



**FOREVER
JACOB**

PROJECT NEW HOPE

VO TRAN



Jacob, a first generation robot, has a problem. Actually, he has a monumental problem. The moon is practically an arm's reach away from colliding with the earth, rendering his kind extinct. But Jacob wants to stay. He calculates he can bring his kind back from the brink of extinction. His solution? Recreate the ones who created him - humans. Only problem is, he's never seen a human before. "Damn, 333! This isn't going to be pretty."

Forever Jacob: Project New Hope

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Prologue

Her hands, blackened by a layer of dried blood mixed with dirt, were wrapped tightly around a protruding ledge nearly at eye-level. Her tight grip was the only thing keeping her balanced atop a narrow shelving of rock. With eyes sealed closed, she pressed her forehead against the back of her hands attempting to catch a much needed breath of the wickedly cold air. A warm, red fluid trickled down the entire length of her arm, soothing her velvet skin from the frosted-over surface of rock. The blood branched off into smaller streams and merged into the deep gashes of freshly open wounds all along her side, creating a chaotic assortment of red patches that stained her musty-smelling shirt.

Her feet were anchored inside a pair of knee-high boots, braced for yet another push—another exhausted effort. “Come on, Eve...” she encouraged herself. “Need to...start climbing.”

She opened her eyes and exhaled, expelling a thick, nearly opaque plume of mist from her lungs which crystallized instantly in the cold air. “You...you can do this. You’re almost at the top.”

She bent her knees ready to push off. Her intent was pure, and her mind focused. The rest of her torn and battered body, however, disagreed and refused to respond. Before she could even attempt another effort, the muscles in her legs twitched and jerked before simply giving out. “Shit!”

Her feet slipped off of the rock shelf forcing her blunt fingernails to tear into the ledge. Her body hung suspended for a moment and then slammed into the side of the solid rock wall with a disgusting-sounding thud. Her heart pounded against her ribs causing a searing pain with every thump. Her respiration became erratic, forcing out an endless trail of mist that engulfed her entire face. Her feet dangled precariously. They were in a wild, dizzying search to find a natural crevasse, another ledge...anything within the wall to support her weight.

When a small opening was offered to her, she didn’t hesitate. She buried both her boots so deep inside the opening; she could only hope that they would come loose when she needed them to.

Secure for the moment, Eve closed her eyes and took a dozen laborious breaths, pondering what could have happened. When the wild beat of her heart finally slowed, she opened her eyes and smiled slightly. She had been able to hang on. “Shit!” she said, exhausted by the sense of relief. “Shit...”

It didn’t take long for the adrenaline to drain from her body. Once it did, her smile immediately became a grimace. She thought she would be used to the pain by now, but being wedged up against the sharp edges of rock, fused with the overwhelming cold, felt exactly like it did the very first time. It was mind-numbingly painful. She rested her head against her shoulder for a

moment and then looked down, just in time to see the sections of the rock shelf, that had supported her fragile weight, crumble beneath her feet and fall into the chasm below.

That could have been me. “God damn, him!” She scabbled to hang on with her fingers, as more pieces of rock fell away and plummeted downward to be swallowed by the pitch-black abyss from which she had come. “God damn artificial gravity!”

There was a brief moment of silence before the thud of rocks, colliding with the ground, rose to her level. If it was possible, it made her hate him even more. This was *his* creation, and she hated him for even giving birth to the idea. “God damn, you!” she cried. “It’s all your fault. You did this to me!”

She tried to rest her head on the rock-face but bumped her chin which made her bite her lower lip. A bitter-warm, copper taste tickled her tongue. She hated the taste and immediately spit out as much of the blood as she could. The rest trickled down the side of her mouth and dripped from her chin, adding more red splotches on her shirt. “How could you do this to me?” she whispered.

Gravity, the ever-lasting nuisance, had haunted her ever since she had reached the base of the mountain—the only vantage point within this barren landscape. It tormented her each and every inch of the way up the mountain which stood tall and proud. And even now, as the final ledge separated the black sky from her reach, artificial gravity provoked her into hating him even more. Fortunately, the anger she felt toward him and his creation, strengthened her grip on the mountain’s side. Artificial gravity wasn’t going to take her that easily. She wouldn’t allow it...She couldn’t allow it. She wasn’t going to become one of them...She couldn’t.

She ignored the stink of oil, sweat, and blood from her shirt. She hated the smell of the oil. It was disgusting, and an odour she would never forget. She made herself look up. There were not any further reasons to look down. She moistened her dry, cracked lips and clenched her teeth in an effort to regain a bit of composure, but nothing could contain the awful moan expelled from her broken body. She winced. Flowing in unison with the biting wind, a lock of her blood-stained hair battered the side of her face. Now blood moistened her lips. She could actually taste the pain; only this time, she could not spit it back out. It was sharp and bitter.

