

CHAPTER ONE

The start of another twelve-hour work day was nothing to look forward to, Zack thought.

‘Welcome to the Twenty-first Century’ the old sign on the work station greeted him, as usual, and the shuttle ride from the U.S.I Colony 5 was as quiet and boring as always.

As he passed by the U.S. Space Defense Station, he ruminated, “what a waste of time. An hour in flight, another half to suit-up, and now they have me doing antennae work. Nearly ten hours of checking circuits... something a computer can easily do in one.”

But as far as the Company was concerned, his time was cheaper than computer time. After all, they did not pay him. At least he would see Zuri on this trip, as she was working a split; one of the beauties of being a free worker, none of the straight twelve-hour work days. Zack almost envied her position with the Company, because although her ties were nearly the same as his, the Company did not own her, as it did him for the next seven years.

“Welcome to the Twenty-First Century, what a joke.”

All the hopes and dreams of Utopia people had had, evaded them still, some fifty years past its start. People had traded their freedom, religion, and self-esteem for the promise of a bright and glorious future. But now, instead,

that future was like looking at the sun through black glass. Not as bright as one would want, and if you stood looking long enough you would surely go blind. Zack had already gone blind to his situation. All that mattered now was marrying Zuri, and settling the colony.

‘And why not,’ he thought, ‘that means freedom, the end of my contract with United Space Industries.’

The Company was the biggest and the best, and if anyone could start a colony around another star, they could. Also, ten years of room and board was better than any other company was offering. He signed up, also knowing ten years would be impossible to endure, if not for Zuri. In retrospect, five years distance from Earth was not nearly far enough, but he settled for it anyway.

United Space Industries was the first to conquer space. They saw the endless void as a place to grow unchecked; and still unhampered by political constraints, they redefined the meaning of automation the way information had been redefined by the computer. That new definition was the Space Spider, and as their name implied, they spun webs in space.

The body consisted of a laser fusion reactor connected to appendages that secreted crystal steel frames, or poly-plastic streams that they wrapped the framework in, forming great cocoons. Additionally, space spiders could synthesize compounds in various states. One spider, for example, could lay a conduit and the wires that filled it. And they were fast, incredibly so, thanks to electromagnetic propulsion.

Mag-pulsars were volleyball-style spheres filled with liquid nitrogen and a super conductor core. The

hexagons comprising the outer shell, were composed of electromagnetics that could be toggled on and off and their strength varied, dotting the spider's body, some large, some small, to drive the spiders in any direction. Every spider had two gigantic mag-pulsars, one on top and one on the belly, but they didn't drive the spider, their job was to create the enormous pressure inside the fusion chamber that produced temperatures as hot as the surface of the sun.

On Earth, maglev-made cars and trains travelled at bullet speeds, in space, the spiders were a hundred times faster. Speed was a necessity, as the materials they extruded solidified instantly in the cold darkness of space.

Always on the pioneering front, U.S.I. developed breeder spiders, which were sent to the asteroid belt. There, they used the plentiful materials to build other huge spiders; the kind they needed to manufacture metropolises. To U.S.I., bigger was best in the void. The Company topped the Fortune 500 with their Space Spider in 2023, before Zack was born. They had been growing unabated ever since.

Zack knew why. Business had a much simpler language than politics, religion, or even science. To a company like U.S.I., there were only debits and credits. U.S.I. took jobs that increased profits and eliminated unnecessary losses.

The United States struck the first deal. During debates over death sentence for terrorists, Congress tried to side-step the issue by granting U.S.I. permission to build U.S. Penal Colony I. The colony was a giant cocoon type, designed to hold a hundred thousand Lifers.

It was run entirely by robots and monitored from Earth stations. It was a hot issue, which only got hotter. Originally, only terrorist, hijackers, or repeat serious felons were supposed to be imprisoned there, but as riots flared up in the early decades, the distinction faded. More and more people were banished to the colonies a hundred thousand miles out in space.

The prisoners were on their own once processed. The colony was totally self-sufficient; solar panels provided energy and farming decks provided food. Even if prisoners didn't work the farms themselves, robots and automated systems kept them producing ample supplies of nourishment. The joke shared by the inmates was, "it's a Garden of Eden in the middle of Hell."

It was strictly survival of the fittest for as long as possible. There were two regulations on Penal Colony I; nobody was allowed on the robotic maintenance levels, and second, everybody had to be in their cells at lights out. To make sure these rules were followed, a transducer was implanted in each prisoner's brain during processing. These made it possible to monitor everyone's whereabouts, and to deliver disciplining electric shocks to defiant inmates. The shock was nonlethal but intolerable, as it could be administered repeatedly without damage to the brain. There was no way to build tolerance, and thus, the unbearable punishment kept even the most hardened criminals out of the restricted zones and in their cells by lights out.

