

PROLOGUE

Strawberries

“They’re finally ripe!”

Scabs split, ulcers wept, chemicals itched, and sunburns chafed as I shuffled up the rise separating the Johnson home from my destination, toolbox in hand. Sweat poured into my wounds and set them afire, but I pressed on. *Today is strawberry day!*

I topped the rise separating the Johnson hovel from the greenhouse I’d built from the remains of pre-Destruction buildings. *Destruction: an absurdly simple word for global ecological collapse millennia in the making and sealed by nuclear exchanges between states.* Gathering the materials was a labor of obsession. Distilling and redistilling water to wash enough dirt to fill the greenhouse forty centimeters deep became an exercise in tedium. Planting and tending took only a few weeks, by which point I was more than a little impatient. Why? To prove that one could farm healthy crops using solar power and clean water instead of the acidic rain captured by the many hydrators dotting the family homestead.

Today was the day I’d taste the fruits of a year of hard labor. I smiled, anticipating the sweet tang I hadn’t tasted since childhood. My smile faded to a puzzled frown as the door opened. My frown became a scowl as I saw my neighbor and friend Rutherford Samuels leaving with two fistfuls of my hard-won triumph and blood-red juice running down his chin. My jaw dropped. On post-Destruction Earth, stealing food was tantamount to murder.

“Thief!”

He looked at me wide-eyed for a long moment before turning to flee, but I was already in motion. My body burned as I pushed for speed. A jolt of pain inflamed my rage when my thigh smacked a corner of my toolbox. I snatched up a heavy wrench. Rutherford glanced back, tripped, and fell. I howled as I lifted the tool above my head and swung it at his skull. Rutherford recoiled from my onslaught. Time slowed. I watched in horror as he twisted his body out of harm’s way. Then I felt and heard a crunch. Rutherford screamed as the wrench shattered his

kneecap. I staggered backward then collapsed to my knees, chest heaving as I watched him crawl away whimpering.

“What kind of acid is this?” I called after him. “If you want to kill me, then stab me instead of taking my food. You’re my neighbor—my friend. How can you betray me like this?”

I looked at the smushed pile of berries Rutherford had dropped and rolled over. The anger faded as my pain subsided enough for me to crawl forward. I popped the only intact strawberry in my mouth. It tasted flat and dull, nothing like the strawberries I ate on Mars as a child, back when life made sense. Guilt and shame overcame me. *I maimed my neighbor for this?*

“Damn you, Rutherford! All this and the berries aren’t even good?”

Nobody would blame me for defending my food supply, least of all Rutherford, because tolerating one theft risked inviting more. Knowing that didn’t help as I knelt there wondering whether I should try to help him or finish the job. We’d been neighbors for over a decade. *I thought we were friends. These berries aren’t what I’d hoped, but they prove I can help everyone in Omapeka and beyond—including you.*

A sonic boom from a passing sub-orb rattled my greenhouse. The sudden noise and red strawberries against the grays and browns of Omapeka reminded me of Aunt Gertrude Kellem, mayor of the Chryse Planitia Pleasure Colony on Mars. She gave me a toy MSF Interceptor for my fifth birthday and told me I’d be a pilot someday. Instead, I was a half-starved post-Destruction dirt farmer breaking bones over a few handfuls of strawberries. I stared up at the contrail, yearning to fly, to get off this barren rock, to return to Mars and the life I once knew.

I remembered seeing her in a well-manicured meadow on my fifth birthday: a portly woman with brown curly hair, too much rouge on her cheeks, and lavender glitter framing her green eyes. I also recalled her turquoise jacket straining to remain in place against her pink blouse. *She stuffs herself with all the abundance Mars has to offer while thoughtlessly sending me computers and thousands of data cards on every topic imaginable. What the hell happened to get my family dumped on this poisoned rock?*

CHAPTER ONE

Earth

“Wake up, fertcan.”

