

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.

CHAPTER TWO

Quirl

I couldn't feel my body beyond knowing I was on my back, which I found more than a little disconcerting. I tasted a metallic tang. I heard a rush of air and smelled something I could not place until I realized the air was pure. Perplexed, I stirred. I felt like I was tumbling. My stomach heaved. I stifled a retch and froze. My nausea faded as I grasped that the strange sensation was my first time feeling no pain since childhood. I held my body still and moved my arms and legs. Next, I flexed my neck and back, feeling nothing but awareness of moving muscles. *Is this death? Who knew that nothingness could feel so exquisite!*

"David, wake up!"

I opened my eyes and saw a white blur. I blinked several times, and the blur focused into a metal ceiling. I turned my head to follow the sound. A young woman lay on her back near me. She sounded like Eva, but looked both familiar and unfamiliar all at once.

"David? All well?"

"I think so," I said. "You?"

"Fine, I think." She took in our surroundings. "Are we on Mars?"

"I don't know. The *Lucky Lynn*. Perihelion. What happened?"

She shrugged. "I came into the salon, tripped, and woke up here."

We lay on elevated beds in a white room with beige and black trim and crimson symbols on the walls near what looked like controls and machinery. Holographic images of our bodies and internal organs hovered over us. Soft beeps and warbles filled the air. Screens displayed information in cryptic characters. *This must be Mars, so why can't I—*

Eva screamed. I froze for a moment before seeing her gaze riveted on something behind me. I whipped my head around and gaped at the creature entering the room. He or she or whatever stood two meters tall and was thin for its height. Its egg-shaped head held two large

black eyes the shape of teardrops, a diminutive nose, and a thin mouth with cyanotic lips. Its hairless skin was bluish white. It wore a teal bodysuit with black trim on the neck, shoulders, wrists, waist, and cuffs, and golden metal objects pinned at the collar, shoulders, and chest. Gleaming black boots sheathed its feet, trouser cuffs bloused above them. It recoiled when Eva screamed, but then smiled and raised its four-fingered, two-thumbed hands with the palms facing us. *We're scared of each other. I find that reassuring.*

“Viz d'uuk,” it said in a high-pitched, masculine voice before pointing at itself. “Yanexu Rih'Sutekh.”

“Ya, who?” *I'm on the Lucky Lynn and hallucinating.*

He cocked his head, then thumped a hand on his chest. “Ya'ris.”

Aha! I pointed at myself. “David.”

“Daaayyyveeed.” Ya'ris beamed and turned to Eva.

“Eva,” she said.

“Eeevah,” Ya'ris said, gesturing at us as he spoke. “Dayveed quon Eevah quon Ya'ris!”

Damned decent of my delusions to introduce themselves. Ya'ris helped me off the bed. Standing caused another wave of nausea. I clutched the bed as Ya'ris shifted his attention to Eva. Recovered, I looked down at myself then, flabbergasted, at Eva.

Her lesions were gone. Her hair was full and shiny, and her eyes were bright. I raised my hand to my face. My skin felt smooth and clear. The holograms above our beds showed Eva and me as we were on Earth. We watched in silent amazement as our electronic doppelgangers morphed into young human adults in the prime of health. The man stood just under two meters in height with dirty blond hair, blue eyes, and toned muscles. The blonde next to him was equally fit. I tore my clothes off and stared at myself. Some distant corner of my awareness knew I was standing naked in front of both my sister and some strange creature, but my disbelief overrode any embarrassment I'd normally feel.

“What rain is this?” Eva asked. “And yes, David, I already guessed your body matched the display without needing to see it, you fertcan.”

“The simplest explanation is that Mars rescued us and induced comas while androids treated us,” I said, oblivious to her remark as I squatted, waiting for the familiar tearing and bleeding sensations, but felt nothing. I pushed off with my leg muscles. My feet left the deck. I winced, expecting a surge of agony but felt only slaps against my feet as I landed. I watched, entranced, as I curled my hands into fists, my fingers contracting and expanding effortlessly. Ya’ris watched with what I suspect was amusement as Eva and I experimented with our first pain-free movements in years. *Can this be real?*

“I feel so alive,” Eva said as she twirled.

A hiss drew my attention to an opening hatch. Six people entered the room. All wore matching uniforms with varying types and amounts of insignia. I watched the newcomers converse with Ya’ris in a strange language. A woman wearing more insignia than her compatriots then stepped forward. She came up to my chin. Her straight hair ended just below her ears. Her narrow waist flared into wide hips and muscular legs that seemed out of proportion to her lithe upper body. I smiled and nodded. She returned the gesture and said something to Ya’ris, who handed me fresh clothing. I accepted it and glanced down at myself, blushing as I became fully aware of my unclothed state. I dressed and then faced our hosts. “Excuse me, please. Where’s the toilet?”