Self pity, however, was tasteless. There was none of it for her to sink her teeth into. She would just have to swallow the ever-growing pain and continue forward.

I have no choice.

She glanced up. The final ledge—the temporary horizon line—far from the security of the ground, watched over her. She had to reach it. She had to get up and over it. From there, at the very top of the mountain, she could finally assess the situation she was facing. At the very least, she could allow her exhausted body the chance to rest.

“Come on, Eve. They’re coming. They’re coming for you. You can do this. Can’t let them take you...”

Ignoring the lingering pain in her arms, she forced herself upward. Her right hand ached, as she grasped the ledge above. She took in a deep breath. The cold air burst inside her lungs, causing yet another whimper to be expelled into the silent night. The pain was unbearable, but she knew she had to push herself. “Okay...that’s one...” The words came out in a moan. “One...more.”

At a time when realistic goals required a single-minded approach, one ledge at a time, she couldn’t resist the impulse to look ahead. Pain momentarily eased when she saw the mountain’s summit—the end of her journey. And just above the mountain’s peak, the moon was advertising itself in not so subtle ways. Using a dazzling array of finger-like glows that filtered across the ledge, it seemed as if the moon was gesturing her toward it—encouraging her forward.

The muscles in her jaw clenched, rippling the side of her face. “No more hesitating,” she said, with determination. She stiffened her legs, pushing up with all her strength. She stretched her left hand up and over the ledge, beyond the crest of the mountain once thought to be so impenetrable. With one last effort, she pulled herself up and onto the mountain’s summit. *Finally!*

It was a rather ugly landing, as her body rolled down a bit of incline, but style didn’t matter. All she cared about was that she had finally made it. Her breath came out in a loud whoosh, as her body flattened out and came to rest. Her legs and arms flopped to her sides as if they outweighed her entire body and then remained still.

With her actions no longer dictated by the need to scale the mountainside, she could finally face the black sky. The sight took her breath away. The stark contrast between the pitch-black night and the shimmering highlights from the array of stars played tricks on her vision. Every twinkle of the millions of stars made it seem as if they were moving. As if they were alive. As if they had a heart and a soul, each with its own story to tell.

Seeing the stars brought bittersweet memories of her father, reminding her of the stories he used to tell her while they were star-gazing. Those special moments were perhaps the only times they actually shared a genuine smile with each other.

As always, her vibrant-green eyes eventually made their way to the brightest star in the sky—the North Star. “Mom...” The sight was too much for her to comprehend at the moment. It had been so long since she had seen stars—so long since she had been in hiding. She had started to think she would never see them again. A single tear escaped the corner of her eye and ran down her cheek, but she barely noticed it.

At the moment, nothing seemed to matter. She didn’t care that a sharp crescent moon watched silently over her. She didn’t care that the moon’s glow highlighted the peaks and valleys of open wounds that stretched across the entire length of her body. She didn’t care that it exposed her ragged and torn clothes that she had worn for what seemed like forever. The moon didn’t care, either. It just stared with a relentless silence.

At that very moment, she did not feel like the woman who had just trekked across a destroyed Earth, braved her senses and scaled an endless mountain to escape. She wasn't the physically destroyed woman who had no idea if the final chapter of her storied life had already been written. She was simply that young girl from many moons ago looking up at the starry night next to her father. It had been a time when she still loved him and she had been sure that he loved her...

Her hand suddenly formed a tight fist and slammed into the solid rock floor. "He never loved me."

She sat absolutely still for a moment and became aware of a warm bead of fluid running from somewhere deep in her hairline that trickle down the side of her face. She immediately wiped it away with the back of her hand. The mere thought of what he had done, destroyed any sense of nostalgia that she had once treasured so deep inside. The attention she offered to the stars was now severed. Any sense of gratification that she had rightfully earned from conquering the mountain was completely eradicated. Pain that had ravished her body immediately returned. All that she could ask herself now was, "Was running away worth it?"

Running from them, running from him, nearly losing her life...was it worth it? A sudden metallic rumbling in the distance unequivocally confirmed that it was.

"Shit!" she cried. Her body became rigid. The shearing of metal, the ever so familiar clanking, tore into the silence like a streak of lightening rips into a cloud-drenched sky and was growing louder and louder.

Without the slightest hesitation, she flipped over onto her stomach and forced herself to do the unthinkable. She needed to see where the sounds were coming from. She crawled back to the edge of mountain, contradicting her efforts to this point. Trapped pockets of air from deep within her joints popped and crackled with every movement, shattering any silence not yet forfeited by the approaching sounds. "Please..." she whimpered, practically in tears. "Please...don't be there. Don't be there."