I opened my eyes. Morning light streamed through holes in the rusted corrugated sheet metal that formed our home, casting jagged patterns on the dirt floor that mimicked the dry, cracked earth outside. Every creak of the walls sounded like a warning. Wind pelted the house with sand and debris. The air carried a metallic tang, gritty dust, boiling vegetables, and a whiff of petroleum. My computer and many hundreds of collected data cards contrasted with the squalor.

“You were thrashing in your sleep.” My younger sister Eva stood in the doorway. The once-beautiful Martian toddler with blonde hair and bright blue eyes was now a young Earther woman covered in the same rashes, lesions, and thinning hair as everyone else.

I rose and folded my rough, threadbare blanket into a hooded cloak. Scabs split open. My body itched. *Oh, to be five years old again with a skinned knee from running and playing instead of weeping blood and pus from chemicals and unfiltered sunlight!*

“I had the space dream again,” I said. “Floating in space next to a gargantuan ship with a big fin sticking up. I reach out to touch the hull, but it veers off behind a planet.” I pulled a pair of boots over my swollen feet. “No idea what it means, but it beats reliving the Rutherford incident. Can’t believe it’s been almost two years already.” *Different day, same script.*

“Breakfast is almost ready. Oh, and happy birthday.”

The pain lessened. *Today is Monday, August thirteenth, 2564. It’s my eighteenth birthday. I am a man.* I dabbed a layer of protective mud on my face and exposed limbs. “I hope the second half of my life is better than the first.”

“Aunt Gertrude rained you another package. And let me help you with that abscess on your arm.”

“Why?” I waved my free arm at my computer and thousands of data cards whose number grew with every arriving sub-orb. “Take *Practical Intra-System Maneuvering* and *Ganymede HX Series Console* for example. What possible use do I have for these beyond entertainment? I can fly to Mars in my sleep, but can’t clean soil or purify water. If Aunt Gertrude wants me to be a pilot or do something specific, then she has a funny way of showing me.”

I winced as Eva lanced the boil and squeezed out a ball of pus that she wiped on a corner of my cloak. “Ah, that’s better. Thanks. I’m glad somebody enjoys this kind of thing.”

“I’m trying to do whatever good I can, and things like this are easier than trying to set Rutherford’s knee. As for Aunt Gertrude, at least she likes one of us, because I can’t remember the last time she gave anyone else a gift. Come eat, then let’s get to work.”

Earth is all Eva knows. She was too young to remember the Pleasure Colonies, green grass, and healthy foods. I envy her relentless idealism and fascination with medicine. Rutherford can walk today because of her.

I followed her into the central room. This was the only room with glass windows instead of bare openings covered with sheets of metal, wood, or fabric for privacy. A sheet of translucent, sun-warped plastic served as our inner door, its corners pinned with metal bars to keep the wind from ripping it free. Father sat at the table oiling our hydrator tools. I eased myself into a brittle plastic chair across from him. Wrinkles crossed his face. Blisters covered his bald scalp. He looked at me with yellow eyes.

“Happy birthday, son,” he wheezed. “Take today off and work double tomorrow if you want.”

“Does it matter?”

“Speak up, Son, you know I can’t hear too good.”

I picked up a caliper and used the cleanest corner of my blanket/cloak to wipe grit from its hinges. “Does being eighteen mean I get to marry Lynn and start my own farm?”

“Yes, and about time. Go mod your own hydrators since you’re the expert.”

“My mods work, and you know it.”

“And if you’re wrong? No hydrators, no water.”

“Stop,” Eva said, emerging from the toilet room. “Can we go through one day without this endless argument? Just today? Please?”

I squirted oil on the caliper and worked it into the hinges. I finished and stood up too fast, grimacing as sheets of fire raced down my back. I limped to the toilet, slammed the door, and lowered myself onto the rough wooden seat above the stinking fertcan that collected our offerings.

“Breakfast is served.”

I finished my business and returned to the central room, where Mother ladled vegetables into chipped bowls. The stunted turnips and cabbages looked and tasted as lifeless and caustic as the soil that that birthed them. Still, I chewed slowly to extract what nutrition I could and washed it down with warm cooking water from a pitcher. I wiped my hands on my hood when I finished.