By the year 2040, the penal colonies had grown to sixteen of various sizes. The nations of the U.S.A., the reformed U.S.S.R., South Africa, and Brazil ostracized people by the thousands. There was always room, life span

in the colonies ranged from one week to perhaps three years. If you were lucky.

Peter, Zack's oldest brother, had been sent to Penal 3 in 2047, during the Boston Hunger Strike. As the first son of a Black Baptist Minister, he carried a particularly heavy cross. He was expected to be an example, both in his father's eyes and the eyes of a corrupt government.

The economic picture at that time was chaotic. There was a miniscule powerful rich class that controlled companies, countries, and the colonies, then, there was the rest of humanity. Eight and a half billion living on the verge of poverty; starving, homeless, and uneducated, they had little hope. The Earth was turning into a brooder for workers, whom, most companies had little need of, or use for. Automation had replaced the need for humans in all but the most menial jobs. Even the most sophisticated tasks, such as surgeries, could be performed by robots more proficiently.

Peter operated against these ends with demonstrations, sit-ins of government and corporate offices, and political rallies. He was the type of man the country needed; big, bold, and brave enough to say what was wrong with the system, also honest, heartwarming, and highly-educated to know what actions needed to be taken to set things right. Overly charismatic and charming, he became a threat.

At the upcoming Boston Hunger Strike, in Liberty Park, he intended to announce his candidacy for President, but his group was infiltrated by paid agitators. During the fourth night, a rock-throwing mob stormed the police lines and Boston exploded into a blazing city of terror for the

next three days. Peter and other leaders of the Baptist Reformers Party were held responsible for the riots, and were summarily tried, convicted, and sentenced. Only Peter was sent to a penal colony. That ended his political career, as well as his life.

At the same time, U.S.I. was busy building factories above the earth. Pharmaceutical companies were among the first to charter a working society and Medical researchers got permission from their governments to sign people up for life studies. Individuals with deadly diseases such as HIV/AIDS, MARV, and Ebola, gave up their freedom for the possibility of a cure.

Unsurprisingly, the United Nations' General Assembly signed a resolution on January 1, 2050, that made any space station operated outside of a fifty-thousand-mile earth limit, autonomous. Thus, making companies, including U.S.I., nations in their own right. More and more, companies made the billion dollar investments for absolute control over their employees. Most, offering a fifteen-year plan; work the years for room and board then become a full citizen of the colony. But what it meant to be a full citizen of a colony depended entirely on the company that owned it. Usually, it didn't mean much, a mere token vote, and simply room and board for life.

Other companies traded goods for a country's populace. A practice mostly employed by the agricultural stations. A government would send fifty thousand people to work in the fields of a colony in return for a share of its produce. Crops could be planted and grown by automated means, but the best way to harvest was still by

backbreaking manual labor. Mainly, the Asian and African nations managed to solve their hunger problems in this manner. U.S.I. had opened a can of worms, but everyone was going fishing with the bait.

I dreaded the start of another twelve-hour shift, but we were coming to the end of phase two at last. Our shuttle turned left, bringing the workstation into full view.

“Welcome to the twenty-first century, from United Space Industries,” I said with an acid tone.

“There you go again, Zack. Do you have to read that blasted logo every single trip out?” Arlene was pulling out some silver dollar coins, which she angrily handed over to Bob Marshall.

“Don’t mind her, Kid,” he said, “you keep it up if you like. You know how some people get when the assignment is nearly over.”

“Not really,” I said, feeling a little uncomfortable, “this is my first job. And I doubt I ever will, you know I’m shipping out on the Pegasus.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that, Mr. Tops, you don’t know the company execs,” Arlene snarled. She was bitter over losing her bet, but her words carried some truth. The Company has been known to break contracts with their indentures.

“Let’s can that kind of chatter,” ordered our crew chief, Chilton.

“Yeah, Zack has only been with the company three years, he doesn’t know about all the double-crosses yet,” added Bob Marshall with just a touch of sarcasm in his gravel voice. His stone-white hair, sandpaper face, and

steel blue eyes made him look immortal rather than aged. He had been with the company a long time, much longer than crew chief Chilton. "Yeah, you probably got one of those notarized indentures from the Colonial Regulatory Committee," he continued, smiling at me.