She repeated the words over and over until she reached the small incline that separated mountaintop from the threat below. She wrapped her hands around the lip of the mountainside but then hesitated. Instincts were trying to pull her over, begging her to look down, but fear and the realization of what she might see kept her timid. The din from all the clanking and squealing was now to the point of being unbearable. It tore into her ears, sank deep into her emotions, and reopened unhealed wounds.

But she knew she could no longer hide. No matter what was on the other side of the crescent, she had run out of ground. No matter if they had found her, there was no place left for her to run. But still, she had to make sure. She clung to the slightest bit of hope that the sounds could just be an echo in the far distance. Maybe they would break left instead of right, retreat instead of engage.

She sighed. Who was she trying to fool? She knew what their orders were and why they were stalking her. But she had to make sure. Even if it

was just to confirm the inevitable. "Please...don't be there," she forced herself to say one last time. She pulled herself as far over the ledge as she could go, giving herself the best possible vantage point. A stream of sweat, stained with a reddish tint, trickled down her face. It did little to distract her. Every one of her senses was now being overwhelmed by the sight before her. Her whimpering of, "Oh my...god..." barely got through her lips. She was stiff with fear. Her stomach seemed to drop to the very soles of her boots and then surge back up again, threatening to exit out of her mouth. She had to blink a few times just to make sure that what she was seeing was the truth. In the end, her eyes did not lie.

The mass of mechanical beings below, stretched from one end of the horizon to the next. They were coming fast and determined, with primary orders set. They were not to return until those orders were fulfilled. And in this stage of their evolution, mechanical beings rarely failed in meeting an objective.

As Eve lay flat against the mountaintop, she became aware of a different sound—a deep, rhythmic thumping. It didn't take long for her to realize that the thumping wasn't coming from the distance. It was her heart, pounding against her ribcage. It was a painful feeling she knew too well. She pulled back from the edge. What could she do? She was trapped.

Desperate, she turned around in hopes of finding a way out. Anything would do at this moment. Her eyes were drawn to the other side of the mountaintop. It was a short distance, but one that was not even worth the effort of trying to cross. There was no protection for her there. She had made a tactical error in thinking she would find security on the mountain. If her stomach could sink any lower, or deeper, it just did. Greeting her was the sharp, false horizon line where the mountaintop cut the sky in half. There was no way down. The mountain had lured her onto its false sense of security and was not going to let her go.

The approaching sounds recaptured her attention. She heard the shearing of metal plates grinding against each other, the roaring thud of cold steel colliding with the granite Earth. Her heart no longer was the only source of pounding. The entire mountain was now trembling, sending a cold chill up the entire length of her spine. She stared at the mass of mechanical beings relentlessly moving toward her, shaking the Earth with thousands of footfalls. The entire mass looked as if it was taking the horizon with it, leaving an enormous trail of dust in its wake.

It didn't matter what direction she looked, they were coming. She glanced to the right, they were coming. She glanced to the left, they were coming. In all directions, they were coming. It was an ominous sight soon detailed enough to reveal individual parts making up the mass.

Each polished surface reflected the moon's glow and dispersed it back into the pale night. Pistons didn't need highlighting. They were distinct enough through simple yet violent motions, as they drove themselves deep into form-fitting chambers. Gears were well-defined on their own, as they rotated in a blurred mess, propelling angular limbs forward.

They were so noisy, so disgustingly loud that she could hear nothing when she let out a sigh. She surrendered. Her body slumped even further down, nearly collapsing over itself from the hip. Her face became as rigid as the rock she was perched on. She sat there in complete silence, feeling betrayed. She knew very well who had sent them. She knew who had given them the order. And by doing so, meant that he still wanted her, maybe even loved her. Why else would he have them go after her? But she couldn't call this love. Not when all she could feel was pain.

The stars, and the way the moonlight caressed the night with no real sense of urgency, were all so beautiful. If the ones below hadn't found her, this would have been a perfect place to lie down and allow time to pass by. Unfortunately, the mountain's height would only delay their progress. They would make it up to her soon. She could already smell the pungent, sourness of their surfaces and hear the random, metallic voices calling out to her. She was down to her final option—one that she had hoped would never offer itself to her.

She knew what had to be done.

Her hand slipped down alongside her left boot and stopped when it was met by a slender buckle. A long-running seam was stitched all along the side of the boot with golden-brown strapping. Resting on the top half was a flap that was secured by an elliptical button. She allowed her hand to rest for a moment, hoping for something to happen that might just be enough to coax her hand away. The metallic voices directing orders from below, and the first blue beam searching for her, would simply not allow this.

