

IF SHE WERE HERE written by: Nadia Rose Tabbara/ 5th grade

"Come on Layla!" I whisper yell through her door. "You know you were supposed to be up by now, we made a plan last night. We have to go!" I say slightly louder.

"Okay okay," she says, "I'm coming, just let me finish brushing my hair."

"No!" I counter a bit too loudly, "City patrol won't care if your hair is brushed or not; they'll care about the fact that we're sneaking out in the middle of the night."

"Fine," she says walking out of the door. I have absolutely no idea how a cute little nine-year old can be so sassy.

We tiptoe down the stairs. I see my hover bike stashed behind a bush where I hid it last night.

I jump on, which is hard because of the weight of my bag. I power my bike up but realize that Layla isn't on hers yet. I realize I don't see her bike anywhere.

"Layla, where is your bike?" I ask impatiently.

"In the back where I put it. DUH!" She replies rudely.

"Why in the entire galaxy would you do that?"

"Cause there no one will steal it."

I start to question why I'm even bothering to bring her along. I quickly make myself stop because I know that despite how annoying she is, I wouldn't leave without her.

"Just go get it. Be quick, the shuttle leaves in" I look down at my HoloWatch, "10 minutes." I say in horror. It takes 7 minutes to hover bike to the air terminal and it's going to take at least 5 minutes to sneak past the guards. We aren't going to make it.

Just then Layla comes around the corner on her hover bike.

"What are you waiting for?" she yells "Let's go!"

We jump on our hover bikes and ride off. It's the middle of the night and I took the light off my bike because I don't want anyone to see us, meaning its super dark and hard to see where I'm going.

We stop a few blocks away from the air terminal. We jump off our bikes and sneak towards the A.T. I look down at my HoloWatch, only 3 minutes till the shuttle leaves. We still have a chance. As annoying as she is, I can't let Layla down.

I see a figure in the distance. I'm pretty sure it's just a guard. I don't think Layla sees it, so I stick my hand out in front of her.

"What did you do that for!" She yells a little too loudly.

"SHHH!" I say, "Do you see that person?"

"Yeah,"

"I think it's a guard."

"So?"

"So, if we just keep running, they'll catch us."

We get a little closer to the person. I hear talking. I assume it's on the HoloPhone because normally they only have one person on a shift at a time.

I tell Layla. She replies, "So let's just sneak behind them."

I'm ready to criticize but it's actually a pretty good idea. We run until we are a few feet away from the guard. I recognize the faint blueish glow and decide that it is a HoloPhone.

Layla trips on a stone. I watch as she falls to the ground. She makes a noise as she turns over onto her back. I wish I could have stopped her from falling. Just then the guard turns around and I am ready to give up. I see a rock a few feet away. I duck behind and then hear Layla moan. I have to help her. I pick her up and move her behind the rock just as the guard turns to face it.

The guard turns back around. He mutters something rude under his breath about how his medications are making him hear things. I feel my entire body relax again. Once he moves, I look down at Layla.

"Layla, what hurts?"

"Everything!!"

I roll my eyes.

"Fine, my ankle hurts the most."

“Can you walk?”

“I don’t know. But if I can’t, go on without me. Don’t wait for me. Get on the shuttle. Tell my family I love them.”

“Please Layla. It’s one scratch. Of course, you can walk.” I say rolling my eyes again.

Layla dramatically gets up. We sneak past the guard. They really should hire better guards for this place. We sneak into the door next to the guard (Who was still talking on the HoloPhone) and walk inside. We see the terminal 31. That’s the one. We run over. We see the door open to the shuttle we need to get on. We peek inside. I don’t see a pilot on the ship. We run in.

Woah! This this must be the first-class shuttle. I see a buffet in the next room. The fact that it has more than one room is impressive. I hear talking outside and see someone coming in. We duck behind a couch in the corner.

The pilot walks in. I am squished in between Layla and the wall. She has WAY more room than she needs. The shuttle starts to move, and my stomach ties itself in to one million knots. I start to wonder why there are no passengers and then I remember, no one is allowed on earth. We are on a forbidden ship. My stomach starts to churn even faster.

I remember my family. How every Friday we would have game night and eat pizza, how my parents would tuck me in every night and kiss me on the top of my head before leaving. How I get to see them again after six years. I’m sure they have changed so much.

“Ada,” Layla whispers, “are you thinking about your family?”

“Yeah. How did you know?” I ask.

“You always have the same look on your face when you think about them.”