I did, and nodded.

"I hate to tell you that ain't worth shit! If United Space Industries says you go work elsewhere, you go elsewhere. And the Committee, they can go to hell."

"Hey! I said to trash that line," Chilton yelled at him.

"Trash this!" Bob gave him the finger. "I was on my first project, huh... twenty-two years ago now; we were working behind the spiders on U.S. Penal One, Kid."

I assumed he was still talking to me, although he calls everyone Kid. He was strolling the aisle of the shuttle, warming up for another great adventure in the life of Bob Marshall.

"See what you started?" Arlene whispered, "now he'll go on for the whole hour, 'til we dock at the station."

I shrugged and pretended to be bored also. But actually, this would be the best part of the shift. Well, second best, I planned to meet Zuri for lunch aboard Pegasus later, and I was going to make sure I reached Deck 17 by lunchtime.

"Like I was saying, Kid," Bob's gaunt six-one frame towered over me. "They were supposed to shut down the space spiders while we inspected the framework and if I had not seen its shadow on the beam below I would have been caught like the rest. I jumped from the beam just in time. As I bounced around on my tether line I watched the others get sprayed with aluminized iron silicate. Sixteen of

them encased in that stuff, alive. I could hear them frantically calling for help inside their hard-suits. It took hours to cut them out, even with laser torches. Yeah, they ran out of air long before we could free them from the beam. Shit! The Company said the spider had glitched its programming. But I knew better, those bastards never turned the damn thing off. After the spider refilled its tanks, it came back to lay more frame, right where we were standing. The Company never paid death benefits, just like that, wiggled out. They transferred me to the defense station the next day. It was a restricted project so I had no outside contact for four years. U.S.I. swept the whole affair under the carpet.”

“That’s the way it always is out here,” Arlene said. “Robots work and we check. Robots screw up and we die. Nobody regulates a damn thing.”

Arlene was a beautiful redheaded Irish woman and when I started at U.S.I., she was my instructor. I thought she was a teenager then, maybe eighteen, but she quickly set the record straight.

“I was indentured by U.S.I. seven years ago, when I was fifteen. Staying for a full twenty.”

She had been signed over by the British government, in lieu of doing life in a penal colony for rioting. She didn’t talk about it much; after all, a lot of indentures were proffered instead of doing prison time. Any number of governments rounded up its dissenters and gladly sent them off to work for the companies. Those who refused went to places like U.S. Penal One, Interpol’s Space Confinement Center, or the Russian Black Star.

I, of course, did not belong to that class of workers. I voluntarily signed up for work on Pegasus and as part of my agreement, was to be among the first to settle another solar system. Zuri and I will be in a colony of seventy-five thousand pioneers.

“Don’t think because you are not sentenced they can’t change your assignment, now that the work is done,” she cautioned me, “I was going to get married once, while I was working on Outworld. All the papers were signed, everything was ready. We even had a unit assigned to us.”

“What went wrong?” I found myself asking.

“Nothing went wrong. The dirty bloody buggers back-doored us. They gave him orders to monitor a freaking mole transformer in the asteroid belt. You know the kind, Old-timer; those spiders that bore into an asteroid and suck out its insides to make a freighter hull or something stupid like that. We could still have married,” her voice was seething with unvented anger, “but naturally, we would have to live at the mole station. I guess they didn’t want any convicts at Outworld. They gave us a right royal bumming.”

“He broke off the engagement.”

“No,” she smiled. “He was a real right guy. I called it off, as I couldn’t let him waste ten years of his life in a tomb for me. I’d rather go to a penal colony. At least death would come quickly.”

I wanted to say that couldn’t happen to me, but I knew it was wiser not to. Because, I have Zuri, who paid her way, and she is down on the contract. I hated having her sign a marriage contract, but it was the only way to guarantee we didn’t get screwed. Also, I hate that we have

to wait five years to get married. But the contract states we have to be past the no-turn-back point before we can marry. So, I guess Arlene and Bob are right, the company has two more years to screw me over.

Out of our shuttle window the logo took on its true appearance, black solar panels a mile long on the white aluminized iron silicate walls. The panels provided all the energy the station required. We were nearing a docking bay door in the workstation, which hid the Pegasus from view. The station filled twenty-five cubic miles of space. Pegasus filled most of it.

The workstation was nothing more than a set of pressure chambers and landing docks, and interior lights constantly bathed the ship. It was quiet, even for space, and that was the one thing I could not adjust to these past few weeks, as I had become accustomed to the endless chatter of the radio. The station was a ghost town now, most of the job rooms had been shut down to conserve energy, making the place look like a checkerboard box internally.

