

The Beginning

The conference room was dark, the blinds in the windows drawn and only a few lights were casting a glow over the long conference table. Three men sat around the end of the table, each a chair apart. Two of the men were young, around mid-30's, sitting nervously as they watched the third, who was significantly older. He sat at the head of the table, his face obscured by a shadow, one hand resting next to a shiny silver cane. The only sound in the room was a set of clocks quietly ticking on the far wall, each showing an international time zone.

Suddenly the older man's cell phone on the table rang to life, making the other two jump in their seats. He slowly picked up the phone and raised it to his ear.

A voice could be heard on the phone, but not understood by the young men. The older man listened and then hung up after the voice was done speaking and remained silent. The two younger men shifted anxiously in their seats.

"The funds have been transferred," the older man finally said. He picked up his silver cane and stood to leave.

He paused, staring at the table in deep thought.

"I give you authority for Phase 2," he finally added.

The other two nodded and watched him walk out of the room.

The door closed and they looked at each other, relieved.

A shared thought hung in the room.

The Avalon Program can begin.

Three years later.

Flint

The lunar surface was gray, barren, and lifeless. Above the bleak horizon was a deep black void. If you looked around for a while, you could eventually spot a small blue marble floating in the depths, the only interesting thing to see from the dusty lunar surface.

Flint had been working on the mining team for six months now, and it already had become a dull routine. The coolest thing about his job was that he could brag to the girls at the bar that every day he worked on the moon. Of course, what he meant was that he virtually visited the moon.

Flint sighed as pulled off his headset and stared at the screen in front of him, which showed the piece of equipment that he had just been operating. For the third time that week he had gotten a machine stuck on a rock. It wasn't his fault; the camera on the mining equipment did not provide a clear view of obstacles directly in front of the machine. However, each delay cost the company millions of dollars. And to make matters worse, Flint's supervisor was an asshole. Flint wasn't expecting to have this job much longer, and he didn't actually care. The job had sounded great when he initially applied. The chance to make an impact by working

on one of the biggest projects humanity had set out to achieve. That had sounded appealing to him. Colonizing the moon was a huge and historic opportunity.

Flint leaned back in his chair and reflected on how he had ended up here, while his manager stormed over to him. For the past three years, he had dreamed of being selected as a remote operator for a lunar vehicle. He just wanted to get his hands on some controls and see live images of an alien surface. The moon wasn't the most exciting prospect, but he figured if he could get started here, he could go anywhere. Rumors were starting to fly around in the space industry about privately funded missions to new planets. If he could get enough experience, maybe he could follow his dream of exploring space.

What had begun as an exciting prospect had soured and turned into monotonous and tedious work. Every day, he sat in the same chair controlling the same vehicle and waiting the same amount of time for the computers to debug code and update the vehicle systems.

The equipment was slow to respond, under-powered, and fragile. They were little more than Martian rovers converted into makeshift mining vessels. They were some of the biggest lunar vehicles ever assembled, and were insanely expensive. And every problem or delay was blamed on operators like him, whether or not they were at fault.

Rich Berkley, the manager, stormed over to Flint's station holding a display screen.

“Do you want to explain this? AGAIN?” he demanded.

“The vehicle stopped responding –“ Flint began.

“You lost control again! Due to a lack of attention!” Rich spat back.

Flint tuned out his boss and remained silent while he was chewed out. This was nothing new for him, as the facility had already received several warnings from the top executives of the company. Lunar mining was difficult, especially when the machines were remotely operated from Earth. It was costing the industry much more than predicted, and now the blame was coming down on the remote operators for any failures.

“- and if this happens one more time, you – are – gone!” Rich yelled as he stormed off.

Flint looked around the room and saw that everyone was still fixated on their screens, despite Rich's loud outburst. They were all in the same position that he was. They needed to focus on the mission until the company decided to shut down the facility.

Flint sighed and grabbed the control sticks to attempt to move the mining vehicle again. He pushed forward but immediately several warning messages appeared on the screen. He released the controls and shoved himself out of his chair. He had had enough for today. And he desperately wanted a drink. He slipped out of the control room as Rich started yelling at another helpless operator, who had lost connection with the lunar station.