Blank stares met my query. A simple pantomime sufficed for Ya’ris to usher us into an adjoining compartment containing a row of stalls with hollow seats that accepted and disposed of waste. *Painless urination is one of life’s simple pleasures!* He then led us to another compartment and directed Eva and me into separate cubicles. He then rolled up a sleeve and adjusted some controls mounted on the bulkhead. My jaw dropped as water sprayed from spigots above our heads.

“Clean rain!” Eva exclaimed as we stared at a sight magnificent in that it should never be magnificent. Ya’ris showed us how to adjust the temperature and demonstrated containers of mysterious substances before stepping back and waving us towards the water with a smile. Eva

and I stood there staring back and forth at him and the gushing water. Yet another pantomime solved this riddle, and Eva and I soon stood under the warm cascades.

I tasted the pure water, then dispensed some pink goop and examined it before lifting it to my nose and inhaling a faint floral scent that reminded me of Aunt Gertrude's perfume with none of the sweat or breasts. "I think we wash ourselves with this stuff."

I smeared the stuff into my armpits. It dissolved into a foamy lather. I scrubbed it clean, then dispensed more and washed the rest of my body. Finished, I caught some water in cupped hands and remembered holding Martian soil on my fifth birthday. *Pure water and healthy bodies. An MSF ship must have rescued us and brought us to Mars.*

"But that language. And that thing," Eva said when I told her. "Did your data cards mention any of this?"

"Earthers speak many languages," I replied. "We must be on Mars, just not at Chryse Planitia. Maybe each Pleasure Colony is different."

"Does any of this look familiar?"

"No," I admitted as Ya'ris reentered. He pressed buttons on the shower panels. The water stopped, replaced by jets of warm air. Eva and I dried off and donned more fresh garments. "The stuff we washed ourselves with reminded me of Aunt Gertrude's cosmetics."

"Cosmetics?"

"Paint and scents designed to increase beauty."

"Increase beauty," she repeated. "Do you think I need cosmetics?"

I laughed as we emerged from the showers. "If painting yourself helps you forget you're my bratty little sister, then don't let me stop you."

She said nothing as she turned away, but I spied the corner of a smile. Ya'ris led us into a corridor with grated metal decking and ribbed bulkheads. Pipes and conduits obscured the overhead. Recessed lamps illuminated the corridor. Uniformed humans and aliens of several

species passed us. *Aliens? Or robots?* They greeted our escort and openly stared at Eva and me. *I would too, were I in their position.* We entered an octagonal compartment large enough for perhaps six people. Two doors slid closed behind us. Ya'ris tapped a panel. The compartment began moving alternately horizontally and upward. The doors opened at the end of a particularly long upward stretch.

"Here we are," I said. "Aunt Gertrude will explain everything."

"I doubt that," Eva replied. We stood in a darkened oval compartment. A delicious aroma lured our attention to a table and two chairs. This table held covered dishes and ordinary enough utensils. Ya'ris lifted the covers. There was soft brown bread, bright green leaves wrapped around chunks of meat, mixed vegetables, what looked like rice, and glasses of juice. Our stomachs growled. Ya'ris pointed at the chairs, then took his leave as Eva and I sat and tucked in. I bit into a leaf. It was cool and spicy. The tender meat inside tasted of smoke. I nearly wept for joy. *I don't remember the food being this good in the Pleasure Colonies—and Rutherford walks with a limp because of some dull strawberries! I wish he could taste this.*

"I thought Vandenburg food was delicious!" Eva refilled our plates. "David, we just woke up on Mars and we're already healed, bathed, and eating the best meal of our lives. I'm certainly in no rush to return to Omapeka. You?"

"Yes," I said. "Everyone in Omapeka deserves this. I just need to gather knowledge and supplies, then head back. I wish I hadn't wasted so much time worrying about Father... and I also wish I'd asked Rutherford to help me with the strawberries from the start."

Sated, we pushed our plates away and took in our surroundings. One end of the compartment had full-length viewports. I meandered over, expecting to see biodomes filled with glass cylinders and parks but gasped upon seeing that the compartment we occupied was in a dorsal fin protruding above an egg-shaped hull. This hull tapered to a neck that led to a boxy aft hull that was adorned with an insignia of five maroon rectangles with rounded corners, one large and four small, on a white background. Beyond lay countless stars shining with cold, unflinching light. "We're on a ship... with artificial gravity! The MSF insignia was a solar system with Mars as the largest planet. Maybe they changed it?"

“You studied celestial navigation,” Eva said as she came up next to me. “Where are we?”

My breath quickened until my skin prickled as I searched in vain for even one familiar constellation. I started to speak but was interrupted by a white flash. I blinked. My jaw fell open. The stars were different. One appeared about the size of a pea and lay in our path. “My best guess is we hit something flying around the sun. The *Lucky Lynn* barely held together, and this ship, whoever’s it is, picked us up and started jumping across space. I don’t think we’re anywhere near Mars.”