"Damn it," she cried. With her breath held, she twisted the button and unlocked the buckle. She flipped over the small flap revealing an antique revolver—a dirty bronze weapon. It was rusted but had just enough reflective surfaces left to absorb most of the moon's glow. She then wrapped her hand around the cold handle. With a slight twitch of her wrist, she pulled the revolver from its holster and allowed her arm to fall to her side. Determined, she looked down to check the progress of her enemies.

The smell of raw metal was intoxicating. The mechanical beings were now so close, she could see their body parts sharpened to fine points. The shape of their limbs matched the peaks and valleys of the wounds that had been inflicted all over her body. They had caused her the pain and were undoubtedly ready to finish what they had been sent out to do. She could not let this happen. She raised her hand, and the moon's glow was allowed to send its highlights along the revolver's defined surface. She glanced at the barrel. Engraved into its length, on the left side, were the words, *Love, Always and Forever, Daddy.*

"You never did," she whispered.

Eve ran her finger along the entire length of the barrel. It was cold to the touch. Her fingers stopped at the blunt end of the barrel. With a flick of her wrist, she snapped the gun open, allowing the muzzle to point downward. Instantly, the cylinder ejected from the side and rested in an open, inviting stance. Six chambers now stared at her. Five were empty and darken by

their own cast shadow. The final chamber held a bullet. This was all she needed to see. She rotated the cylinder so the blocked chamber was one click from the very top. Taking in a deep breath, she then cocked her hand, snapping the cylinder and barrel back into place.

She wasn't sure if *she* had caused it but the horrific sounds had suddenly stopped. Unfortunately, they were immediately replaced by a dizzying array of blue beams that ran up the side of the mountain and danced around in a feverish search to pinpoint her location. She squinted when the blue beams hit her face and defused the greens of her eyes into a pale grey.

They had found her. The time was now.

She grimaced, as she staggered to her feet. Her broken body did not allow her to stand very tall but enough to afford her a new vantage point, one that also meant she was no longer concealed behind any part of the mountain. She looked down and was met by an eerie silence. Every now and then, the silence was briefly disrupted by the offensiveness of metal parts adjusting themselves or pistons blowing off stored energy.

They watched. Thousands of them. Mechanical beings, just like her father. The distinctly round highlights coming from the lenses of their eyes were focused directly on her, piecing right through her. They were waiting. For what, she did not know. But just then, one of them turned and spoke into their shoulder-mounted speakers. He was the largest one of them all.

"We found her, sir. Awaiting further orders."

Whatever those orders were, she wasn't going to let them commence. She raised her hand and pressed the open end of the barrel against her temple. The entire mass below suddenly reeled back. She had caught their attention for all the wrong reasons. It made her happy in a way, knowing that she still had at least some sort of control over her own fate—one that they could not take from her. Sweat pooled around the tip of the barrel before trailing down the side of her face.

Her thumb slowly reached up and pulled back the small, triangular hammer until it locked in place and remained still. Trembling from the combination of anxiety and fear, her index finger inched its way toward the trigger.

A deep breath followed.

Strangely, because of the adrenaline flowing through her body, the air she was breathing in suddenly seemed warm. The thick stream of condensation that was released from her lungs, confirmed that the air was still bitter cold. Not as cold as the end of the barrel that was now imprinting its circular shape onto her temple.

As she took one final glance down below, she couldn't help but think of the irony presenting itself to her. Gears, bolts, and cold steel would not stop until her fate was sealed. Now, here she was with gears, bolts, and cold steel pressed up against her temple with the exact same intent. Either by the awaiting or the immediate, her fate would be determined by parts—metal—man-made. It was inevitable. Her index finger twitched, as it locked down onto the trigger. Her eyes slowly closed until finally the moon's glow, the

starry night's sky, and the overwhelming fear was nothing more than a thought. She bit down on her lip and whispered. "So this is it. This is how it ends..."

Epilogue

Light from above penetrated the calm surface of the ocean, creating ribbons that danced against her vertically angled spines. The water was warm against her scaly surface and provided rich nourishment each time it filtered through her complex arrangement of gills. She had spent most of the day in search of a place that would become her new home. No ordinary place would do. She needed a place that would protect her from what grew inside these life sustaining waters. Monsters, many times her size, roamed these seas, hunting down her kind in order to fulfil their most basics of needs—survival. She could not let this interfere with her own needs, one that was nearly at the end of its cycle.

Lowering herself so that her soft underbelly was flat against the ocean's floor, her search had come to an end. Her black eyes spotted a reflective object poking out from the soft, sandy floor. Its main surface was flat, with five multi-jointed protrusions curled over itself forming a protective arch. The rest of it was buried deep inside the ocean's floor. She swam closer, allowing cautiousness to linger. There was no telling what was hidden in the object's grasp. Shells and coral adorned nearly the entire surface but posed no threat. Odd looking strands, pushing out from cracks in the object, did not match the textures of the surrounding plant life. They flowed with an artificial rigidity against the water's constant current. She had never seen anything like those strands, but they appeared harmless.