I was inside the ready room oiling my suit's O-joints. I can't afford to have this stupid thing locking up on me. The thought of a spider spraying me jumped into my head. I pushed the image out. Part of my training videos were horrific films of people hit by spiders, sprayed by spiders, and lifelines cut by spiders. There was a warning alarm that went off in the helmet when a spider was approaching, but sometimes you just didn't hear it, or foolishly disabled it.

The next time I see Zuri will be mid-way through my shift. I am going to make lunch today. *'So, nothing is going*

to hold me up, especially not this stupid hard-shell, and definitely not getting killed by a metal monster.'

I stepped up onto the boots' platform and snapped the leg casings around my lower half. I worked my legs around, they felt good. Next, I donned the upper torso and checked my chest plate indicators, everything was OK, the air blowing soft and cool up my back. Pulling the two thick plates together made the magnets lock. The suits were made so they could be opened from the inside. I slipped my arms through the holes. Once I secured the helmet and gloves I was ready.

"Arlene, where are you?"

"I'm on the A wing. Have a good walkdown."

"I'll be at portside top."

A spider whisked past me as I slid down my tether line. We had to check in with our partner before starting out, as a safety precaution. Switching on my electron scanner, I called in, "Control... Control... Zackary Tops, sector 115T." I started walking down the outer hull, looking for a blip on the scope, one that usually doesn't occur. It is ten hours of loneliness. Ten hours to meditate. It is madness. This has to be the worst duty I ever pulled.

Electronic sweep in hand, the plodding of my footsteps in diligent performance of my duty, and eyes fixed on the meter hoping for a flicker of the lamp, I'm feeling real lost. During these ten hours, I rarely get a blip. Occasionally, a spider will eject from a portal in Pegasus going for a refill. Looking towards the blackened cubicles of the station, I know we are all alone out here.

Time goes by slower and slower as one walks the gangplanks and I have become accustomed to doing the

walkdown without a tether line, from watching Bob. He often tells me that he would rather use his air to jet back to safety than a damned tether. Now I know why. I realize I don't know him as well as I think... Or myself. After all, this is your basic slave chain.

"They don't need armies. The weak go willingly."
Dad's preacher voice boomed in my helmet.

"What! Who was that?"

"Go back to school, get something for yourself. Stop running, God has big plans for you, boy." Even this far in space, a hundred thousand miles, halfway to the moon, and he still taunts me. This long in time, he tears, accuses, ridicules, mocks, diminishes, and condemns me.

After Peter died, I was supposed to fill his shoes. Take his place in the family business of saving souls and fighting for the little guy. The only problem, I was the little guy, Peter's scrawny little brother. Just one of seven, third of four boys in the family. I had neither Peter's stature nor the voice of God like Dad. Even my three sisters had more going for them than I did. One a lawyer, the other a doctor, and the youngest of us all married a minister. She made dad very proud. Oh, my other problem, I was not sure God had planned on me. On the Eternal List of Angels, Saints, and Martyrs, my name didn't even show up. I bombed out of Seminary School for what was termed, "lack of conviction."

"Was that you, Zack?" Arlene's voice queried from my helmet's speaker.

"Let him be." Bob commanded.

"This is Control. Does anybody want to report?"

"No," I said.

The walkdown continued. I carried the weight of my father's disdain on my shoulders alone.

Sometime later, I picked up a flasher on my scope. Of all the days to pick up a flaw in the webbing, "I've got a glitch for you—quality control guys."

"Marked. Go on correction."

"Marked. Out."

I pulled an egg from my sling pouch. Technically, it's an electric gravity generator; but it looks like an egg, an ostrich egg to be precise, except for the feet. Anyway, I extended the tripods and placed it on the spot, turned its silver dome, and sat down on the torso ring of my suit to wait for a repair spider to answer my signal.

Between the outer hull and the inner hull—both made of aluminized iron silicate crystal—there are layers upon layers of webbing. One inside another spun just right in dimension, so they never touch. The repair spider will dissolve the bad spot and secrete a new one in its place. All I have to do is wait. I tell myself this is important, and it is. If a high-power web is crossed, with say, the antenna webbing, the radioman gets fried. I just happen to be a radioman.

I hope you enjoyed chapter 1 of Pegasus: A Journey To New Eden. Go to <https://bit.ly/2lIW3k> to purchase a copy. And while there check out all our other books by fine authors at www.rockhillpublishing.com

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