossed over the median.

It was all over in a split second. The head-on collision had sent their car into a tailspin, making it perpendicular with the traffic coming west, passenger's side vulnerable. Another collision, this one side-on, threw the car straight with traffic again, but not before a fourth car rear-ended them. When it was all over, six cars had been involved in the crash, and only one lane out of five was clear.

Anthony struggled to regain consciousness. All the air had been knocked out of him when the airbag inflated, and his head pounded.

As he came into realization, he looked over at his right.
Kate!

She was covered in blood. Her eyes were closed, looked like they were clamped shut. Anthony smoothed back her hair, shaking her. "Kate! Kate!" But she was lifeless.

He remembered screaming. He remembered scrambling for his phone. He remembered the ambulances coming, what seemed like years later, to pick up the body and transport the injured to the nearby hospital.

They admitted him to the trauma ward overnight to observe him.

But he had emerged from the crash essentially without a scratch on him. Like a dream, it was all over in an instant.

Now, in his bedroom, he remembered how much Kate had admired that Picasso painting, how she'd picked it up at a yard sale, cheap as it was.

A call came in. General Redding. He flipped up his console and peered at the man's face.

"Sir?"

"I hope you're ready for the mission tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

"Get any sleep?"

"Actually, no. I was just going over some notes, and it took more time than I expected."

"Well, I advise you to try and sleep before reporting for duty at 0800 hours tomorrow."

"But I'm not tired," he protested.

"It's an order, not a suggestion," the general replied.

"Yes, sir," said Anthony. He closed the console, slipped out of his pants and crawled between the covers on his bed, then turned out the lights.

CHAPTER TWO

A girl was hovering over his bed. She had long, blonde hair that fell to her knees in soft waves, and huge, almond-shaped eyes that seemed to plead without a word having been said. Her skin was pale, so pale that it was almost blue, and her limbs were frail, weak. *A Novacadian?*

She opened her mouth to speak, and when the words came out her voice was sweet and melodic. "Help us," she begged. "We are enslaved."

Not a Novacadian. Novacadians didn't speak; they were a silent species. But her physical features were those of that race, and everything about her, except her voice, was alien.

Anthony was haunted by this person, this being, who lingered at the foot of his bed. "What is it you want?" he whispered, trembling.

She raised her hands to him. "You are the only one who can free us."

Anthony sat up into a darkened room, wearing only his shorts. His muscled arms were beaded with tiny drops of sweat. The drapes on his bay window were open, and he could see the

lights of the city from his bed. His dream...it had been so real.

He looked at his clock and saw that it was time to rise. He reluctantly got up, draped his robe over his shoulders, and padded over to the bathroom.

After he'd showered and dressed, he picked up his keys and his jacket and left the apartment, flipping off the lights as he closed the front door.

Driving to the base in the darkness of early morning, he found he took pleasure in watching the sunrise--the gradations of pink, amber, orange, and red that rose as the sun peeked up above a sullen landscape. He wondered how much longer humans would be able to enjoy watching that simple event before they would fry from the sun's heat in so doing. Global warming was no longer a theory, as it once was, it was a reality and a current threat. That was why Novacadia, untouched by man-made pollution, was being carefully considered as a colony, and that was the major reason why, Anthony assumed, he was going there.

He arrived at the front gates and showed the guard his identification badge. Once given the okay, he drove past the station and into the parking area. All of the visitors' spaces were full, he noticed. People come to watch the launch.

He pulled into his own reserved spot and killed his engine. Minutes later, a swipe of his pass card, and he was inside the massive stone building that was IAST--*International Aeronautics and Space Travel*. This administration building, which covered more than five football fields in length,

connected to an even larger building by train, where the launch would eventually take place.

Anthony wove this way through long corridors, listening to the echoing taps of his feet on the pristine linoleum floors, on his way to the de-briefing session. Hidden away on the fifth floor in the Southeast corner of the building was the staff room where he and his superiors would meet.

He entered the room to find his peers--those who would be travelling with him--already sitting down in a semi-circle in plush swivel chairs.

"Late, Harding?" Jackson joked. He was a black-haired baby-face with a huge smile that resembled that of a jack 'o lantern with all its teeth. Anthony looked around. The general wasn't in yet. He had come with plenty of time to spare.

"I see all of you are sucking butt," he said. "We've got ten minutes yet until the de-briefing session starts."

"Always cutting it close," said Andrews. "Didn't you remember that we're launching off today?"

Among the crew were two psychologists, Dick Andrews and Tony Peterson, two medical doctors, Jim Johnson and Kingston Smyth, and two spacecraft technicians, himself and Fred Jackson. The long-distance spacecrafts were not designed to hold but a few people at a time, and so the IAST only sent small teams on a mission at a time. Crew members were carefully selected ahead of time, and Anthony was chosen as this team's co-pilot.

General Redding walked into the sterile board room, stiffly and proudly. The team members rose from their feet as he entered, then sat when he indicated so.

He cleared his throat, scanning his light blue eyes over the room of six young men. "Good morning, gentlemen," he said, as he took his seat behind the podium. "Launch will resume promptly at 1600 hours today. There has been no delay. All of the inspections have indicated that everything is working in tip-top order."