She had found the perfect place. Happily, she swam around her new home, sweeping her broad tail back and forth, removing the sand that had collected inside of the object's palm with each pass. Once satisfied, she stopped in front of the arch and slowly backed her slender body into the awaiting gesture. Her new home held her comfortably in place and gave her protection for what she was about to do. A surge of water was pulled deep into her gills, as she laid her batch of eggs.

* * *

The ocean's plentiful bounty had nourished his basic needs up to this point. The water was now receding. Any chance of survival would have to be sustained on land. Fortunately, he had evolved for this moment. He climbed out of the dwindling ocean for the first time and did not hesitate. His gills were now lungs, and they gorged on their first taste of air. It was painful, but it was something he would have to get used to. Leaving the water's security meant that vulnerability was immediately heightened. The soft mud underneath his smooth, moist body was cooling, but the comfort would not last. His skin was delicate and was not immune to the scorching heat of the

sun. He needed protection. He needed to stay out of reach from potential enemies that walked the earth—enemies that he knew nothing about.

Two beady little eyes, set high on his head, searched the open landscape. Dense foliage, something he had never seen before, was too far in the distance for him to reach with his insignificant strides. He would never make it. Closer to him was something he could easily get to. An odd looking structure rose out from the mud. Five multi-jointed protrusions set on top of a flat base were casting an alluring shadow on the ground. It made for a perfect shelter. He wagged his tail, freeing himself from the last few drops of the ocean's influence. Then using his tiny fins, he hopped across the ground. Once at the base of the structure, he buried himself in the mud, only allowing his eyes to poke out. For now, he'll just have to wait. Evolution was all about enduring different stages of life. He had just completed his very beginnings.

* * *

A dense barrier of tall grass concealed him from the vast open plains. A herd of four-legged herbivores stained the vivid-green scenery. They grazed mindlessly on the plentiful vegetation provided by the Earth.

He had been following them for three days and three nights. They tempted his hunger, and motivated his offensive stance. An intimidating spear, punctuated by a jagged tip and carved from bone, was held tightly in his enormous hand. He advanced, dragging his knuckles across the hard ground. His forwardly angled eyes were set high on his large cranium and kept the herd within his immediate field of vision. His body was thick, rugged, and bulging with muscle, contradicting his methodical movements. Hair covered his entire body and flowed in unison with the tall grass. He needed to be quiet. This was the only practical way to hunt. Brute force, something he had relied on during his youthful and inexperience days, would have driven the herd into a frenzy, successfully ending his hunt. Hunting in that manner was no longer efficient, and the scars riddled all over his body were a constant reminder of past failures. He had evolved his ways. He had learned that to make a kill and to satisfying his hunger, he would have to use the most significant weapon he had. Intelligence. The spear he held close to his side was merely a tool to be used to bring about a successful conclusion.

He parted the tall grass down the center and saw a straggler weakened by the simple need to constantly feed. It was an enormous buck, many times his size. The base of its antlers resembled tree trunks, with branches for tips.

He had purposely kept downwind of the animal, as a buck of this size would not retreat, nor would it be easily intimidated. He crept forward and had only taken a step when he saw a strange object protruding from the ground. It was much too shiny and far too complex to be a rock, but it might serve a purpose. He used his spear to dig it free from the ground. Once in his grasp, he examined it closely. Though its complexity bewildered him, it was the way the light was striking the object's surface, causing a distracting gleam that excited him.

The buck was slowly moving away. He needed to make his move. With spear in one hand and the strange object in the other, he stood up causing a loud rustle in the grass. The buck immediately turned and faced him. It snorted, whipping its massive head from side-to-side.

The man planted his feet and stood his ground. He angled the object in his hand with the sun, allowing the glare to strike the buck's eyes. The buck winced. It pawed at the ground with his front leg, ripping a deep gash into its surface. The man remained calm, turning the object in his hand to allow all five protrusions to absorb the light. It was working. The distracting light was confusing the buck, driving it into a frenzy. It let out a deep grunt, preparing to charge. The man grunted louder, coaxing it toward him. The buck threw its weight on its hind legs, preparing to charge, but then, it simply collapsed. It let out a guttural cry. Slender hooves buckled under its enormous weight. When the beast collapsed on its side, the man saw the spear that had been driven deep into the buck's flesh, shearing the heart in half. It let out a final cry as life drained from its body.