I smile. I love how well Layla knows me.

“Do you ever have bad dreams about your family?” she asks.

“All the time.” I respond. I hope she can’t detect the pang of sadness that hits me as she says that. I think back to how for the first year on Xylon I could never sleep because I would have the same nightmare every time I would fall asleep. In my nightmare, I would go back to earth, and every time, my family was gone.

I wonder if Layla had the same experience. When my parents heard the government was moving us to Xylon, my parents wouldn't let me go out on my own. And how I did anyway. How that day, I cried more than I had ever cried before. How when they showed me where I would stay, I kicked them in the shins and told them to take me back home.

They scolded me and threw me into my room. As they walked away, I heard them cursing under their breaths.

"Ada" Layla's voice whispered, "Five minutes till we get to see our families!! Aren't you excited!"

"Yeah." I reply.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" I asked, knowing she would keep asking until she knew.

"You don't sound excited." she stated.

"I am."

"What were you thinking about?" she questioned.

"The day I came to Xylon." I say.

"That explains the glossy look in your eyes." Layla says.

It makes me wonder how much time Layla dedicated to reading my face.

"Who's there?!" says the pilot.

OH NO!!

Layla looks at me. We both know this is as far as we're going to get.

"Don't make me ask again, WHO'S THERE?!" he yelled.

He walked closer and yelled again, "COME OUT OR I'LL TAZE YOU!!"

I thought of my family again. I thought of how if we got caught, I wouldn't see them again. Layla looked ready to step out and confess. Then, I had an idea.

I pushed Layla out from behind the couch. She looked shocked. Then she looked back at me. I gulped and felt horrible. Layla looked like a scolded HoloDog.

“Is there anyone with you miss?” the pilot asked.

Layla looked back at me one more time then said, “No. I’m by myself.”

That made me feel like someone punched me in the gut. I betrayed Layla. The girl that came to Xylon with me. The girl that would look up to me. The 6-year-old who would hug me and the girl I thought of as family. She NEVER would have done that to me.

We pulled into the terminal on Earth. As soon as the doors open, I bolted out. I knew by heart how to get to my house. I ran out of the doors and ran all the way to my block. I see my condo. The light isn’t on. I figure they’re asleep. It is 1:37. I run up the back stairs to our condo. I see our room. I get to see my family!

Layla is probably in a juvenile prison right now. Because of me, she won’t get to see her family now, or probably ever.

Here I am. At the door to my family. What I’ve waited for since I was six. I find it hard to move my feet. Every time I’ve imagined this moment, I’ve imagined me bursting through the door and hugging my family. Now the moment is here, I feel almost as if I can’t do it. I want to walk through the door. I want my mind to make my legs move, but they don’t. I say to myself “Left foot up, left foot down, right foot up, right foot down.”. I open the door and yell in “I’m home!”

I expect to hear the familiar voices of my parents yell back, but I don’t. Maybe they’re still sleeping. I look around the living room. I don’t see the fuzzy white couch, or the beautiful wooden coffee table. I never thought I would say this but, I miss that hideous black and white rug.

I investigate the kitchen. Empty. I see the fridge and think of how once, it was cluttered with my school pictures and the drawings of an eight-year-old. I miss that. I slowly walk down the hallway, I see empty picture frames as if someone left in a hurry. I see the door to my room, the do not enter sign still hanging but with a thick layer of dust coating the outside. I turn the doorknob and walk into my old room.

My bed still unmade from the morning I left. See my childhood playmates, my HoloStuffies. I see Dolphina the dolphin, Elli the elephant and countless others. My desk is full of paints, markers, and filled up sketchbooks. I remember staying up on many

nights doodling my way to heaven. I pick up a sketchbook and blow off the dust. I flip open the cover. I see people, robots, landscapes, fruits, animals, and more. I close it and hug it. It has been so long since I had last drawn.

I carefully set down the sketchbook and walk back out the door. I walk out to the hallway and slowly go to my parents' room. I see the plain white door. I pick up my hand and slowly move it towards the doorknob. I turn and wait to see my parents come into view after 6 years.

I quietly walk into room. I see a lump in the covers and decide that its them. I move next to their bed. I take a deep breath and pull the covers back. I see a pillow. I close my eyes, then reopen them. Still a pillow. If my parents aren't in bed it means they aren't in our condo. The rest of the condo is deserted. I refuse to believe my parents just left me. They betray me. Just like how I betrayed Layla. Layla. I miss Layla. She would've hugged me. If she were here.