Flint walked down the hall and towards the sunlight streaming through the doors ahead of him. He had been inside since midnight and now felt a sudden desire to go stand out in the sun. He stepped out into the bright daylight, squinting his eyes. His sunglasses were locked in his car, so he kept his hand held up to block the sun as his eyes adjusted. He made his way to a small sitting area with some benches under the shade of

some oak trees. He probably looked strange to people, with his hand held up in front of his face while he walked, but he didn't care. There were all kinds of strange science and projects happening on this campus, not to mention all the weird engineers and scientists.

Flint sighed as he sat down and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He had successfully weaned himself off tobacco five years ago, but ever since starting this job he had fallen back to using them as a distraction from the stress. He had explored activities that were supposed to help reduce stress, but yoga seemed silly, and meditation made him fall asleep. He had a growing liquor collection, but that was at home. He lit the cigarette in his mouth, took a deep draw, and felt the rush of nicotine to his brain. He leaned back and contemplated his existence over the past six months since he had started working at the company.

Flint's thoughts were interrupted as another guy sat down across from him and Flint felt a flare of annoyance that this guy had decided to sit so close, considering all the empty park benches around them.

Who is this guy?

"Man, I didn't realize how tough this job would be," the guy said aloud, looking at the ground. He was younger, blonde hair, probably a recent college graduate. Flint ignored him, not feeling in the mood for dialogue.

"How long have you been operating?" the guy asked. "I saw you getting chewed out this morning." Anger surged through Flint of being reminded of his morning. He swallowed and deeply inhaled the cigarette to try to soothe his anger. He let out a breath and spoke.

"Six months," he breathed. The kid shook his head.

"I don't understand how anyone could take that kind of abuse ... for that long I might add," the kid said. Flint sighed and disposed his cigarette, crushing it with the heel of his shoe.

"Nice talking to you, I think I'm going to go home and pour myself a strong one," Flint said, standing up.

"Word is that NASA is looking for people from our department for an upcoming mission. People that can handle stress. People like you." The guy said abruptly. Flint paused.

"A mission, huh? What is the pay like?"

The kid shrugged.

"I guess you would have to ask someone that works there. But I know that the NASA recruiting office is only three miles from here. Maybe stop there, before you go get drunk" the guy said, standing up and then walking away.

Flint stood still as he quickly turned things over in his mind. He felt a slight annoyance that this guy was judging him like he was an alcoholic. Then again, maybe he was drinking a lot. Five strong drinks a night just felt normal to him. Flint turned and walked to his car, feeling more awake and mentally capable than he had when he had left his control station 15 minutes ago. Once he reached his car he looked in the navigation computer for the NASA recruiting station. It was on his way home. He put the car in gear and drove towards his new future.

Flint stepped into the building and shivered from the chill of the air conditioning. He saw two men sitting at a table in front of him, each with a laptop and a stack of papers.

“Hey there!” said one guy cheerfully.

Flint remained stone-faced and nodded back.

“I’m looking for some astronaut sign-up thing? Somebody told me that there was a job sign up here,” he said.

“Yes! You can sign up right here. My name is Paul by the way,” the man said. The other guy remained silent and watched Flint through his glasses.

“What’s your first name?” Paul asked.

“Flint,”

“Alright, let me see ... oh! We have your files right here ready to go!”

“Huh?” Flint said, frowning.

“Well, since you do contract work for the lunar mining mission, you are in our international space employment database,” Paul explained.

“Oh - well, uh- what else do I have to do?” Flint asked.

“Just sign here saying that it is actually you, and that you want to be considered for our upcoming missions,” Paul said.

“Alright,” Flint said as he bent down to sign the paper.

Fuck it, he thought, smiling to himself as he signed. If this meant he could get out of his job, then why not go for it?

“Thanks Flint! You should hear from us soon, and you will know whether or not you are selected. Lucky you that you stopped by, today is the last day for applications!” Paul said.

“Ok,” Flint said, turning and walking out.