A brief applause followed. Peterson raised his hand. "At what time will we need to board the shuttle?"

General Redding gave a nod. "1400 hours. I have a crew doing last-minute preparations on board right now."

"Sir," Anthony asked, without raising his hand. "Details about this mission have been rather vague. What exactly *will* we be doing on Novacadia?"

A tense silence followed. General Redding narrowed his eyes to him, lowering his chin. "The Novacadians have been giving us some trouble. As you all know, when we first landed on the planet, we had no means of communication with them, even though they appeared to be a highly intelligent life form. All of our psychologists were unsuccessful in trying to establish communication with them, even though our team of doctors worked steadily on the project for several years. Apparently, not only do they not speak, but they do not use sign language or any other means of observable communication. We are still trying to figure out how this race can become so advanced as to build

entire villages and live social existences without ever speaking to one another. But communication, at least to human beings, is crucial for any kind of progress, and to assess any dangers--and the latter is what is of most concern to us. So far, they appear to be a completely docile and peaceful race, but so long as we cannot share ideas with them, they are considered a military threat. So, to try and make contact with them, we began inserting communication chips.

"The communication chips are like radio transmitters, only they process and decode information within the brains of the Novacadians. Highly sensitive technology. But the natives resisted our efforts. Physically, of course, they cannot overpower us, and they have no weapons to speak of. But..." General Redding looked uncomfortable for a moment. "Rather, er, strange things have been happening."

"Such as?" one of the men asked.

General Redding's eyes darkened. "Several crew members have turned up missing, and we can only assume that the Novacadians are responsible." His tone was mysterious and secretive, as though he were leaving out tremendous and important blocks of information.

Silence permeated the room. "What measures have you taken to determine if it really was the natives who did this?"

"We have many reasons to believe that they are responsible."

"And have you done anything to try and control the problem?"

"We've been keeping them inside their homes on a twenty-four hour basis while the project to begin communication with them is under way. Until and if we can ever actually speak with them, we have no way to trust them and can only consider them a threat."

"And what is it that you want us to do?"

General Harding looked at the room of young men. "I want you to assess them psychologically and join the efforts to make communication. I want you to go under-cover."

"But how could we possibly go under-cover? Surely you don't mean pose as Novacadians."

"Of course not," he said. "That would be impossible. What I want you to do is pose as allies. Mingle with them and learn as much as you can about them. Remember, we need to establish relations with these people eventually if we ever want to colonize the planet. But, bottom-line, right now these aliens are our enemies."

CHAPTER THREE

Anthony left the room feeling bewildered. He had the distinct sensation that a lot of information was being withheld, but he couldn't pinpoint why he felt that way. He ate a healthy, liesurely lunch in the cafeteria and took the train over to the shuttle with time to spare.

Strapping into his seat and adjusting his headgear, Fred Jackson looked over at him. "You ready for this mission?"

"It'll be like any other, I suppose."

He gave him a sideways glance. "Have you ever seen a Novacadian?"

Anthony scratched his head. "No."

Jackson smiled. "They're just like old-timey versions of aliens who used to abduct people and make crop circles, only more human, with hair and teeth."

Anthony sat back in his seat. "So why don't they talk?"

Jackson snickered. "Maybe E.S.P. Maybe they're so intellectually superior that they can levitate objects with their minds. Maybe they can even travel to other worlds with their minds, you know? Hey, who knows, maybe it was them back then that people saw. It's possible, don't you think?"

Anthony shook his head and closed his eyes. "Don't get carried away. I'm sure these people are highly unimpressive."

Time came for launch, and as the craft was lifting off into space, the engines sounded like a thousand jets screaming in the afternoon air. The crew members remained seated until they were well out of the solar system, rapidly on a course for Novacadia.

Anthony had never seen this planet before. When the top hatch of the shuttle opened up, they were immediately greeted by a warm, misty air that quickly permeated the inside of the vessel. It smelled vaguely like moss and damp sage, only different, more rich.

He unbuckled himself and peered outside. The massive forest was miles away, but as visible as though it were a mountain range, considering the monumental size of the trees. In other directions, the landscape was flat and rocky. The soil was dry and cracked, resembling in some spots moist sand. The sky was pink with stripes of purple in which handfuls of stars were visible, and low-hovering, wispy clouds streaked the air overhead.

The air, similar in composition to that of Earth, was as pure as that of their 19th century, untouched by man-made pollution that had accumulated in the 20th and 21st centuries. Anthony felt invigorated as he took a deep breath, feeling for the first time in his life the sensation of breathing air with little resistance from his lungs.

His peers, one by one, came out to join him. "Home sweet home," one of them commented.

It was truly a beautiful sight. Not even a single building was around to taint the magnificent landscape. "Well, what do you think?" Andrews said, holding his helmet under his arm.

"I think it's spectacular," Anthony breathed.

"Wait till you see the aliens," he commented. "They're like nothing you've ever seen before."

They went back into the ship, gathered together their belongings, and went over their itinerary. Consulting a map, they determined that the village towards which they should be headed was due East.

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