“David, why don’t you take the sailcar into Omapeka and get your package?” Mother said. Clumps of yellow hair jutted from beneath her headscarf. She pulled a few coins from her apron and pressed them into my palm. “I’ve been saving these. Get some meat for your birthday supper.”

Father snatched them away. “No sense wasting money on meat. And stop encouraging him to fill his head with Gertrude’s acid.”

“That acid’s my only escape.”

“You know where the door is if you want to escape.”

Same script, increasingly different day. “Fair enough. I’m taking the sailcar into town to register a farm at the land office.”

Father leaned across the table. “You—” He broke into a coughing fit.

Something about this particular exchange cut deeper than usual. I reached for his shoulder but stopped short. *He doesn't want pity, least of all from me.*

Eva rose. "David, help me fert the garden before you go. You promised."

"If I must." I stood, kissed my mother, and followed Eva into the toilet to retrieve the fertcan. No Omapeka home was complete without one. *To think we owe our lives to these wretched buckets.* She grabbed the box of hydrox compound and poured some in the canister. I gasped.

"No wonder the east patch is so alkaline! Watch."

"But the instructions say—"

"Whoever wrote those instructions needs a wrench to the head." My hand stung as I scooped half the white powder back out. "This is plenty. Trust me."

We stirred the mixture of shit, piss, and hydrox into a pungent slurry, then headed outside. I spat in my palm and watched my saliva fizzing as it reacted with the hydrox. The burning eased. My data cards described the plants and animals that once filled these plains. I pictured waist-high grasses and purple-flowered shrubs blanketing the landscape. *As if my nightly dreams of Mars and a strange spaceship aren't torture enough!*

Memories of lying on my back in a lush meadow, blades of grass tickling my neck, faded to real browns and grays. Ranks of hydrators stood idle in the morning light, rusting vertical tubes with meter-wide catch basins at their bases. Grains of windborne sand stung my face. Tomorrow, I'd be back at work replacing corroded pipes and valves while making furtive adjustments to wring more, cleaner water from those accursed machines. "Let's get at this so I can sail into town."

I knelt by a plant and scooped a dollop of slurry from the fertcan. My eyes watered and my stomach roiled from the stench that never fully washed off. *A gardener on Mars showed me a handful of rich, moist brown soil with an earthworm as he told me how soil is life. Here, soil is lingering death.*

Each plant received its portion of fert as we worked our way across the field. Missing or half-eaten plants surrounded a hole halfway down the row, each bite mark laughing at weeks of wasted labor. My hand burned again as I scooped a handful of turned soil. *Too much hydrox, Eva!* I dropped the contaminated dirt and spit in my palm again to neutralize the caustic soil. Something moved in the hole.

“Gopher!”

“Where?” Eva peered over my shoulder.

I pointed, my skin breaking with the movement. Eva speared a section of pipe into the burrow. I grabbed her arm. “Soil is life. Let him be.”

“You don’t want the meat?”

“Not this time,” I said. “Rutherford grows his food and chose to steal ours. This creature has nothing else to eat.”

Eva nodded, lowering the pipe. We finished ferting the plants.

“You really need to lay off the hydrox, Eva. It—”

Eva scoffed. “I know what it does. I also know the instructions were written by experts, not my brother who thinks he knows any better.” She pointed at the sky. “Looks like rain’s coming!”

I squinted at the distant thunderheads and shook my head at their empty promises. *Our lives hinge on occasional showers of clean rain that wash away built-up salts, but today won’t be such a day.* “That’s virga, Eva. It evaporates before hitting the ground.”

“Remember the strawberries?”

I hung my head. “Those fucking strawberries were my one indulgence in life. Meanwhile, people on Mars gorge on anything they can get their flabby paws on.”

“So you never stop saying,” Eva said with a shrug. We kept walking. I saw our mother struggling with two jerrycans as we approached the house. I caught up with her and took the full cans.

“So much water,” she said with a gap-toothed smile. “Praise the hydrators!”

