

SHIP

BY

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Prologue

Standing at the large window in his bedroom, looking at the night sky, he couldn't help but feel a sense of awe. The stars shown with a brightness and clarity that took your breath away. A meteor streaked across the mountain tops and the twinge, from the wound he'd gotten in the North African Meltdown many years ago, reminded him that even cosmic beauty had a dark side. Turning away from the window and looking down at his wife, peacefully asleep, he made a decision. Something had to be done and, paraphrasing the words of a famous President, if not him, then who?

CHAPTER
** ONE **

Two men glared across a desk at each other. The electric tension in the room seemed to arc through the air. Behind the desk, the Administrator shrugged.

“It’s out of my hands, Tom. Appropriations insist that you not be involved.”

“That’s stupid, Conrad. I’m the most qualified person on the planet to lead the project and command the base. What possible reason could they have to do this?” He asked, with barely suppressed anger.

“I agree, you are the most qualified. Maybe, if you could keep your mouth shut, the head of the committee might not have such a negative view of you. Politics is . . .”

Tom stood, abruptly. “Politics is BS and the Senator is an ass.” The Commander of Mars Expedition One and the first man to set foot on the Red planet, turned and stomped out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

Taking the long way home allowed him to cool off, his anger giving way to resignation. When he arrived, he grabbed a beer from the fridge and checked his mail. The sorting program had divided the messages into categories. Junk went into the trash. Marriage proposals likewise went there. Being famous had its minor irritations. He put off looking at friends and family for later and was about to send Invitations down the chute, when a name caught his eye. He opened the message.

Commander Dalton,

You are cordially invited to a gathering at my residence this Friday.
Transportation will be provided. Please respond ASAP.

Sincerely,
John Graham

Normally, he graciously refused invites. Most of them were either from politicians, hoping to get a boost from his celebrity or vacuum headed rich women, trying to score one over their friends. The ones he accepted were generally from kids wanting him to visit their schools. Education was important and they didn’t care about politics, just Mars.

He searched ‘John Graham’ and spent a little time reviewing the skimpy information he found. On a whim, he sent an acceptance. It wasn’t like he was busy or anything.

Professor Lundquist, walking down the steps of the Academy, hung his head in defeat. His presentation had been met with the usual derision and laughter. Stopping, he turned back and raised his hand, one finger extended. “This is for you, fools! Someday, you will see that I was right!” He shouted at the building.

“Professor, wait for me!” A woman’s voice interrupted his angry outburst. He smiled at the young brunette grad student, waving at him and hurriedly dragging a wheeled suitcase down the steps. He was glad that there was one person who believed in his research.

“Be careful, Cynthia, we have no place important enough to rush off to that you need injure yourself.”

“I’m so sorry, Professor, they were very rude,” she said, catching up to him.

“You have nothing to apologize about, my dear, it is they who are ‘sorry’. Some of the greatest scientific minds in history were laughed at.”

“Still . . .” She was interrupted by a limousine pulling up at the curb. The rear window slid down and a voice came from within.

“Doctor Lundquist, my name is John Graham and I would like a word with you.”

Professor Lundquist scowled. “We do not have time for idle chitchat. There is a plane to catch.”

“But, Doctor, I have followed your work for many years and I think . . .”

“I already know what those fools think,” he responded, waving at the building behind him. “I do not require yet another uninformed opinion.” He turned and walked away.

Cynthia got a good look at the occupant of the car and gasped. “You’re . . . Professor, wait,” she said, running after him. “Maybe you should listen to what he has to say!”

He stopped. “Why?”

“Because he is John Graham.”

“I already know that. He introduced himself.”

“He’s also very rich.”

“That is obvious also, Cynthia.”

“Okay, but he has a keen interest in Science.”

The Professor’s eyes lit up. “Ah, I see! Come, we will listen to him. Perhaps we can get a ride to the airport, for our trouble.” They got into the car and it drove off.

Cynthia nervously glanced at the Professor, fast asleep across the aisle. Mr. Graham had driven them to the airport, discussing the Professor’s work, among other things. The limo had stopped at a private terminal and he had offered to fly them home if he could hear more about the Professor’s theory. This turn of events was not part of their itinerary, but the Professor just shushed her when she pointed that out. Now, they were on a private jet and apparently going to an unknown destination, since they were headed south and home was west.