“What?!” Eva’s eyes were wide. “Then where are we?”

The sheer impossibility of our situation hovered just outside my thoughts, as if my mind refused to touch it for fear of going mad. I felt a little dizzy and rested a tingling arm on a bulkhead as I stared at the utterly unfamiliar starscape. “I have no idea.”

“David, I will hold you face down in a full hydrator pan until the bubbles stop coming up if you’re joking about this!”

I closed my eyes and concentrated on slowing my breathing. It took a while for my symptoms to ease and another moment or two before I could speak. “I wish I was joking, Eva, but I truly have no idea where we are or what happened.”

Eva drifted toward the viewports. “I should be scared, but I’m not. David, this could be the biggest opportunity ever.”

“That may be, but what if we can’t go back?”

“If we can’t go back,” Eva said as a smile spread across her face, “then we’re free!”

“What makes you so sure?”

Eva gestured at the table and dishes. “I don’t see how having a belly full of the best meal I’ve ever eaten, clean clothes, a healthy body, and almost unrestricted run of this ship makes me a prisoner.”

“Maybe you aren’t, but I feel like one,” I muttered.

“No.” Eva’s tone hardened. “Nobody in Omapeka asked you for anything, least of all me. I’m free of hydrators, and you’re free to drop your savior act and enjoy life.”

“Savior act? That hurts, Eva. I’m trying to make a difference!”

“You made a difference by never forgetting to remind us how awful things are, you arrogant fertcan.”

“You’d understand if you remembered Mars.” I turned away from the view and massaged my temples. “Lynn, Mother, Rutherford, and everyone else deserves what we have. I also promised to start a farm with Lynn, even if she did predict that I wouldn’t want to return.”

“Life is better for everyone because Mother and Father have extra food and water for Lynn and Rutherford with us gone.” She rested her hand on my arm. Her voice softened. “David, do you want to start a farm with Lynn because you love her or because you want to spite Father? Does she love you, or are you the only eligible bachelor in Omapeka?”

“Of course we love each other!” I shot back a little too quickly. Eva said nothing but gave me a long questioning look before turning her attention to Ya’ris as he joined us at the viewport. I waved at the view. “Where are we? What is this ship? How can we jump across space?”

He pointed down at the deck. “Xing au *Quirl*.”

I shook my head. “Is *Quirl* your word for spaceship or are we on a spaceship named *Quirl*?”

Ya’ris seemed to understand because he powered on a device with a screen and stylus he carried in one hand. Eva and I watched as he drew several crude spaceships, pointed at each of them silently, and then said “*Quirl*” as he tapped the last one. He then pointed at the large star in our path, drew an image of four planets orbiting a star, and pointed at the second one. “Sarcha.”

I nodded. “So, we are on the good ship *Quirl* on our way to a planet called Sarcha located somewhere very far from a home we may never see again.”

Eva scoffed. “Don’t tell me you’re homesick.”

“Maybe I am.” I stared out into space. *Were we rescued? Kidnapped? Both?* “Maybe, no matter what happens, I’ll always be an Omapeka dirt farmer.”

“That makes one of us,” Eva said emphatically. “Suffer all you want, David. Something tells me I’m finally about to start living!”

“You do that,” I whispered as I searched the sky once again for anything familiar.

CHAPTER THREE

Sarcha

Eva and I occupied a cabin with two bunks, a washroom, and a sitting area beneath a viewport.

“We are on a strange ship approaching a strange planet, so why does this feel so familiar?” I sat on my bunk and bounced up and down. “The furniture, clothing, even the food and utensils would look perfectly at home on both Mars and pre-Destruction Earth. I mean, shouldn’t this be... I don’t know, different somehow?”

“Humans are humans,” Eva replied with a yawn. “I guess we all like the same things on some level. Anyway, I’m going to bed. Good night.”

We slept and I dreamed of making love with the woman I met in Sickbay—a welcome break from my normal nightmare. Ya’ris toured us around the ship after we awoke, starting from the bridge, and seemed to enjoy the break from his routine. The star I noticed yesterday was visible through the viewport and about the size of a grape.

A holographic projector in the center of the bridge showed the star and four planets as red spheres. A yellow line arced into the system from beyond the ecliptic. This line was solid from the edge of the display to a growing blue dot before continuing to the second planet as dashes. Green dots also appeared. They flashed occasionally and blocks of data in the same foreign language appeared next to each one for several seconds.

Eva leaned in and pointed at the second planet. “Is this the planet Ya’ris drew for us? Sarcha, I think he called it?”

“Sarcha,” a feminine voice said. The woman from Sickbay sat in an oversized chair on a dais at the rear of the bridge and pointed toward the holo. *She’s the Commanding Officer.* I said nothing as I recalled my last thoughts before perihelion on the *Lucky Lynn*.