Mars supplied hydrators, parts, and just enough electricity to keep most of them running most of the time. Spending every day servicing hydrators while balancing acids, bases, and salts to prevent starvation was the best way I knew to keep a population both docile and dependent. I rejected this status quo by dedicating myself to squeezing every possible drop from the grotesquely inefficient machines. *The last thing Mars wants is for Earth’s millions to rise up, overrun their outposts, and maybe even invade. Aunt Gertrude must know this. So what is she playing at?*

Mother understood my thinking. Thanking the hydrators was her way of thanking me without lifting the veil of acquiescence.

I smiled. “I told you reworking the condenser inputs was a good idea!”

“Horace is working the north side of the ridge. Take the sailcar before he returns.”

“Thanks!” I set the heavy cans down, grinned, and made for the sailcar. I boarded and unfurled the sail for the thirty-klick ride to Omapeka and my package but hesitated before adjusting the lines. *Do I really want to know what useless data card, computer, or other trinket Aunt Gertrude sent this time, when all it will do is rub my nose in how abominable things are? Still, I have to know.*

I shook my head as I pulled in the lines. The sail caught the wind. The lines went taut, the mast flexed, and the sailcar groaned as it began moving. I sailed out of sight of the house before winching in the sails. The sailcar canted onto two wheels and accelerated. I spread my arms, relishing the cool wind.

A familiar cluster of corrugated buildings came into view surrounded by its own hydrators and feeble crops. I giped the sailcar towards it. A figure watched me approach.

“Hey, Lynn!” I called, releasing the sails and braking. “Come to town with me.”

“Happy birthday, David!” Lynn said, leaning in for a kiss. “Why town?”

“Package.”

“Again?”

“I know. But the short break from work will be nice.”

“Good rain,” Lynn said as she climbed aboard, laughing as the breeze tousled her matted brunette waves and dulled the ever-present smell of fert. Her narrow mouth and widely spaced eyes resembled Aunt Gertrude’s, except Lynn’s face was drawn and gaunt. *Obesity isn’t exactly endemic on post-Destruction Earth.*

“Let’s get married and go to the land office.”

“What makes you think I’ll marry you?”

“Like either of us has better options?” I grumbled.

“What? David, you know you’re my man.” Her tone was light, but doubt lingered in her eyes. “C’mere and give me some lovin’.”

I trimmed the sailcar for hands-off running, then embraced her. She giggled and hugged me back. I kissed her. Giggles became moans as our kisses intensified and our hands explored each other. Evolutionary instincts trumped burns and aches, and we made love—if two half-dead people creaking across the flats in a sailcar can call it that. The same instincts also made me misjudge the wind, as we arrived sooner than expected.

WELCOME TO OMAPEKA, KANSO-NEBRASKA PROVINCIAL CAPITAL, TEXAHOMA PEACE AND CO-PROSPERITY SPHERE—POPULATION 2,003, proclaimed a sign as we cruised past the city limits and finished rearranging our clothing. Martian colonies were clusters of cylindrical buildings beneath domes that mimicked pre-Destruction Earth skies and smelled of flowers. Omapeka consisted of three hundred shanties cobbled together from

whatever materials their owners could scrounge. This settlement sat beneath a polluted sky that shimmered with heat and particles of dirt, hydrox, and fert.

I parked and furled the sail at Town Hall and Sundries, a mud-brick structure roofed with metal sheets and salvaged planks.

“I’m going to the library,” Lynn said as we climbed down.

I kissed her cheek. “I’ll wait here when I’m done.”

Her hand trailed down my arm as she walked away. I watched her go, then entered the dim, dusty shop. *Shop is a generous term; these shelves never hold anything worth buying.*

“Hey, David.” The shopkeeper emerged from the storeroom. “Your aunt rained you another package. She must think you’re something!”