The man walked over to the buck and waited until it took its final breath. He grunted, and another man jumped out of the tall grass. His hunting partner. It was his spear that was stained in deep-red ochre. Their strategy had worked perfectly.

No longer needing the object, the man set it down on the ground and then stood over the kill. Together, they let out a victorious grunt. They had used their ever-evolving intelligence to ensure their survival.

* * *

"Hey, over here!" A shirtless man yelled out, ripping his shovel out of the ground. His skin was golden brown, baked by the midday sun.

His partner, who wore a thick-rimmed hat, was in mid-stride, about to sink her own shovel into the hard bedrock. She wedged the shovel's head into the dry Earth and then used its shaft to brace her weight. Beads of sweat trickled down the side of her face. It had been a day full of disappointments, spent in the intense sun. She brushed some of the sweat away with her forearm, but it didn't make much difference. More sweat concentrated almost instantly. "What is it this time?"

"Come over," the shirtless man said. "I think I found something."

"More worthless rocks?"

"Just get over here."

She sighed and let go of her shovel, allowing it to fall onto the ground. She made her way over expecting to be disappointed as usual.

"Only started digging here a moment ago," the man said. "Looks like I might have found something already."

"I sure hope so. An entire week of digging in this dried up ocean bed, and so far nothing." She frowned. "Give us something, damn it! Anything! Doesn't even have to be museum-worthy." She crouched over her partner who had

already begun the tedious task of picking away the embedded dirt that had impregnated itself around the object. “Oh, you *did* find something.”

Little by little, the object was revealed, which, ironically, made it more and more mysterious. The last bit of dirt was blown away with a gratifying exhale. There was an awkward pause, as they stared at the object. They studied the mangled form, the rust eaten surface, the flat part, and the three protruding sections.

“Okay...so what is it?”

The man studied the object. “You know, it sort of looks like a hand.”

She laughed. “A what?”

“A hand.” He moved the object around. He even sized it against his own hand. Some of the fingers were obviously missing, but what was there—the palm, the thumb, the two other fingers, all lined up perfectly. “See? A hand.”

She shook her head. “Hands aren’t made from rusted pieces of junk.”

“I know that. I’m just saying. There are fingers, a palm, and most of the forearm. It looks like a hand to me.”

“Okay, so who...or what...does it belong to?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, then, who created this hand?”

“I don’t know!” the man replied, becoming annoyed.

She stood up, not giving the object another look. “I knew it,” she said, tipping her hat forward and wiping the sweat from her forehead. “Another piece of junk. Why am I not surprised?” She simply walked away.

The man wasn’t as easily discouraged. “It *is* a hand,” he said to himself. “What else can it be?”

With her backpack slung over shoulder and shovel in hand, she yelled over at him, “Let’s go! Time to move to another site. Maybe we can salvage the rest of the day. This dried up ocean bed has given us nothing.”

The man stood up and held the object out in front of him. “But there’s more here! I know there is!”

“All I see is rock and a lot of dirt.” She began walking off. “Stay if you want, but I’m taking the horse and carriage with me.”

“Alright, alright. I’m coming. Just give me a moment, will you?” Clumsily, he shoved the strange object into his backpack.

“Hey!” she yelled back at him. “You’re not taking that with us? Just leave it here. It’s worthless.”

“Fine!” He waited until her back was turned and then closed his backpack. *Never know. It might be important to us...someday.* The man hoisted his backpack over his shoulder and ripped the shovel out from the rock. Dirt clung to the tip of the shovel, so he banged it against the ground. The rock he was hitting began to crumble. A dim-red light filtered through the messy seams of the ground, causing the man to stagger back. “Hey! Hey, look! I think I found something!”

* * *

He had seen the girl come in once before. The girl was no more than ten years old and was again unaccompanied by parents. She kept her hands hidden inside the deep pockets of her ragged pants that were shredded at the cuffs. Hair long and tangled overflowed her narrow shoulders. She stood on the very tips of her mud-caked boots, worn high enough to engulf most of her legs up to the knees. She didn't seem to acknowledge, or want to acknowledge, the messy trail she dragged in behind her that led all the way back to the doors. She stood in front of the main window, as she had done earlier. Peering over from time to time, from the corner of the pale lit waiting room, the man had watched the girl make her way across the room, hampered by an obvious limp. Getting to where she was now had been a major accomplishment. From where the man was sitting, he could not see who the girl was talking to behind the window. All he could see was a frown appearing over the girl's face and then a lowering of the head. It was a disappointing send off. The girl turned away and followed her muddy trail all the way outside and out of the man's sights.

Wonder what that was all about. The man sighed. He fell back into his chair, silently praying for his name to be called soon. He had been trapped inside the hospital's waiting room for what seemed like forever. It was an impossible wait, one that was severely testing his patience.