We visited Sickbay next. A crew member of Ya’ris’s race lay on a bunk with a human standing over him.

“What’s wrong with him?” Eva stared at both the tech and the holographic displays.

Ya’ris gestured towards the exit, but Eva was still engrossed in examining the medical displays.

“I want to stay and watch,” she said when I tapped her arm. “Don’t you want to know how they healed us?”

“I want to learn about this ship,” I answered. “I’ll find you later.”

I left Eva firing questions at the medical personnel and peering at displays and holograms while they tried to shoo her away with only partial success. Chuckling, I followed my alien escort to a compartment with a row of lockers and benches opposite a viewport that looked into a much larger compartment with views of deep space where I expected fore and aft bulkheads. *What keeps the atmosphere from rushing out into space?*

Ya’ris pointed to a craft approaching the aft opening. It seemed to shimmer as it passed through the hangar bay opening. A low rumble and falling engine whine rolled through the bay as the craft touched down and stopped. This machine was deathly beautiful: a bubble cockpit protruded from a streamlined chassis slung between two conical tubes housing the engines and barrel-like protrusions. Four tail fins held hardpoints for attaching ordnance. An orange stripe ran down the side of the fuselage, and I also saw the same five-rectangle insignia.

“Yutu,” Ya’ris said, pointing.

A lanky human male climbed out and removed his helmet to reveal aquamarine hair. He wore a teal flight suit with rigid gray panels on his torso and limbs. The insignia of the five rectangles adorned his right shoulder, as did several patches and devices. The pilot strode in our direction. A hatch opened and he entered, pausing as he saw us. He nodded and said something to Ya’ris.

“Angmar Faranji,” Ya’ris indicated the pilot, then pointed at me. “David.”

Faranji leaned against a bulkhead and folded his arms, his lips curled into something resembling mild annoyance at my presence as he looked me up and down. He and Ya’ris

conversed while my attention returned to the Yutu. *When will I get this opportunity again?* I cleared my throat to get their attention. I pointed at myself and then the Yutu with a questioning look. Faranji shook his head. Ya'ris intervened. An argument ensued before Faranji frowned at me and jerked his thumb toward the Yutu. I whooped. "Thank you!"

I soon clambered up a ladder extending from the Yutu's left tube. My five-layer flight suit was heavy and hot. Mist fogged my sealed helmet visor. Faranji nodded to the forward chair. I lowered myself into the seat and caught my breath as he fastened harnesses and umbilicals. Cool air began flowing through my suit. It felt wonderful. He climbed into the seat behind mine. My pulse and breathing quickened with anticipation as he ran down his checklists and closed the canopy. I heard a whoosh followed by the Yutu thrumming as its engines spooled up with rising whines. I then heard communications in my headset just before acceleration pressed me into my seat as we shot into space. Blasting off from Vandenburg aboard the *Lucky Lynn* had been agony. This was exhilaration.

I laughed and cheered as Faranji rolled into a hard turn, my suit constricting around my legs and arms as G-forces built up. Faranji reversed direction and I felt like I was tumbling forward for a moment before G-forces again shoved me into my seat. *Quirl* was nowhere to be seen. Faranji tapped my shoulder and pointed at the controls. My hand grasped the yoke and moved it left and right. The Yutu rocked in response. I pulled back. Stars became white streaks as we went into a tight loop. I kicked a foot pedal. We tumbled, G-forces pinning me against my harness. I centered the controls, and we returned to straight flight.

The yoke waggled as Faranji resumed control. He pitched up and banked. A holographic display illuminated and *Quirl* appeared as a yellow outline. A red dot streaked towards us. I looked up just in time to see another Yutu flash past and roll in behind us. Faranji threw our fighter on its side as two lines of glowing pink projectiles tore through the space we had just occupied. I panicked. *Are we under attack?* Then I realized they were treating me to a mock dogfight. I lifted off my seat into my harnesses as Faranji slammed on the speed brakes. Our opponent shot past, blue fire spewing from his engine nozzles. My seat hit my back as Faranji gave chase. The game was on. Both Yutus maneuvered violently as their pilots sought advantage and bragging rights. "Come on, turn... turn. Got him. Fire!"

Faranji fired both cannons. The fighter shuddered with each report like lightning jabs to my solar plexus. Two pink lines marched across the void and into our opponent. I tensed, half-expecting an explosion or damage, but our defeated opponent merely rocked his wings and continued as Faranji executed a slow victory roll. We changed course. *Quirl* hove into view, her brightly lit hangars plainly visible on either side of her aft hull. My first Yutu flight ended far too soon as we returned to *Quirl*. Faranji disconnected me from the fighter. I climbed down to the deck. Ya'ris waited in the ready room. My body tingled and I couldn't stop grinning. I changed back into regular clothes and pointed at the Yutu. "Aunt Getrude was right about one thing: I don't know how, but I'm going to be a fighter pilot someday."