He said the same thing every time a sub-orb ‘rained’ me another useless computer or data card from on high. I accepted the parcel. Drops of crimson dripped from the shopkeeper’s scabbed arm onto the white wrappings. I studied the address:

Hon. Gertrude Kellem, Mayor

Chryse Planitia Colony

Mars 4

“I hope she finally sent me *Practical Intra-Fertcan Mixology*,” I quipped. I nodded in thanks as I exited and leaned against the sailcar to wait for Lynn.

“Old man Faulker is dead,” Lynn said when she returned. “His son runs the library now.”

“He was only thirty-six. My data cards say that pre-Destruction Earthers lived a hundred years.”

Humans: the only species I know that slashed its own life expectancy by two thirds. And for what? Lynn cradled my face in her hands. “Look around, David. Do you want eighty-two more years of this?”

“Mars was uninhabitable while Earth was so beautiful people couldn’t wait to get outdoors.” My voice wavered. “That’s how things should be. That’s why I keep modding hydrators trying to clean soil, and I’m tired of Father stalling me at every step.”

Lynn smiled. “Is that why you want to marry me? To work a farm without your father bothering you?”

Lynn understands neither hydrox chemistry nor if my work will save or doom us, but she trusts me more than anyone... and it’s not like any other woman of marrying age lives anywhere close. “Yes, damn it. I want to work my own farm my way and show everyone how to live longer, better lives. Let’s go to the land office.”

“Now?” she laughed, brushing some hair from her face. “Why the rush?”

“I can give us a life worth eighty-two more years.”

“Yes, David.” She touched my hand. “Soon. I promise.”

I smiled to mask my frustration. “Is that your seventh book?”

She nodded, smiling. Those seven books made her the most well-read person in Omapeka. If one didn’t count the thousands of data cards Aunt Gertrude sent me, that is. Her selection intrigued me.

“Robinson Crusoe. Who’s he? What’s it about?”

Lynn nudged me. “You haven’t read it? I thought you were smart!”

I chuckled. “You haven’t read any of my data cards.”

“Why read fancy words and pretend to fly spaceships?” She stuck her tongue out at me. “I can’t do numbers like you can, but I talk just fine. Stories take me away from here. I don’t know the places they describe, but I like picturing them in my head.”

I unfurled the sails, and we departed. Lynn flipped through her book. I felt both guilty and thankful that Lynn knew nothing of my Martian past. *She deserves to know, but I have no idea when or how to tell her.* “Are you happy, Lynn?”

She shrugged, her smile widening. “Why not? My family’s got a good farm. We all love each other. I don’t expect you to change anything around here, but at least we’ll be working our own land.” She scooted closer. “Let’s go to the land office and start our farm. I’ll go to the Population Bureau for a marrying license and a repro permit.”

“We need to go together. Should I turn around?”

“Not yet, but soon.” She kissed my cheek. “You gonna open your package?”

I complied and opened the letter, disbelief growing with every line of smooth flowing purple script. “*Practical Intra-System Maneuvering.* This was Gertrude’s plan all along!”

“David, watch out!”

“What? Oh, fert. Hang on!”

I let out sail and yanked the tiller to avoid a boulder, then released the boom to stop the sailcar. The loose sail luffed in the wind. Lynn huddled in a ball grimacing at the jarring. “What does that acidic letter say?”

“Aunt Gertrude gave me a ship and wants Eva and me to return to Mars.”

“Return to Mars? What do you mean, return?”

Everyone knew my family hailed from somewhere else, but no one suspected the truth I’d just blurted out. *I withheld this from Lynn because anyone descended from those marooned on a dying Earth should loathe anyone descended from the elites who bled it dry before infesting another planet. She woke up wanting marriage. She’ll go to sleep wanting nothing to do with me.*

I began resetting the sail, but a line refused to budge. I yanked it a few times before noticing a broken guy pulley. I dismounted, turned to Lynn, and told her everything from my Martian birth and childhood to my exile on Earth.

“Why didn’t you tell me all this a long time ago?” Lynn said when I finished. “I knew about your aunt, but I never guessed you lived on Mars.”

“How could I tell you? And explain how bad things really are here to people who’ve never known anything else?”

Lynn stared at the ground, shaking her head. “Well, now you have a ship and an invitation. What’ll you do?”