The injured, the sick, the ones hoping that their loved ones would return with good news, filled the inadequate room beyond its capacity. Fortunately, he didn't need one of the room's poorly conditioned chairs. He just needed a place to park his. A distinct metal smell roamed the air, making the already sterile room even more potent. It didn't bother him, however. He was used to it. Next to him sat a woman, thick on all sides and laden with perfume pungent enough to fend off the room's metal aroma from time-to-time. Neither sick nor injured, she was obviously waiting for someone. She was reading a magazine and suddenly dropped it in her lap. "Can you believe this?"

Being the only one within her range of torment, the man predicted that her vocal opinions were about to continue with him as the unfortunate recipient. He glanced over at her and was met by a pair of budging eyes, a double chin, and a magazine article practically shoved in his face. "Excuse me?"

The woman shifted her immense weight toward him, furthering baiting him into the magazine article. "This," she said, jerking the magazine back and forth.

Not having any idea to what she was referring to, he shrugged and turned away.

The woman shook her head, clearly angered. "They found more pieces from the crash site on planet Titan," she said. "I tell you, it's like some sort of graveyard up there."

The man's eyebrow twitched, not particularly surprised at what he was hearing.

"Wonder how those pieces got up there in the first place," the woman said, continuing with her one-sided conversation. She slapped the magazine closed and then focused her attention entirely on the man who did his best to ignore her. "I tell you," she said, leaning closer, "ever since they found that mechanical hand here on Earth, years ago, these damn scientists will stop at nothing to find out more about the past." She sighed. "And now they're even searching around on other planets. Pathetic if you ask me."

"Well...not exactly."

She leaned back quickly, as if surprised to hear him finally speak. "Oh? And why isn't it?"

"Knowing our past may help our future. We can only benefit from it."

"Ha! The only thing they're doing is destroying our future. All those damn parts they keep finding everywhere only feed their experiments. It's a damn shame what we're becoming."

"There aren't many options these days," the man countered.

"What? Are you serious?" She smacked the magazine into the side of her chair. "Mechanical parts and humans don't mix and shouldn't mix! Perfect way to kill off our race if you ask me."

The man reached down to pull the jacket from his lap over his right hand, but his attempt at concealment came too late. The overhead light reflected off his hand in a way that it wouldn't off a human hand.

"Oh..." she said, both shocked and embarrassed. "I didn't realize." She glanced around the room making sure no one was watching her, as she leaned in even closer. Now practically in his face, the woman whispered, "It's okay. My cousin had the same procedure done to him. I was totally against it at first, but it saved his life. Should be thankful." She pointed at the man's hand now completely hidden by the jacket. "Is that what you're in here for?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Your hand? Is that what you're in for?"

"Oh, uh...sort of. Just a check up."

"You sick?"

The man turned to her and gave a sad little laugh. "Aren't we all?"

She studied his face for a moment and then pointed her finger at him. "Wait just damn a minute." She opened the magazine and flipped a couple pages to the article she had been reading. "The President of Mechanical Lifestyle Corporation shares excitement over recent findings on planet Titan," she read. "And this is the quote from the president, 'Findings are an important step forward toward the growth of our future.'"

The picture inserted with the story showed a man with the same chiselled jaw, the same deep sunk eyes, and the same receding hairline as the man sitting next to her. The magazine fell out of her hands. "It...it's you!"

The man instantly looked away. Mercifully, a nurse came out from behind the window and walked over to him, saving him from having to respond.

"We're ready for you," the nurse said. She had the biggest smile he had ever seen.

"About damn time," he said, under his breath.

The nurse placed a simple, white folder down onto the man's lap and unlocked the wheels of his chair so she could push him away.

"You don't realize what you're doing!" the woman cried out. "You're going to destroy us all..."

The nurse rolled the man out of the waiting room and into a quiet hallway where the lady could no longer bother him. "She a friend?"

"No. Just an annoyance."

They shared a laugh, as they proceeded down the sterile hallway. Every door the man saw was closed off. Through the thin glass adjacent to each door, he easily noticed that each room was occupied. "Busy?" he joked.

"Been this way ever since I started. One patient leaves, another one takes their place. It's an endless cycle."

The man sighed. "We're doing our best to provide the hospital with parts. The demands are just overwhelming, and more testing needs to be done."

"And no slowing down, as far as I can tell."

"Trust me, after waiting that long inside the waiting room, I believe you." Unexpectedly, the man looked back at the nurse. "Almost forgot. While I was waiting back there, I noticed a girl come in."

"Yes, I know who you're talking about. She's always coming in."

"Is there something wrong with her?"

The nurse smiled and gently coaxed the man's head back around. "You know I can't give out that sort of information...even to you, sir."