Ya'ris and Faranji didn't understand my words, but caught my meaning. Faranji laughed and walked to his locker to remove his flight suit. Ya'ris pointed at me, made a motion as though moving a yoke, then pointed at a Yutu. I nodded. He laughed as well and placed a hand on my shoulder as he guided me from the ready room. I glanced back at Faranji as we exited. He was still smirking.

Ya'ris led me up and forward to a compartment measuring roughly five by ten meters. A horizontal bar about three meters off the deck divided the space.

"You're just in time for the game," Eva said when she saw me.

"Game?" No one else was in the compartment. "Where are the other players?"

Six humans and two aliens entered as if on cue, including the captain. She walked over to us, pointed at herself, and smiled. "Aphrodisia Numanami."

Sounds like 'aphrodisiac,' which is an Earth word. How did humans come to be here? Did they bring language to or from Earth, or is this just a coincidence? Either way, she is very easy on the eyes.

I stuck out a hand. "David Johnson."

Aphrodisia shook my hand, then waved toward the court where teams of five players were taking sides. They all nodded or waved in greeting as I took my position. The goal was simple: keep the ball aloft while passing it over the bar. A team scored when the opposing team dropped the ball. I soon learned where Aphrodisia got her leg muscles. At one point, the ball sailed over the bar in a low arc. No one else was close enough.

“I’ve got it!” I lunged, throwing my arms out and batting the ball up as I crashed into the deck, rolled, and used my momentum to propel myself back upright. My teammates cheered. I closed my eyes, savoring the moment. *Not bad for an Omapeka boy!* My team lost, as evidenced by our opponents’ cheers. Aphrodisia grinned and patted my shoulder as both teams dispersed. I stared after her until Eva snapped her fingers and prodded me toward the exit. We returned to our cabin. She disappeared into the washroom and emerged a few minutes later. Steam rose from her robed body as she walked to me and held her arm next to mine.

“No scars, no dryness, no discoloration, just healthy skin. These people restored us on a cellular level. I watched them treat that crew member and I think I’ve decided to do something medical someday. Imagine everyone back home looking like this!”

“It’s almost as if you want to make a difference.”

“Very funny.” She opened a cabinet and examined its contents before selecting a dress and pulling it over her head. “I’m going to start by taking care of myself. I’ll figure out the rest when I’m ready.”

Later, Ya’ris came to fetch us. We followed him to a hatchway just aft of the bridge and stepped into a cabin with a bed beneath an oval viewport before us and a galley with a table and four chairs to our left. It smelled delicious. The cabin décor featured dark earthen tones and spotlights highlighting abstract metal sculptures hanging on the bulkheads. Ya’ris motioned us towards the chairs. I began sitting, but his sharp glance drew me upright. We stood behind our chairs, Ya’ris at attention.

Aphrodisia entered, a vision in a gown that seemed made of fine fur. She wore iridescent earrings. She wore red paint on her lips. Her smile was at once warm and commanding. Ya’ris

saluted. She nodded and sat down as Ya'ris gestured for us to sit as well. *Aphrodisia is the first healthy woman I've seen as an adult, and—well—I can't help what I can't help.*

Stewards entered and served multiple courses paired with bottles of a tannic fruity beverage that gave me a warm glow and left me feeling giddy. Chilled whites accompanied lighter dishes, while heartier dishes came with room-temperature reds. I don't remember what we ate, but I never forgot our hostess who carried herself with graceful self-assuredness and saw to it that no one at her table went hungry or ran low on drink.

After dinner, we sat on floor cushions around a low table sipping a hot, sweet liquid. Ya'ris handed me his tablet and stylus. I drew our solar system down to Earth's continental outlines and the red spot on Jupiter. Aphrodisia activated a holograph showing a galaxy resembling Andromeda. A planet appeared with some information next to it and then shrank to an orange dot somewhere in the galaxy. More planets followed in rapid succession and the map quickly came alive with orange dots.

"How many inhabited worlds are there?" I pointed at the planets and made counting motions on my fingers. Ya'ris drew five boxes in a horizontal line. He pointed at the rightmost one with one finger and then at the one to the left with ten fingers.

"Base ten," I said, nodding. Ya'ris drew four dots in the ten-thousand box and two in the one-thousand box. "Look at this map, Eva. We're in a different galaxy with forty-two thousand inhabited planets."

"How does a simple trip to Mars lead to another galaxy?"

"If the *Lucky Lynn's* life support systems failed, then who knows? We may have been frozen for millions of years," I said.

"You say that awfully calmly," Eva said.

"Do I?" I shrugged. "Maybe some mental circuit tripped to keep me from thinking about this too much. And you?"