“You and I will stop suffering on this planet and finish our hundred years on Mars.”

“And leave everyone I love behind to suffer?”

I sighed. “Why not? I’m doing everything I can to make things better, and for what? My father can’t be the only one afraid of change, and nobody wouldn’t steal good food. I can’t save everyone, but I can save us, and that’s something. This is our chance, Lynn!”

“This is your chance, David.” Lynn took a deep breath. “Fix the sailcar and take me home. I’ll be up half the night working on hydrators and the rest of the night wishing I didn’t love you.”

I jury-rigged the boom, and we set off. She leaned into me as the sailcar moved across the flats. Her warmth comforted me. She sat upright as we neared her home and looked me in the eyes.

“You don’t belong here, David,” she said softly. “Just don’t forget the people stuck down here when you’re enjoying the good life on Mars.”

“No one belongs here,” I muttered, finally grasping her meaning. *Can I abandon her?*

She kissed my cheek, climbed down, grabbed her book, and took several steps before pausing. “I hope you find whatever you’re looking for on Mars, and I hope you find another girl who loves you as much as I do.”

Lynn’s words hit like a swung wrench.

“I can’t stay on Mars knowing what I left behind,” I muttered. “What if I heal there, then return to build the best farm in Omapeka? With you?”

Lynn rolled her eyes. “What’ll you tell your parents about the sailcar?”

“The truth.” I began adjusting the sail for departure, but stopped as she took my hand.

“If you leave, then you won’t come back.”

The sadness in her voice added itself to my list of demons as the sailcar began moving.

“Don’t tell me about taking Eva or Lynn to Mars after wrecking the sailcar,” Father said, holding up the letter. “Sell Gertrude’s ship for food.”

I snatched it from his hand. “No. And the sailcar isn’t wrecked. It’s just one broken pulley.”

“You’re my son. You’ll do what I tell you!”

I hesitated only a moment before squaring my shoulders. “I am a man. I tell myself what to do.”

“Respect your father,” Mother snapped.

I waved the letter at him. “I don’t know what you did on Mars, but Mother, Eva, and I paid for it with interest. I’m going.”

“How dare you?” Father stood up, the veins on his forehead bulging.

“Easily.” My eyes met his. “I can’t live on Mars, but I can visit and return with tools to improve people’s lives, you included.”

“Gerturde sent us here and floods your head with bad rain, and you think you’re welcome on Mars?” Father snarled. “Sell that ship and do something useful for once.”

“David deserves the truth, Horace,” Mother said.

“What’s there to know? Gertrude’s up there and we’re down here. The end.”

“Horace...”

The fight left Father’s eyes. He slumped into his seat as if crushed by some unseen weight. “Leave us, Esther. You too, Eva.”

Father hushed her reply with a gesture, then looked at me with an expression I’ll never forget. “This farm is my fault.”

I froze. My mouth went dry. He reached out to touch my arm, but I pulled away.

“I was eighteen, Esther was sixteen,” Father continued. “I loved her the moment I saw her.”

That told me everything I needed to know but I persisted. “What happened?”

“Esther got pregnant with you.”

“Of all the rusted tubes,” I spat.

Father wiped his eyes. “We served a year of hard labor after having you without a repro permit. We got one Eva, but the Department of Population claimed we never filed the forms, so Gertrude sent us here. You were five years old, and Eva was barely three.”

“In other words, Eva and I paid for your wet prick, and you returned that favor by meddling in everything I did while I tried to make the best of it.”

“Don’t you understand, Son?” Father held out his hands. “I destroyed our lives because I thought I knew better, but Mars laws are unforgiving. Down here, your strawberry project cost Rutherford a knee... and you keep thinking you can make the hydrators better, but we all starve if you’re wrong. Stop, son. For all our sakes.”

“I hope your fun was worth our misery.”

Father's shoulders slumped. "I never wanted this to happen."

I sighed. "And I'm the hypocrite who may have gotten Lynn pregnant today."