The door closed and the other man looked over to Paul.

“*He* is the one we are looking for.”

Meanwhile, in a cleanroom at the Goddard Space Center in Maryland, a team was working on several complex spacecraft. There were three solar probes, each the size of a car and equipped with huge shields designed to block the intense radiation of the Sun. They had to be packaged up and put on a rocket within six months so they could be sent up to the waiting spacecraft that was orbiting the Earth. A spacecraft named *Avalon*.

Flint

On his way home Flint stopped at the liquor store, and then walked into the bar next door and emerged several hours later with a girl’s phone number in his pocket. He stumbled to his car and made the rest of the trip home

driving the bumpy streets that took him through the run-down townhouse communities. Once he arrived at his apartment he opened the door and accidentally dropped his keys. Cursing, he bent down and then noticed a letter addressed to him on the floor. He paused, his mind sobering up. Who would be sending him a letter? Not many people even knew he lived here. Perplexed, he closed the door behind him and carried the letter over to his armchair. He plopped down and tore open the envelope. Inside was a single sheet of paper, and he was stunned as he pulled it out.

“Flint O’Brien,

You are accepted into the Avalon astronaut program.

You will go to the NASA astronaut training center for orientation. Details are below.”

Flint saw another piece of paper in the envelope, and pulled it out. It was an airline ticket, for the first flight departing in the morning.

He stared at the letter, still confused. How had the letter gotten into his apartment? Plus, how had he already been accepted? He had just applied a few hours ago. He looked at the directions on the letter and realized that the orientation was scheduled to begin tomorrow. He didn’t even have time to put in his two weeks for his current job. Then again, he would be free of his asshole boss, Rich. He pulled out his phone and typed an email.

Rich,

I quit.

Fuck you,

Flint

He smiled as he hit send, then he muted his phone. Flint felt the effects of the alcohol starting to kick in, along with the exhaustion of his work day. He quickly set an alarm for early in the morning (for the flight) and he quickly dozed off in his chair.

Haley

Meanwhile, miles away from the JPL campus on the Santa Monica beach

Haley took a deep breath, and pushed herself up into a standing position, and maneuvered the surfboard onto the wave. The roar of the wave started to fill her ears, and her mind focused on keeping balance and finding the invisible path through the wave. Ahead of her was the Santa Monica beach, glowing orange from the sunset behind her. She stuck a hand out to feel the water splashing next to her as she continued to expertly guide the surfboard through the surf. This was where she wanted to be every day. There was nothing like being inside

the curl of a wave, the ocean helping to drown out all of her worries and fears. She coasted away from the dying wave and stepped off her board. As soon as her feet splashed into the water her thoughts came rushing back.

She thought about the mission she had signed up for a week ago, and she still wondered why she had decided to submit her name for consideration. She wanted a change in life, yes, but going to the sun was a crazy idea. Who would ever sign up to go on a manned flight to orbit the Sun? Several space agencies had sent unmanned probes into orbit around the sun, but that wasn't very assuring. A solar flare could easily destroy everything closely orbiting the star in an instant

Haley felt another concern too, of the chance that they could be sucked into the Sun's massive gravity, or they could face an infinite number of more dangerous hazards. And yet, life as a regular human being felt too - normal. The entire human experience in this country felt contained. There was nothing romantic or adventurous about going to the grocery store each week, or sorting the laundry every few days ... she wanted a radical unforgettable life experience. She needed to escape the entire society, and explore the universe. She wasn't afraid to look behind the curtain.

Haley plopped down next to her surfboard and relished the feeling of warm sand. She watched the big bright star in the sky slowly disappear into the ocean under a crimson sky. Ever since she had signed up for the mission, Haley looked at the sun differently now. She tried to imagine what it would be like to go and visit it. She stayed on the beach until the sun turned into an orange glow under the darkening sky. She sighed, enjoying the beauty of the West Coast evening.

Once the breeze began to chill her, she carried her board back to her Tacoma and drove the short distance back to the house she was renting with a few friends. She played the Carl Sagan series while she drove, thinking about what it would be like to leave Earth and travel past other planets in the solar system.

