

## Chapter One

### *The Trans-Tibetan Highway, AD 2259*

The tower glinted against the sky. Zeke blinked in the fierce sunlight and searched for a glimpse of the top. But there was no top. The building zoomed up forever.

“I told you already, bro,” snapped the fat geeky boy in the next seat. “The Televator’s too high. Pack a telescope next time.”

He was right, but Zeke needed a distraction from his fears. Perhaps the smell would do it. He breathed in the ripe air and grimaced. After two days of travelling the hover-bus was beginning to remind him of a zoo. The fat boy wrinkled his nose.

“Stinks worse than a gorilla’s butt in here.”

Zeke tensed up. Had the stranger been reading his thoughts? Some of them could, he knew that. If his lies were discovered now, six months of hopes and planning would be ruined. He focused on the grey Tibetan plateau, but that was as endlessly flat as their destination was high. The painful memory of Heathrow’s Terminal Twenty bounced back into his head.

“You’re going to be the best Star Mariner ever,” his mum said, biting back tears. She didn’t want him to go, naturally, but she had no say in the matter. Every child who passed the Exam, everyone onboard the bus, became government property.

She hugged him and walked away, fading quickly into the crowds. She didn’t know. Nobody knew. Zeke had faked it through the Exam, the interview and half way across the world. Now the last hurdle waited for him, the Televator, brooding on the horizon like a hangman’s scaffold.

They were nearing another roadside restaurant. The driver steered the gleaming bus off the road and into the car park.

“Oh great,” the nerd groaned. “More yak burgers, more yak shakes! Any more Tibetan cooking and I’ll morph into a yak!”

“Newsflash, yak-boy, you already have!” called a pimply boy from the front.

The others all laughed. The escort, a skinny sour-faced man, threw them a stern look.

“Quieten down folks,” he said. “Okay, lunch. Then everyone back on the vehicle in thirty minutes. We’ve got an interplanetary travel schedule to stick to.”



**A** cold Himalayan draught whistled through the deserted restaurant. As the last stop before the Televator, the place had been decorated in a space theme. Flimsy polystyrene rockets dangled from the ceiling. Tatty posters revelled in long ago glories of space exploration. Astronauts planted flags on the lunar surface, constructed space stations and lifted up the colossal Televator.

Zeke bought a Full Moon Pizza with Salami Craters and scanned for an empty chair. Most of the others were sat by the window, chattering like monkeys. A few looked in his direction but he quickly turned away. They seemed a smug lot, with their luxury ski-suits and designer boots. His cheeks burned as he glanced down at his second-hand coat. *No doubt they all had successful fathers*, he thought enviously. Zeke longed for a dad. An unsuccessful one would do just fine.

He spied the geek alone in a corner. The boy was gulping down Saturn Rings, really onions rings, and playing with a Laserlight Mini-Deluxe. The small console had transformed the tabletop into a holographic battlefield. Tiny glowing commandoes hunted among the dirty plates for a disgustingly ugly alien. Zeke recognised the holo-game as *Blood Guzzler III*, not due in the stores until summer. This geek was one very rich kid.

“Hey, I love that game,” Zeke said in his coolest voice.

The boy said nothing, scowling intensely at his miniature figures.

Zeke persevered, flicking the nearest foam rocket. “These models are, um, neat.”

“Neat! Is that a way for saying cheap, tacky garbage where you come from?”

“I guess so,” he said quickly. “My name’s Zeke Hailey, from—”

“London. Your accent’s a giveaway.”

“Where are you—?”

“Lakeville, outside Toronto.”

“Sorry, never heard of it,” Zeke confessed, taking the adjacent seat.

“No sweat, bro. It’s in the dictionary under dead-end. A burger joint, a pizza place and you’re done.”

An awkward pause filled the air as they weighed each other up. The fat boy resembled a frog in a blond wig. His hair was long and greasy, his eyes too far apart, and his nose flat.

Zeke blushed as the nerd returned the stare. He awkwardly combed his fingers through his unruly blue hair.

“Oh, my hair?” he added with a half-hearted laugh. “Mum always says a cartridge of nano-dye fell on my head as a baby. Turned me bluer than a parrot!”

The geek didn’t return the laugh. Instead he searched deeper, into Zeke’s dark burning eyes and crooked smile, as if something was missing. Zeke shifted uncomfortably on the hard seat. He wondered if the boy could sense his secret.

At that moment the alien leapt out from behind a pepper pot and devoured a shrieking hologram soldier. The frog-boy stretched out his hand.

“Scuff Barnum.”

They shook manfully.

“So what was your score?” Scuff asked, an inevitable question. It was thanks to the ESP exam that they were going to Mars. The letters stood for ‘extrasensory perception’ and every fifteen year old on the planet sat the exam. And every fifteen year old who passed was onboard the rather small coach.

Zeke blushed. For all his boldness Zeke was a lousy liar.

“D-Doesn’t matter. H-How about you?” he stammered.

“I’m not telling if you won’t,” Scuff barked. He shoved back the table and moved away.



**D**usk was falling as they neared the Televator. The unending pillar caught the sunset in a blaze of orange and purple. Zeke strained his eyes, trying again to catch the vanishing point. He marvelled at its height.

“How come it doesn’t collapse?” he asked Scuff, who was still sulking beside him.

The geek glared and said nothing. Zeke turned his attention to the plasma screen in the back of the next seat. He tapped in his question and text appeared.

*Carbon nano-tubes, the strongest and stiffest material on Earth, are welded together molecule by molecule creating a strength greater than diamonds—*

“Any time now!” the escort proclaimed, distracting Zeke from the screen.

A hush filled the coach as the Televator erupted into light. A million photon lamps raced up, into the twilight, glittering like a cosmic Christmas tree.

The sobbing of a little girl broke the silence. Zeke got up and stumbled through the darkness towards the sound. It was one of the Chinese students, a tiny girl with a short bob of hair and a face as round as the Moon.

He sat down beside her.

“They say space travel is as safe as crossing the road,” he said, taking her hand.

“Supposing we die up there? My daddy told me there’s no air on Mars,” she replied in perfect English.

“No, no, that was in the past. There’s plenty of air now, at least where we’re going.”

The girl pointed to a battered old teddy bear beside her.

“Mr Raffles is homesick.”

“Aren’t we all? I keep thinking about my mum.”

The girl’s tearful expression gave way to a puzzled frown.

“What about your daddy?”

Zeke gritted his teeth. She’d hit a raw nerve. He was cheating his way into the greatest school in the Solar System for the gravest of reasons.

“My dad’s missing.”

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