I scooted my chair next to his and put my arm around him. "I'm not selling my ship. You thrust me into this situation, and I'm going to thrust everyone out of it. I can't take Omapeka to the Pleasure Colonies, but I can bring the Pleasure Colonies to Omapeka. Mars must have technology and equipment that can help. They colonized a barren planet, after all."

The house lurched and rumbled as the monthly sub-orb to Vandenburg on the Pacific Coast went supersonic. *I can wait fourteen months for the next launch window to open or spend an additional six months in space by launching as soon as possible and using the sun as a slingshot to reach Mars eight months sooner than waiting. Am I selfless for wanting to save eight months or selfish for wishing I had already left? Someone selfish enough to follow Father's example may be selfish enough to vindicate Lynn's suspicions. Different day, different script!*

Eva and I took the next sub-orb. Vandenburg was a pre-Destruction United States Space Force base which became the Mars Authority's premier facility for beautiful people fleeing the hoi polloi. *Sticks in my throat that this place can exist next to so much misery!* It occupied a plateau between the Pacific Ocean and coastal mountains and enjoyed cool summer temperatures. Fog formed most nights and dissipated the following morning. Grasses and even bushes and trees dotted the landscape. A nuclear reactor provided power and desalinated water. Mars Security Forces guarded the perimeter. We dined on prepackaged meals imported from Mars that we unwrapped and heated in microwave ovens. Life there was as close to a Pleasure Colony as Earth could offer. *This is almost as good as Mars—and we're going there, not as stragglers on some cargo flight, but aboard my very own ship!*

Thousands of Omapeka nights in front of my computer paid off as Eva and I spent weeks practicing intra-system maneuvers on actual Ganymede HX consoles installed in full-motion simulators with no hydrators in sight. The bumps and lurches of mock maneuvers chafed our irritated skin against harnesses and restraints. It hurt, but every itch and welt meant progress toward leaving Earth. We lived in quarantine to forestall possible bacterial or viral hitchhikers. I

didn't mind the isolation because I was focused on my mission and had never participated in whatever Omapekans called a social scene.

Our thirtieth Vandenburg morning dawned. Eva and I stood beside a launch pad gazing at a beetle-shaped ship strapped between two solid fuel boosters and an insulated tank of liquid fuel. *How little has changed since humanity first ventured into space!*

"Practical Intra-System Maneuvering," I whispered as I patted one of the boosters, my knees weak. "Simulations and data cards are one thing, but this..."

I started to walk toward the gantry, but Eva stopped me. "Why are we here? Why did Aunt Gertrude go to such lengths to prepare you for this?"

"She always said I'd be a pilot." My brow furrowed. "I wish I knew why she's so interested in me except maybe as a son she never had, but we'll find out."

"She clearly had no use for a surrogate daughter," Eva said.

"I know." I patted her shoulder. "Just be glad you don't remember Mars. I see it every night and then wake up to shit and hydrox every morning."

"If it's as good as you've said..." Eva looked away. "I might not want to return."

We ascended the gantry elevator and boarded my birthday present. The ship contained a two-seat bridge in the forepeak with wraparound viewports and a Ganymede HX console. The living space included a salon and two sleeping compartments that rotated to mimic gravity. Stern holds contained our provisions. It was a palace compared to the Johnson home.

"I christen you the *Lucky Lynn*," I said, wincing as launch personnel cinched our harnesses. They performed their pre-launch tasks before withdrawing and sealing the hatch behind them. Eva's and my ears popped as life support systems came online. I booted the console and began the launch checklist. *Left and right fuel selector valves on. Solid booster safety interlock to bypass. Emergency abort handle unlocked. Gantry release armed. Auto guidance enabled. Internal hatch lock confirmed.*

I had witnessed dozens of launches during our time at Vandenburg. Clouds of dust and spent fuel surrounded the launch pad as solid boosters ignited and spun up. The ship lifted out of this maelstrom atop a plume of fire and smoke that fanned and faded to wisps of contrails beneath a fading dot of light as the altitude increased. Flashes of light followed by distant popping noises signaled jettisoning the boosters and switching to liquid-fueled engines for the remaining ascent. The spectacle never bored me.

