

# Chapter One

## *The Cranny Cafeteria, The Ophir Chasma School for Psychic Endeavour, Mars*

**S**cuff gazed at the birthday cake. Nothing happened.

“Rats! Your turn,” he said, pushing it across the table to Zeke.

“Easy as a piece of, um, cake,” Zeke replied. He pushed back his blue hair and stared at the pink-frosted sponge. The candles remained spectacularly unlit.

“It’s okay, really,” Pin-mei said.

Zeke turned towards the window. The school’s cafeteria was built into a crack in the cliff, high above Mariners Valley. The view was panoramic. Great canyon walls tumbled down from the sunset and into the shadow.

“Did you bring a fusion lighter?” Scuff asked.

Zeke didn’t answer. He was staring at the land far below. A shape swirled across the bare valley. A dust devil, a small whirlwind of sand. They were a common enough phenomena on Mars. Yet Zeke’s skin crawled. This devil formed the shape of a man.

“Scuff to Planet Zeke, are you reading me?” Scuff said loudly.

“What?” Zeke replied.

He looked again. The dust devil was gone.

“A lighter? For the cake,” Scuff said.

Zeke shook his head.

“Never send a boy to do a girl’s work,” came a voice. It was Trixie Cutter, the school bully, sitting nearby with a couple of her cronies. They were hunched over a round of Moonshakes, plotting her next black market scam.

Trixie straightened her perfect blond ponytail, dabbed more blusher on her scarlet cheeks, and winked.

Twelve birthday candles burst into flames.

Zeke and Trixie's eyes met. She arched an imperious eyebrow, as if to say, 'beat that,' and returned to her group.

"Too big for her boots," Scuff said, but in a low voice.

"Happy twelfth birthday," Zeke said.

"Happy birthday," Scuff added.

Pin-mei beamed and clapped her hands.

"Go on, make a wish," Scuff said.

Pin-mei drew in a huge breath and blew out the flames. All three friends cheered.

"Here's for a splendid year, Pin," Zeke said.

"Ditto," Scuff added. "No rockbots, psychos, or intergalactic demons."

"I hope not," Pin-mei said, and started to carve the cake into segments.

Scuff waved to a nearby drinksomac.

"Another round of cherry blasters."

The trolley-like robot bleeped. It flipped open its chest console and pulled out three tall glasses, bubbling with red froth.

Scuff clinked his glass against Pin-mei's and then Zeke's.

"Four months ago we were in the bowels of that goddam volcano. And now look at us. On top of the world."

"Well, alive and out of danger," Zeke said.

"Don't be a wet blanket," Scuff replied. He brushed greasy yellow locks out of his froggy eyes. "We're doing well in psychic studies, even you. That evil goblin Fitch Crawly is safely locked up. Even your spooky Martian powers are quiet. We've got a lot to celebrate."

Pin sipped at her blaster, swallowed, and said, "You're forgetting one very important matter. Zeke's father."

"Okey-dokey, you've got a point. But one day we'll find out where he went in this big old galaxy. One day."

Zeke stirred his drink with the straw. He looked glum.

“So,” Scuff went on hastily. “What’s it like being twelve. Feeling different?”

Pin-mei’s moon-shaped face frowned. “Not especially.”

“You will,” Scuff said. “It kinda creeps up on you. You don’t notice at first but it’s right there, under your nose.”

“Under your nose,” Zeke repeated, still stirring the straw.

Scuff nodded and puffed out his chest. “Exactly, you’re growing up, Pin.”

Zeke slammed his drink down. “No, that’s what Fitch said. Under your nose. My father’s whereabouts is right under my nose.”

Pin-mei cupped her hand over his. “Don’t let Crawley mess with your mind.”

“After all,” Scuff said, “we’ve scoured the school from rooftop to basement. Other than your father going on a mission called The Flying Dutchman Project, we found diddly-squat.”

“Guess so,” Zeke replied, sinking back into his seat.

“What could possibly be under your nose anyway?” Pin-mei asked, cocking her head to one side.

“Dunno,” Zeke said with a shrug.

Scuff put an arm around Zeke’s shoulder. “Exactly, bro. But ask Albie if it makes you feel better. As software goes, he’s pretty smart.”