Haley pulled her truck into the parking slot underneath the house, and carefully carried her surfboard up to her front door. She unlocked the door and noticed a letter caught in between the door and the door frame. She pushed open the door and caught it as it fell. She maneuvered her surfboard into the room and closed the door behind her. Her dog, Astro, came running up to her, licking her legs.

"Hi Astro!" she said, smiling.

She frowned as she looked around the living room. The room stank of weed and she saw her roommate, Brian, had left all of his glassware and rolling tools out on the coffee table. She sighed and leaned her board against the wall behind the couch and sat down. She looked at the letter curiously. How had it been wedged in the door? The door was locked. And Brian wouldn't stick the letter in the door like this. She tore it open and pulled out a piece of paper and her heart started beating faster

"Haley Smith,

You are accepted into the Avalon astronaut program.

You will go to the NASA astronaut training center for orientation. Details are below."

Amari

The orange sun rose above the African desert, casting long shadows and highlighting the few small clouds in the light blue sky. Amari felt the sunlight on his face and blinked open his eyes. He rolled out of bed, groaning, and walked over to a small washbasin. Splashing some cold water on his face, he glanced in the mirror before stepping out of the hut to gaze at the sunrise. One of his favorite things about visiting this place was experiencing the vastness of the beautiful sky. On clear nights it was easy to see the arm of the Milky Way Galaxy, a massive cluster of thousands of visible stars.

Amari exited the side of the hut that faced the dirt road. Goats bleated in the background and the sound of banging pots came from the other side of the hut. Amari walked around and saw a small, frail-looking woman washing pans.

“Good Morning Nanny,” said Amari.

“Good morning Amari,” she replied, focused on cleaning the grit from the pans, “I need help milking the goats, and carrying water from the town well. Then I need to get a load of straw from Tosuk and spread out the old bedding on the garden.”

“I have to start packing, my cab is arriving in an hour,” he told her gently. She stopped and looked straight ahead, thinking. Then she turned to face him.

“It’s not that day already?” she asked, suddenly concerned.

“Yes Nanny. I have to get back to begin my training,” he replied.

“When will you be back?” she asked.

“It might be some time. Like I said, it might be a year or more...” he said.

He had already explained this several times to her, both over the phone and in person. However, an elder person with failing memory does not retain information well.

“Oh!” her eyes welled up with tears, “my last child, leaving me!” she turned to hide her face.

Amari sighed deeply. The truth was, he was not even her child. He had been visiting Nanny for years now, ever since he had left Ghana for the United States. She had five children, two of which were living in other parts of the country, and the rest had moved to other parts of Africa. Her husband Memfri had died a few years ago, and now she was alone and had to take care of herself. One of her sons still visited from the neighboring town, but not often.

Amari had felt a need to return here ever since he had first left for the United States. During his youth, the family had taken him in and gave him a job and a home. He grew up working in the family’s electronic recycling business and he taught himself how to build and use computers. After graduating from the local college he was awarded a large scholarship to continue his education in the United States. After getting a doctorate in electrical engineering, he had been hired by NASA to work on one of the most exciting space missions yet.

He checked his watch and sighed again. The taxi would arrive in 40 minutes. He hugged Nanny one more time before walking inside to finish packing. Leaving here was already hard. Amari wished he could spend more time with Nanny since she was reaching the end of her life, but traveling here took a lot of time and planning. One time he had calculated that on average it took him over 72 hours to get from his home in America to this tiny African village. If she suddenly became ill or was on her deathbed, he would probably not make it back in time for her.

He zipped up his baggage and leafed through a pile of printed photos he had brought for Nanny. He smiled at the memories. His childhood friends, his first computer, his first day at the local college. His heart would always be here.

There was a honk outside, and he took a deep breath before grabbing his luggage and walking outside. He greeted the taxi driver and placed his bags by the car, and walked back to Nanny to give her one last long hug. As he hugged her, he thought about the mission he was about to embark on. He hadn't mentioned this might be the last time he would ever see her.