She got up and went into the forward cabin, intending to demand they be flown home. Mr. Graham was fast asleep. She hesitantly reached to wake him, then pulled back.

“Good call, Miss, he’s really cranky if he gets woken up,” a voice said.

She turned and saw the pilot, through the cockpit door, leaning out of his seat, smiling.

“I . . . oh . . . I just wanted . . .”

“Why don’t you come up here? It’s a great view.”

“All . . . right,” she said, entering the cabin. He motioned to the copilot’s seat. He was right, the view was stupendous.

“So, maybe I can help you?”

“Well . . . uh . . . Mr. . . .”

“Sorry, rotten social skills. Peter,” he said, extending his hand.

“Cynthia,” she responded, with a nervous smile, shaking his hand.

“You’re probably wondering why we’re flying south, right?” She nodded.

“Just a quick stop in Florida to pick up another passenger.”

“Oh, I see. Then you’ll be flying us to Chicago?”

He smiled. “I’ll probably get in trouble if he finds out I told you, but no, we stop for fuel in New Mexico, then it’s off to the compound in the Rockies.”

“But, we can’t do that! We have places to be in Chicago! Appointments to keep!” She exclaimed, clearly agitated.

“Hey, calm down!”

“Calm down?! This is kidnaping!”

“No, it isn’t, at least not yet!”

“You know there are people sleeping here, right?” A voice interrupted.

Cynthia turned in her seat and saw Mr. Graham standing there. “Why are you abducting us!?” She demanded, angrily.

Mr. Graham shook his head, looking at the pilot. “Stick a pretty girl anywhere near you and your brain disengages from your mouth.”

“Aw, dad, it’s not like that!”

“Dad?” Cynthia asked.

“Yes, my son, the blabbermouth.” He smiled at Cynthia. “Rest assured that once we pick up our passenger at Canaveral and after a long discussion, if necessary we will divert to Chicago to let you and the Professor off.”

“Okay, I guess.”

“Good, now, if you two can keep it down in here, I’m going to go back to sleep,” Mr. Graham stated, looking at his son, raising one eyebrow and returning to his seat.

The invitation had said transportation would be provided, but no mention of how or where. Tom was only slightly surprised when a limo pulled up in front of his house. The driver got out and approached his front door.

“Commander Dalton?” He asked.

“Yes. This my ride?”

“It is sir, but if I may suggest, you might want to bring a few changes of clothing. It will be a weekend affair.”

“Weekend? That wasn’t mentioned in the invite.”

“Apologies, sir, can I be of assistance in helping you, pack?”

Tom scratched his head. “Sure, but when will I be back?”

“I couldn’t say. Mr. Graham is very persuasive.”

“Persuasive? What’s that got to . . . never mind, come on in.”

They quickly got his luggage packed and he went over to the neighbors to tell them he might not be home for a bit and could they look after his house, please?

At the Airport, Tom was getting suspicious. It appeared that the car wasn’t going to be his only ride. They pulled up to a private jet, sitting on the tarmac and got out. The driver opened the trunk, took out his bag and gestured toward the plane. He climbed the stairs and entered. A pretty young woman and an older gentleman were there.

“Uh, hi, you going to the party too?”

“Party? Party?” The man asked, turning to his companion.

“Yeah, you know, the bash Mr. Graham is throwing?”

The woman put her hand to her mouth, in surprise. “I know you! You’re Commander Dalton! The first person on Mars!”

“Yeah, that’s me. But, call me Tom. Commander is so . . . boring.”

“Cynthia Bradford, and this is Professor Lundquist,” she said.

He took a seat across from them. “So, where is this party?” He asked as the plane began to roll.

“I know of no party, young man. We are being given a free ride home,” the Professor explained.

Cynthia was uncomfortable. Mr. Graham’s . . . displeasure . . . with his son, earlier, had been evident and she felt compelled to keep what she had found out from him, to herself. On the other hand, the Professor was her mentor and had a right to know. Now, the most famous person on Earth was asking the question! She sat there wringing her hands. An action that did not go unnoticed by the Commander.

“You seem a bit nervous, Cynthia, do you know something?” Conversation was momentarily stopped by the takeoff. Once the plane had leveled out, it resumed.

“I . . . no . . . yes, but it’s not . . . my place to say.”