Albie was a unique transport app, left behind on a DVD by Zeke’s missing father. Zeke had downloaded Albie onto his mountain bike and various other vehicles to improve their performance. Albie came with his own personality and was devoted to Zeke.

He sat bolt upright, his eyes as round as circles. “What did you say?”

Scuff frowned. “Nothing. Just go ask Albie if that helps. He’s tuned into every database on the planet.”

Zeke grabbed Scuff’s arm so hard the Canadian winced. “Albie! Albie’s under my nose.”

“Zeke, you’re getting your hopes up!” Scuff said.

“I’m going to find out,” Zeke said. He jumped up sharply and his chair tumbled over. “Right now!”



**A**s Zeke hurried across the dusty courtyard, he recalled his arrival on Mars all those months before. At the time, the Ophir Chasma School for Psychic Endeavour reminded him of a city of termite mounds. Even now, as he approached the lofty Grand Hall, the parapets and alcoves looked like ancient coral. The Chasm, as the school was nicknamed, used to seem forbidding. Now it felt like home. Every psychic teenager came here to train for the Mariners Institute. Principal Lutz's claim that it was 'the most important school in the solar system' was no idle boast.

Zeke passed through the huge arched doorway and down into the subterranean tunnels. A prehistoric river carved them from the bedrock two billion years before. The river dried up and for eons they lay empty. Then humankind arrived and converted them to store rooms and cubby holes. As well as bedrooms for the poorest students. Students like Zeke.

His bike was propped against the wall of his room, charging its magnetic coils. Just as he had left it.

"Albie."

The bike lit up.

"Yes, Master Zeke?" the bicycle replied in its metallic voice.

Zeke paused. His pulses were racing. He was dying to find out if Albie knew anything, but he dreaded the disappointment if it did not.

"We've never talked about my father."

"Coleridge Hailey, born—"

"Yes, Albie. I know when he was born. The crucial thing is where is he now."

Albie's circuits hummed for a split-second before it answered.

"Current location unknown."

Zeke chewed on his thumb. "Because...?"

"He went into Deep Space fifteen years ago. We cannot deduce where he has travelled since that time."

“Yes, but where was he going when he began his journey?”

“Cepheus.”

Zeke sank into the chair. The answer he had sought for so long. Something that appeared so out of reach was actually there all the time. The room swayed.

“You mean, the constellation of Cepheus?”

“Affirmative, Master Zeke. Alpha Cephei to be precise, the brightest star in the constellation.”

“Why there?”

Albie hummed for an interminable time. “Would you like Master Coleridge to tell you himself, Sir?”

The words stuck to Zeke’s tongue. “Y-y-yes!”

The bike’s headlamp glowed into life, casting a holo-field into the centre of the room. Electric greens and blues shimmered and rippled before condensing into a shape. A tall, handsome man stood before Zeke. A man with blue hair and a lopsided smile. His father!

The hologram spoke. “My name is Cole Hailey. In case I don’t return, I am recording this for posterity. And for my son. What I am about to say is strictly classified.

“I am volunteering for a mission of extreme importance. For years now the Mariners have translocated into Deep Space. It’s a matter of urgency that we get the human exodus underway. But there is one huge problem. None of the Mariners translocating into Deep Space ever come back. Whether they go alone or at the helm of a colony ship, no one returns. For over a century we’ve been translocating inside the Solar System without the slightest of setbacks, so what’s going wrong with our longer trips?

“The Institute initiated Operation Flying Dutchman to find out. I’m to captain a far-ship into the heart of the galaxy and back. A crack team of scientists will accompany me and one way or the other, we will solve this. We must.

“My only fear is that I will not get back for my son’s birth.”

Cole stared directly into the camera. His eyes were watery.

“If you are watching, son, please know I do this because the fate of billions hangs in the balance. Unluckily for me, I’m the most

qualified for the job. But duty is tearing my heart apart. Understand this, I—”

The hologram crackled and faded.

Zeke leapt to his feet. “Albie, where’s the rest of it?”

“That is all, Master Zeke, the holofile terminates there.”

Zeke threw himself onto his bed and cried.

Minutes passed. Zeke sat up and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles.

“There’s only one person who can help me now.”