NASA Astronaut Training Facility

Haley rolled her suitcase off the plane and followed the flow of people towards the "Arrivals" section. The email she had received this morning had instructed her to wait at the airport cafe. Once she found it she was surprised to see that it was empty of customers. There was a single person behind the counter, a young guy. She walked over to him and he glanced up.

"Would you like to order?" he asked.

"I'll take a dark coffee please," she replied.

She wasn't sure how long the day was going to be, so she might as well get ahead of the feeling of jet lag and be energized for the day. After paying for the coffee she sat down at a corner booth and gazed around the airport as she sipped the steaming hot beverage. She enjoyed people watching, but she was also aware that other people did as well. She might be being watched right now.

Haley glanced down at her watch and realized there was still an hour until she was supposed to leave the airport. She pulled out a book in her bag titled "A Brief History of Time". It was a classic science book, and reading it always set her mind at ease. She opened up the yellowed pages and within minutes was so fully engrossed that she didn't notice the man walk over to her until he was right beside her booth.

"Hey," said a gruff voice, and she looked up, slightly startled.

"Are you here for the NASA thing?" he asked.

"Uh -Yes," she said, suspicious of this man. Why was he asking her questions?

"Me too," he replied, sliding into the booth across from her.

She was annoyed now about the invasion of her space, but tried to contain it and hid it with a smile. First impressions were critical, and this might be someone important in the organization.

"How are you involved?" she asked innocently.

“I’m here because I got a letter in my door about being accepted to a program I only learned about a few days ago,” he said.

“Oh,” Haley said, “what were you doing before that?”

“Well, you might already know that,” he said.

She was silent, unsure how to respond.

“Don’t you work for them? You seem like the cute and bright kind that would work for a space agency.”

Cute? She was slightly appalled, but once again kept her inner reactions to herself.

“No, no. I work at JPL, but that’s different. I’m new to this too,” Haley replied.

“Huh, well I’m Flint by the way,” he said, not offering to shake hands.

“Cool, I’m Haley,” she said.

“That guy has a lot of baggage,” he said.

She followed his gaze at the international arrivals area. A tall man wearing an African shirt carried a bunch of heavy-looking bags in their direction. He entered the cafe and walked over to where they were sitting.

Amari smiled as he joined their table.

“I guess you are my two training mates,” he said as he lowered his luggage to the floor.

“Who are you?” Flint asked.

“I am Amari, and I will be joining you for the astronaut training,” Amari replied.

“Did you also get a letter?” Haley asked.

“Not quite. I am involved with the development of the program as a lead technician.”

“So what exactly is the mission?” Flint asked.

“That will be explained at the first briefing, which will be in a few hours so we better get going.”

Amari replied as he glanced at his watch.

First Day

There were about sixty people in the room, generating a low hum of conversation. Voices echoed off the tall walls, which added to the cavernous feeling of the room. To Haley it felt like a college lecture hall, with the long rows of desks and stepped levels. When the three arrived there were only a few seats available, and Amari pushed his way past Flint and Haley and headed for the empty seat closest to the desk. Haley slid away towards a desk in the far back of the room, leaving Flint looking at the last available seat which was in the middle of a row of desks. He approached the guy sitting at the end of the row of desks.

“Hey can I get by?” he said gruffly.

The guy sitting looked up with Flint with the same exact look of disdain that Flint felt. Flint ignored him and pushed his way past anyway before the guy thought of something smart to say. Down at the front of the room, a group of people wearing military uniforms and suits walked in and the conversations died down to silence.

A man holding a clipboard stepped forward and adjusted the papers on it. He pushed his glasses up on his nose and cast a look around the room.

“Good Morning. My name is Richard Armstrong, I am the commander at Mission Control. And no relation to the first man on the moon,” he said with a smile.

“The people behind me are here to divide you into your training groups and they will be your superiors so give them the highest respect. The training begins immediately, and you will find the information packets under your seats.”

Flint reached under the seat he had sat down in and felt a thick paper packet. He pulled it up onto his lap and was stunned. It already had his name on it.

How? he thought, perplexed.