Eva thought a moment before replying. “I’m healthy, well fed, not on Earth, and happier than I’ve ever been. What more can I want? Aside from Aphrodisia, I mean.”

“All I can think about is how to get to Mars and get whatever I need to start fixing Earth.”

Aphrodisia seemed to understand. That comforted me. Still, communication remained slow and difficult. Aphrodisia and Ya’ris looked at each other. “Quardir.”

I sat upright. “Who or what is a Quardir?”

Something caught my eye. I looked at the tablet. “What is this blank area that takes up almost a third of the Galaxy?”

“Dimenoan,” Ya’ris said.

That word meant nothing to me. But it sounded ominous.

Ya’ris hurried us to the fin compartment viewports as soon as we awoke the following morning. *Quirl* had made port. We watched as the ship eased into one of many octagonal cages extending from the equator of a spherical space station. Hundreds of crafts of all sizes plied the skies. I noticed that the military vessels shared the same general layout of a forward hull with dorsal fin, neck, and aft hull.

“Forget the ships,” Eva said when I pointed this out. “Look at this planet! Have you ever seen anything like it?”

“The continents are all wrong, but it looks like pre-Destruction Earth,” I said as we gazed down at deep blue oceans, green and brown continents, and bands of white clouds. Our orbit crossed the terminator into night and the planet came alive with twinkling city lights and flashes of lightning. “I keep thinking I should feel different somehow.”

“I’m just happy we won’t be fixing hydrators tomorrow,” Eva retorted.

“Yes, but my real work is just beginning, you know?”

“No, but I do know that even the cleanest, shiniest fertcan is still a fertcan.”

Metal tendrils steadied *Quirl* in her berth. Clanks then reverberated through the hull as clamps swung out to finish securing the ship. Gangways extended from the docking bay. We heard more clanks and hums as hatches opened. Pods and spacesuited dockworkers swarmed about and gantries began loading and off-loading cargo.

“There’s the *Lucky Lynn*,” Eva said, pointing. “What a mess!”

“What an understatement.” Her engine spaces looked like a bomb had detonated. Flaps of metal and cabling flailed in the void as the gantry winched it up and into the station. I sank to my knees as I witnessed just how narrowly we avoided death. “The cabin seems intact. We must have hit a micrometeoroid and drifted, but for how long?”

“Eva? David?”

Aphrodisia stood in the hatchway beckoning to us. We followed her down the lift and along a corridor to a compartment where a round hatch opened to one of the gangways leading to the station. Ya’ris and Faranji were here. Faranji managed a sincere-looking smile. Ya’ris embraced Eva and turned to me. I shook his hand.

“David,” he said with a bow.

“Yanexu Rih’Sutekh,” I replied, returning the bow. “I won’t forget you.”

We followed Aphrodisia to the space station and into a compartment that was empty except for a waiting robot. It resembled a muscular human male just over two meters in height. Its oval face held two glowing blue eyes. White and off-white panels punctuated its brushed metal exoskeleton.

“David and Eva Johnson,” it said in a natural male-sounding voice. “I am Quardir. Welcome to Sarcha, capital planet of the Second Federation of Worlds.”

“You speak English?” Eva replied.

“*Quirl’s* engineers extracted and forwarded language data from your ship and storage devices. I expect dockside personnel will complete their analysis today.”

“Do you know where Earth is?” Eva asked. “What’s going to happen to us?”

“I know nothing of Earth’s location. You are the only recorded Wanderers since before the First Federation of Worlds. I am taking you to meet with both the High Commission and Fleet Supreme Command of the Second Federation of Worlds. Follow me.”

My data cards mention an ancient Earther named Confucius who defined ‘crisis’ as a combination of danger and opportunity. The danger is evident, but what opportunities lie ahead?

“Wait.” I looked at Aphrodisia. “Quardir, can you translate for me?”

“With pleasure.”

“Thank you for saving our lives,” I said to her. “I can never repay you.”

“The Fleet pays me.” She winked. “I’m honored to know you, David.”

“Will I ever see you again?”

“My duties take me across the galaxy and back, but who knows? Our paths may cross again.” *Is she blushing?* She gave me a brief hug, then about-faced and vanished down the gangway. I watched her go, then followed Quardir and Eva.

We passed through a hatch into a bustling area that looked like a street with shops, restaurants, and plants. I did my best not to stare at the human women we passed.

“I know exactly how you feel. I felt the same way the moment I saw Aphrodisia,” Eva said with a wink when I mentioned this to her. “Don’t get me wrong, the men aren’t bad looking, but the women! I never knew they could be so...”

Her voice trailed off. We exchanged grins. Then she waved at the scene in front of us. “David, does any of this look familiar to you?”