"Just feel bad for her is all."

"You're not the only one," the nurse admitted. "I feel the same way every time she comes in."

"So she *is* injured."

"Some minor injuries...Cuts, bumps, bruises, everything we all suffer from time-to-time. Just makes it more difficult to deal with on someone so young."

"You can't help her?"

"I wish I could, but like I said, they're minor. We all have priorities at the moment, and unfortunately, her injuries aren't. That's why I have to turn her away every single time she comes in. Maybe I'll let the other nurse deal with her the next time. All she does is sort medical supplies all day."

"What do you tell that girl whenever she comes in?"

The man could feel the warm breath against the back of his neck, as the nurse deeply sighed. "Oh...just to wait and see. Who knows, she might get lucky one day."

"I hope so."

They continued down a long stretch of hallway where there were no doors. All was quiet except for an annoying squeal coming from the rusted wheels of the man's chair. Before they reached the room at the end of the hall, the man noticed empty display cases and wondered what they were there for. "Something going in those?"

"Eventually," the nurse replied, wheeling the man into the room.

A brisk beam of sunlight was pouring into the room. A large, metal table was taking up most of the space, but it was plain enough not to attract the man's attention. "Since you're back there, do you mind taking me right to the end of the room?"

"Not a problem," the nurse said.

Diagrams lined nearly every wall of the room, with each one depicting a familiar part of the human anatomy in extraordinary detail. Each bone, each muscle...each gear was so familiar to him.

Soon, they found themselves at the very end of the room.

"Here we are." The nurse bent down and attempted to press down on the locking mechanism on the man's wheel chair. It snagged and pinched her finger. "Oh, damn it!"

"You shouldn't say that," he joked.

The nurse smiled. "Sorry. I think I've said that word over three hundred times in the past week."

The man laughed. "Wow, that's a lot." He waved at her. "Don't worry about the chair. It's only rust. I'm fine."

Window shutters were open tempting the man to look out. He did so with a cautious smile drenching most of his face.

The powerful sun was scorching the barren Earth, but there was a small area of refuge. A secluded shadow was draped over an insignificant section of the Earth, caused by a massive asteroid looming in the cloudless sky. The man stared at the dull-grey object, observed it, and even wondered about it. A cold shiver ran down his spine, as he pondered what could have happened if it hadn't been trapped inside Earth's orbit.

"Getting closer?" the nurse asked.

"I sure hope not. It would be unimaginable to think what would have happened if it hadn't slowed down. "

"It's best not to think about that sort of thing. I certainly don't."

"I agree."

The nurse offered to take the man's jacket, and he kindly surrendered it to her. She made her way to the door, and, as she placed the jacket inside a small compartment in the wall, a stack of pages fell out from inside the sleeve. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she said and bent down and retrieved the pages from the floor.

"It's not a problem, nurse."

"A book you're writing?"

"Not really. More of a journal."

The nurse wedged the corner of the journal between her fingers, preparing to flip through the entire stack. "May I?"

"I wish you could. Unfortunately, all the pages are blank at the moment."

The nurse tucked the empty journal inside the jacket's sleeve. "When were you planning on—"

"Soon. This injury hasn't allowed me to write much. Still getting used to my new arm." The man turned his arm in the sunlight, causing it to shimmer. "I'll start writing as soon as I'm healed." He smiled. "Need to start filling that

journal soon. I want my new-born son to know what kind of man his father is turning out to be.”

“I’m sure by the time he’s old enough to read, your journal will be filled with interesting stories.”

“I *hope* so.”

“I should be getting back to the waiting room,” the nurse said. “That line isn’t getting shorter with me standing around.”

“I completely understand.” The man smiled. “How long before the doctor gets here?”

“The doctor will be with you shortly, sir. He’s with a patient at the moment.”

“Mechanical or human?”

The nursed smiled. “Sir, you know the doctor only works on one kind.”

“His specialty...”

“You’re right, sir...Humans...”

THE END

About the Author

Vo Tran was born in south Vietnam. He moved to Canada at a young age and has lived there ever since. He enjoys visual arts, technology, and nature. Forever Jacob is his first novel and it was inspired by his early character designs and illustrations. The first draft of Forever Jacob was completed during his lunch breaks while working as a welder.

To see Vo Tran's artworks, including Forever Jacob art, please visit his webpage

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Jacob, a first generation robot, has a problem. Actually, he has a monumental problem. The moon is practically an arm's reach away from colliding with the earth, rendering his kind extinct. But Jacob wants to stay. He calculates he can bring his kind back from the brink of extinction. His solution? Recreate the ones who created him - humans. Only problem is, he's never seen a human before. "Damn, 333! This isn't going to be pretty."

Forever Jacob: Project New Hope

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