The Professor turned to her. “Cynthia, I too would like to know what is going on, please?”

Just then, Mr. Graham entered the cabin. “Now that we’re safely in the air, I will explain,” he said, taking a seat.

The man who drove the limo brought him a drink. “Dinner will be served in an hour, sir.”

“Thank you, Richards, what are we having?”

“Chicken, sir.”

“Excellent.” He took a sip. “Now, Professor Lundquist, as I have previously mentioned, I have been following your work for a number of years. I have always thought you were on to something and our recent conversation has only strengthened that belief. Your efforts to convince the Scientific Community have been met with dismissal or even outright laughter.”

The Professor was nodding. “Yes, those fools only see what is in front of them. They have no vision at all.”

“But even you must admit, lacking evidence that even the Supercollider could not find, your theory is . . . shaky at best.”

“The math is flawless, even the fools conceded that. It is not my fault that I cannot get a research grant from the Government,” he growled, scowling.

“Yes, they can be . . . difficult.” He turned his gaze to Tom. “You can readily attest to that, can’t you, Commander?”

“My name’s Tom, not Commander! And yes, the Government is run by a bunch of ass . . .” He stopped, remembering that he was in mixed company. “Idiots.”

Mr. Graham laughed. “As you wish. We should all be on a first name basis, so you will call me John. NASA is making a huge mistake, refusing to let you command the Mars Base, Tom, so how would you like to be part of a project that will make Mars a mere footnote in history?”

Tom gazed at him, intently. “Okay, whatcha got?”

“The Professor has a theory that may make Faster than Light travel a real possibility. Professor, how would you like to have your research financed? No limit?”

“That would be . . . wonderful!”

“And you, Tom, I need a proven Hero to help me make it happen. What do you say?”

“Well, research is a little out of my field.”

“Research is only the first step. We’re going to build a ship and go to the stars!” He exclaimed grandly, pointing up.

Tom felt his pulse quicken. “Only if I get to fly it.”

“Of course! I didn’t chase down the most famous astronaut in the world to stick him behind a desk. There is one thing that might be a problem though.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I’m the Commander. You’ll have to take a demotion to Captain.”

Tom laughed, loudly. “For a chance to fly a ship to the stars, you can call me ‘Cabin Boy’, for all I care!”

“So, Professor, what do you say? Ready to prove them all wrong?”

“Yes, but we will need a lot of equipment and people to help!”

“All being taken care of, as we speak. I’ll give you a list of what I have already acquired and you can add whatever you think might be needed.”

“The equipment I will need is not inexpensive, and a preliminary survey vehicle will be required.”

“Survey vehicle?” John asked.

“Yes! You cannot jiggle the quantum level just anywhere! And certainly not on a planet!”

“I see. Does it have to be manned?”

“No, no. It is not going anywhere. It will just be making a . . . map . . . of sorts.”

“We’ll work it out. For now, there is a lot to do before we get to a vehicle of any kind.”

Cynthia was feeling a bit overwhelmed. John just casually shrugged off the expense of billions of dollars like it was nothing. Tom seemed to have no fear of leaping out into

unknown space, on a whim. The Professor was taking it all in stride, as if it was the natural order of things.

“Um, Professor?”

“Yes, my dear?”

“Does this mean you’ll be leaving the University?”

“Yes, it does.”

“Will you write a letter of recommendation for me? I still need to finish my grad work and if you’re leaving, I’ll have to find another Professor!” She finished, with an unsteady voice.

“Another Professor? Are you dissatisfied with my instruction? You should have said something!”

“No, It’s been wonderful, learning from you, but . . . well . . . I need to finish my . . .”

The Professor looked at her sad face and started laughing. “Grad work? Cynthia, I could not hope to do this without your able assistance. By the time we are finished, Universities the world over will be begging to have you just grace their portals with your magnificent presence!”

“You want me to come with you?”

“Of course! I would be lost without your attention to the details.”

She wiped her eyes. “Thank you, Professor! But, can you make that decision?” She asked, turning to John.

He shrugged. “The Professor is in charge of the Propulsion Department, he gets to pick his personnel.”

“So, does that mean I get to be in charge of Flight?” Tom asked.

“Kind of pushy, for a cabin boy, aren’t you? Yes, you are in charge of Flight. Now, let’s have dinner and enjoy the peace and quiet while we can.”