“This reminds me of a Pleasure Colony,” I said. The buildings were muted shades of red, yellow, and blue. The plants were green, some with bright patterned flowers. I walked across some grass and scooped a handful of soil at the foot of a tree. It was damp and rich and smelled alive. Moisture soaked through the knees of my pants. I didn’t care. I rose and touched the tree. The bark was smooth and cracked. I looked up and around. Buildings obscured bulkheads from view. The ersatz sky was blue and sprinkled with clouds. A breeze carried smells of food and the muted din of hundreds of conversations punctuated by occasional laughter. “It’s similar in so many ways—the colors, the plants, the liveliness—but it also seems—better. Cleaner. Realer, if that makes any sense at all.”

“If we lived like this on Mars, then whose bright idea was it to leave?” Eva said.

Because our parents insisted on having you. Father kept that from me out of shame, and I’m keeping it from you so you don’t feel unwanted. My shoulder hit something. I looked at a being with green skin, four eyes, and tentacles for arms. It returned my stare, the antennae on its head twitching. I muttered an apology and hurried off.

“The galaxy hosts fourteen Sentient races,” Quardir said when I asked. “Twelve are native. Humans and Mygareans, including Ya’ris, descended from the Wanderers who left the home world they call Raia millennia ago.”

We entered a hangar bay filled with dozens of ships. Enthralled, I meandered through the maze of spacecraft. Quardir found me peering into an engine nozzle and guided me to a four-seat shuttle.

What a world unfolded through the wrap-around viewport as we descended! Mountains became foothills and fields, some with crops and pastures. We passed over settlements and roads.

“This looks almost exactly like pre-Destruction Earth down to the plants and animals,” I whispered. “How did Earth species get here and why does this place feel so... homey?”

“If Raia exists, then transplanting specimens may explain the similarities you describe and that your records corroborate,” Quardir replied. “Their.”

Eva frowned. “Our home world is called Earth, and only humans live there.”

“Be that as it may, legend holds that one or more groups left Raia never to return. Those who left—the ancestors of all humans and Mygareans in this galaxy—became the Wanderers. Those who remained became Those Left Behind. These groups lost contact with each other for some reason. The first Wanderers spoke of Those Left Behind in the form of a prophecy foretelling their eventual reunion.”

If true, this prophecy explains the glaring similarities between this place, pre-Destruction Earth, and the Pleasure Colonies. Eva’s remark about humans being humans explains why being here feels so familiar. Of course humans would seek to recreate the place they came from—and from the looks of things, they succeeded!

“Eva and I are Those Left Behind because humans evolved on Earth,” I said.

“We were until someone insisted on wandering,” Eva said with a laugh.

“What if the prophecy’s real?” I asked. “Is it supposed to bring peace? War? Salvation?”

“Unknown, because all we know is the prophecy foretells reunion without describing what comes next,” Quardir said. “Perhaps it was just longing made sacred. A way of honoring what was lost, wondering after a long-lost friend, or yearning to restore a broken connection.”

“It’s Camelot,” I said, thinking of one of my data cards. “It’s about heritage and a dream of a home that probably never existed.”

Quardir paused. “Ah, but it does exist, or you would not be here. This prophecy was little more than a bedtime story until *Quirl* found you. I will not speculate about the repercussions of your arrival, but it has not gone unnoticed, for better or for ill.”

“This bedtime story will keep me awake until I figure out how to make it real and honor my promise to Lynn. Omapeka deserves better. So do all Earthers.”

Eva scoffed. “Your promise never anticipated ending up in a different galaxy, David. I think you can let that go.”

“Doesn’t matter. My word is my bond.”

“You’ll never be happy, will you?”

The shuttle shuddered as we passed through clouds. Rain streaked across the viewport. Then we broke free into a clear sky as we approached one of six runways in an immense complex that looked like an Earth airport. We touched down and stopped before a stone building with angled walls like the base of a pyramid and the insignia of the five rectangles etched above a doorway. We disembarked and blinked in the sunlight. I looked at the uniformed Sentients walking or marching to and fro. Lines of Yutus and other ships waited on the rain-slickened tarmac. The still air conveyed the sounds of engines and a faint smell of hot metal.

Eva’s eyes met mine as we followed our robot guide through the garrison and across a bridge built of gossamer metal fibers to a bilevel train station. The upper level held a concourse with holographic displays and announcements. Quardir paused for a fraction of a second before leading us down a ramp to the lower level. Sheets of water cascaded from the roof into slots in the floor between platforms, cooling the air and providing a refreshing backdrop of white noise. Red holograms along one platform edge flashed pictographic warnings that even I understood. A rising hum filled the air as the train arrived, an articulated white cylinder with a pointed nose.