He glanced at the person next to him and saw that there was a name on their packet as they opened it.

How did they predict where each of us was going to be sitting?

He looked at the envelope and saw the number 35 was printed in the corner of his packet.

“If we call the number that is printed on your packet, come down and form a group,” Armstrong announced.

A woman wearing an Air Force dress uniform stepped forward.

“If you have the number 35 printed on your packet, please come with me,” she announced, walking over to stand next to the door. Flint stood up and saw several others also stand up, including Haley and Amari. He pushed his way past the other people sitting in his row and joined the group at the door. The other military people also announced their group numbers which caused a lot of shuffling in the room as people organized themselves.

“I am Major Garcia,” the Air Force woman announced to Flint’s group, “we will be going to classroom 6A.”

She led them out of the main room and Flint glanced back, wondering where the other groups were headed.

Flint, Amari, and Haley, and three other candidates followed the Major down a hallway of what felt like a college building. In between the classroom doors were large trophy cases that displayed pictures and souvenirs from military and space missions. Garcia stopped at the door to a classroom and opened it, allowing the group to walk in. She closed the door behind them and walked to the lecturer’s desk.

“Alright, I want to begin by saying welcome to the program. You have each been selected based on your unique qualities and skills. You will be trained so these can be applied for the success of the mission.”

“We will begin the classroom instruction immediately. Please come to the desk -,” she paused to lift a stack of thick textbooks onto the desk in front of her, “- and grab one of these.”

Flint followed the line of people to grab textbooks, and he grabbed one of the last ones on the table. He noticed it looked used, with marks and worn-out pages. He started to wonder how many people before him had used this book, and if they had succeeded in becoming an astronaut like he was trying to.

Once everyone had retrieved a book, Garcia began the lecture.

Training

Flint, Haley, and Amari stood on the pool deck along with the rest of the astronaut candidates as they waited for the instructor. During the past month the three had been through a series of tests and exams, and they had frequently been assigned to work together. Amari and Haley had developed a friendship, but Flint was not very affectionate. He was the realist and sometimes the pessimist of the group. Haley and Amari had learned to cope with his attitude and sometimes resorted to teasing him, which only worsened his mood. Today Flint was especially unhappy to be at the campus Olympic-sized swimming pool.

Flint shuffled his feet as he stood, trying to distract himself from the anxiety rising in his chest. He had not been looking forward to the pool training, and now here he was. Being in this environment brought up childhood memories of swimming lessons, which had not been a pleasant experience. He recalled a near-drowning incident when he was young which had made him be afraid of swimming for years.

The instructor finally walked on to the pool deck and faced the candidates from the other side of the pool.

“Alright!” she barked, “The teams will begin with a relay race. You will be divided into teams of three, and each person will complete sixteen lengths. Begin!” she blew on her whistle and they waited for the assistant instructors to divide them into teams.

Flint wasn’t particularly attached to Haley or Amari, but he didn’t feel like interacting with the rest of these people. He had been training with Haley and Amari every day, and had learned how sarcastic they both could be. He kept wondering how he was going to survive living in a small spaceship with them.

“O’Brien, join Hadley and Schantz down at Lane 7,” said one of the assistant instructors to Flint as he made his way down the line of people.

Flint reluctantly walked along the pool edge down to the lane. He looked over his shoulder and saw Haley in another group, already happily chatting away with the two guys in her team. Flint sighed. He just wanted to get through this.

Flint walked over to the two candidates he had been told to join. They appeared to be twin brothers, and both were tall, well built, with blonde hair. They both looked at Flint with a trace of scorn on their faces.

“Hi Flint, welcome to the team,” said one of the brothers with a fake smile.

“Yeah, thanks” Flint grumbled.

“Attention! Each team member will complete eight laps before the next team member enters the pool. The teams will be evaluated on the total average time of all the swimmers,” announced the swim instructor.

“Oh great,” mumbled Schantz, “We already lost then.”

Flint ignored them as they looked back at him. Hadley stepped up to the edge of the pool.

“I’ll get us a head start,” he said.