“I can’t believe you slept all the way from Omapeka last month,” I said. “My face was pressed against the viewport!”

An alarm rang. A screen displayed our launch clearance. Two buttons lit green. It was time. Eva and I looked at each other. I pressed the buttons. Clouds of smoke obscured the viewports. The *Lucky Lynn* trembled violently as her engines reached maximum thrust. We heard pops and felt jolts as explosive bolts mooring us to the ground detonated. G forces slammed us into our seats, and I whimpered from the pain. The sky turned blue as we cleared the gantry and faded to black as we accelerated into space.

The fifty-seven minutes required to break free of Earth’s gravity and cut the engines seemed like forever. The moment of cutoff felt like being shoved forward. We released our harnesses and floated free, our bodies relaxing. The warm air circulating through the cabin felt exquisite. For once I welcomed the intense light streaming through the forward viewports that intensified as we approached the sun. Boredom was our worst enemy. I studied chemistry and engineering, entertaining myself by dabbling in celestial navigation. Eva devoured everything she could find about the Pleasure Colonies.

Things changed as we transited the orbit of Mercury. The cabin temperature rose. The hull glowed orange, then white hot. Flames belched from the sun’s surface amid a pervasive orange glow. The ship rattled to where I could barely see the console showing our rate of approach slowing and then stopping as we reached our closest point to the sun’s surface. We accelerated as its gravity hurled us around and away like a cosmic slingshot.

“Perihelion,” I said. “Systems normal, velocity one fifty and rising fast. The hard part is over. The cabin will start cooling off soon, and it’s an easy ride to Mars. We made it, Eva!”

We made it. I repeated those words to myself as I grappled with my decisions. Maybe Father had a point when he told me to sell this ship for food, and maybe I went through with this as much to spite him as to find ways to help people. Lynn wasn't being sarcastic when she said I'd never return. Did she sense some deeper truth? It's up to me to prove—

Something slammed into the back of my head and I passed out.

I opened my eyes. My head throbbed. My body trembled. I was dizzy. The back of my head felt split open. I reached back and found blood. I looked around. The *Lucky Lynn* was in shambles. Everything that could tear or break loose drifted across the cabin. It was dark and cold. I smelled the sweetness of leaking coolant.

“Eva?”

No answer.

“Eva!”

I flailed but got nowhere for my efforts. *Fuck! What should I do? What can I do? This ship is utterly silent. Nothing's working. No machinery, no alarms and indicators to tell me just how fucked we are, nothing. Life support... must get life support running again before I... before I freeze to death. Death. Fuck! This ship is dead and so are we.* Thoughts like this filled my head until my fears eventually gave way to relief as cold became warmth. Then I realized I was in the final stage of hypothermia before death, exactly as described in the *Practical Intra-System Maneuvering* section on deep space survival. *Whoever created that curriculum didn't imagine a situation quite this fucked.* I imagined Lynn cradling me in her arms as the abyss opened to welcome me to eternity.

“You were right, Lynn,” I whispered. “I’m not coming back.”

“I love you, David,” I heard her say. “Goodbye.”

I remembered dashing across the Martian meadow on my fifth birthday, waving my toy Interceptor and making hissing noises like an ion drive before tripping and crushing it under my falling body. And now history was about to come full circle. I closed my eyes for what I thought was the final time, then snapped them back open as a searing white beam shone through the frost-covered viewports and panned around the cabin. I saw Eva floating motionless in the cloud of debris filling the cabin. A shower of sparks erupted from the hatch. My head swam. My eyes closed. *Am I hallucinating?*

“In here,” I croaked. “We’re in here!”

Something grabbed me. I opened my eyes and saw three spacesuits surrounding me. *I’m not hallucinating.*

“Thank you,” I said over and over again. “Thank you!”

One of my rescuers bent over me. I gasped as I saw large obsidian teardrops where eyes should be. Something jabbed my arm, and I entered oblivion.