“This really could be pre-Destruction Earth or a Mars Pleasure Colony if I didn’t know better,” I said as we boarded and sat facing Quardir. “It’s as if someone pieced together fragments of home with seams that don’t quite fit together.” The train began moving. Ventilation and conversations were the only noises. The multiple species—sorry, races—occupying the train were the only thing betraying that Eva and I were far from home. *Maybe the familiarity of this place is why I’m so calm. Or maybe I’m so overwhelmed that I’ve come full circle.*

“Xenon City is the capital of the Second Federation of Worlds, which includes twenty-one thousand worlds,” Quardir was saying. “We believe the Dimenoan Empire spans eleven thousand worlds, and the Independent Sector makes up the remaining ten thousand.”

Dimenoan Empire. I've heard that before. A third of the galaxy, completely dark, as though dead.

Settlements were clumps of domes and other buildings. Sentients went about their business just as people did on Earth. The quantity and quality of crops astonished me, as did the pastures with fat, healthy animals. Trees, bushes, flowers, animals, and Sentients blurred into a tableau that was at once ordinary and overwhelming. The vibrant colors overwhelmed my eyes, which were used to seeing desolation.

Then we crested a pass and saw Xenon City for the first time. Crystalline spires rose in the distance surrounded by clusters of shorter towers. Buildings, roads, Sentients, and vehicles passed beneath the elevated tracks and spread out beneath trees that hid much of the city from aerial view. Hills covered with trees, parks, and pools jutted above the woods in places. I dismissed them as natural terrain before noticing their geometric precision. I peered more closely and saw windows gleaming behind the greenery. I also glimpsed elevated trackways connecting many buildings.

“My whole body is prickling,” Eva said. She flexed her fingers as though trying to shake off the sensation.

“Slow your breathing and it will pass,” Quardir replied as he rose. “Follow me.”

We debarked and followed Quardir to a different platform where we boarded a private pod that followed trackways above, between, and through buildings. Trackways branched off and joined ours, giving me the impression that one could ride pods between any two points in town. Buildings grew taller as we approached the city center. The tallest were clad in glass and brushed metals and rivaled the skyscrapers of Earth's heyday in height and grandeur, if I could believe my data cards.

Our pod stopped at a mezzanine between two splayed buildings that joined at the top like a giant letter A. Trees, shrubs, and ivy grew from planters set in the walls.

“Quardir, did Mygareans bring humans here? Did they come the way we did? Did the humans come willingly?”

“Excellent questions,” the robot replied as it blinked one eye off and back on. “Earth and the Mygarean home world may exist forgotten in what became the Dimenoan Empire, but evidence suggests both races emigrated from beyond this galaxy. Take your own arrival, for example. I cannot answer your consent question, but want to believe coercion was not involved.”

“What’s the Dimenoan Empire?”

“I’ll explain more when the time comes. Meanwhile, please follow me.”

We crossed a bridge to a lobby with walls sheathed in golden metal and took an elevator to the twenty-fifth floor if I accurately counted the illuminated symbols above the doors. Quardir led us down a corridor to one of the dark brown doors and motioned for me to press a fingertip against a sensor. I complied and the door slid open.

“Clean rain and no sheet metal in sight,” Eva said as we explored a room with floor-to-ceiling windows leading to a balcony overlooking the city and mountains. The furnishings reminded me of Mars. The plants and trees growing from the building’s exterior walls gave me the impression of being in the middle of a forest instead of at the beating heart of a galactic civilization. Cawing blue birds darted between branches. I opened the balcony door and smelled clean mountain air, and fresh living dirt. The warm afternoon breeze carried the sounds of birds, animals, and urban living.

“I will show you the appliances before departing for the evening,” Quardir said. He was as good as his word because Eva and I soon felt confident we could prepare food and clean ourselves. Finished, he turned to leave.

Eva stopped him. “What will happen to us, Quardir?”

Quardir paused in the doorway. “I don’t know, but I doubt you need to worry.”

A while later, I wandered out onto the balcony and joined Eva leaning against the railing as she watched the sun setting on this strangely familiar world. Lights came on as reds and oranges faded to blues and blacks, revealing the city's true expanse. She held a tendril of ivy and ran her fingers over the leaves and stems. "Have you seen anything like this?"

"It's just like Mars," I replied as it occurred to me that the colored holograms shining in front of the buildings gave Xenon City a festive appearance. *Why not celebrate this place?* "I keep thinking I should feel different somehow, but all I feel is..."

"Home?" Eva spread her arms and twirled around. "This is beautiful. Thank you for bringing me here!"

"Wait until we know what this Second Federation wants with us."

"I don't think people who take such good care of their planet will hurt us, David."

I laughed. "Where was this wisdom on Earth?"

"It's always been there, you fertcan." Eva draped her arms around me. "Maybe you've finally pulled the condenser wrench far enough out of your ass to see it. So, again, thank you."

"You're welcome," I replied as Eva excused herself to go to the bathroom.

"David? David, help. I'm stuck in here! How do I open this door?"

"Push the red button twice."

"Now there's hot water shooting out of the wall."

I burst out laughing. "No, no. The other red button!"