“On your marks!”

“Go!”

Selection

Flint sat quietly in his seat, staring off at the various framed pictures hanging in the briefing room. There were a lot of pictures of military aircraft, and a few trophy cases in the corners of the room. He reflected on the time that had passed. It had been five months since he had signed his name on an application form, and now he found himself sitting in the small room, wearing a flight jumpsuit and pondering what it would be like to actually enter space for the first time.

The door clicked and opened as two men wearing suits stepped inside. One was holding three thick folders, and the other one held a small black satchel bag. The man holding the bag smiled at the three of them, and cleared his throat.

“Good morning astronauts. My name is Jim Brick, chief officer of analytical incorporation. I am here today to welcome you three as official astronauts of the Avalon program.”

He walked around and gave each of them a folder and a mission patch. Flint looked down at the mission patch in his hands and felt a surge of emotion that he had to keep forced down. He had finally accomplished something impressive. He was going to be an astronaut.

Last Day

The next few months felt like they flew by, and pretty soon it was the final week. The team spent the last few hours in the simulator, then began final training. On their off-hours, the three astronauts were allowed to roam around the compound, as long as they stayed inside the fenced area. However, the beach was outside of the fence. Naturally, they each found a way to sneak out on to the beach. Flint spent a lot of his free time sitting on the beach, sometimes well into the night. It was easier to sneak away under the cover of darkness.

Flint leaned back in the sand and stared across the ocean surface at the horizon. There was still a half hour or so of daylight left, and he was expecting to see one last beautiful sunset before leaving Earth tomorrow. For the past few days he had been wandering along the compound fence line and found that someone had covered a hole in the fence with branches from a bush. He had discovered a worn path that led to this empty beach, and had been enjoying the solitude since then. The sound of the waves rushing up onto the beach was soothing, and he closed his eyes after taking another sip from his beer bottle.

Suddenly he heard grass crunch behind him and he whipped around to see Haley walking onto the beach.

“Oh-” she said, clearly startled.

“Oh,” Flint replied, equally surprised.

There was a few moments of awkward silence before Flint spoke.

“That’s ok, I was just about to go-”

“No it’s fine, I usually go down the beach a ways,” Haley interrupted.

“Usually?” Flint asked.

“Yes, whenever I come here,” Haley said. Then she turned and began walking along the beach.

Flint shifted in the sand and sighed. The fact that Haley didn't want to talk to him only made him dread the mission even more. Trapped inside a spacecraft with Amari and Haley was not going to be easy. Flint wasn't sociable to begin with, and those two were not his cup of tea. To make matters worse, Haley was very attractive, and all of her outfits were very revealing of her young tanned body.

Flint tried to stop thinking about her by taking another sip of beer and focusing back on the horizon. Seagulls flew overhead, searching the beach for any scraps of food. Flint sighed again, and for once he felt happy to be alone to enjoy such a view. Of course, there would be hell to pay for sneaking away from his bunk room, but at least he wasn't the only one. But he bet that Haley could probably get away with murder compared to him.

Haley continued walking down the beach, her feet coasting across the fluffy white sand. The orange sky was filled with streaks of purple clouds that looked like fingers crossing over the western sky. Haley walked over the sand, thinking about her life so far. Being on a beach reminded her of college, and she felt amazed by how much her life had changed since that short time ago. The world was walking towards disaster, and the mission she was now a part of might help solve some major problems here on Earth. She stared out at the darkening sky over the ocean, and felt an urge to dive into the surf and swim towards the horizon. She suddenly wanted to escape everything. But she fought back the urge and instead turned back to the fence. She needed to get back soon, before people realized she was missing from her room. She cut a different path through the wooded area to avoid seeing Flint on the beach again.

Amari sat inside his room, going over his old notes about the Dyson probes. He was feeling very concerned, as he was the person responsible for the success of the mission. He had done most of the engineering of the Dyson probes, and had received a lot of criticism for his design. But the engineering committees at NASA had selected his design, so he tried to find confidence in himself for the next step - leading two other people towards one of the most dangerous places in the solar system - the Sun.