

CHAPTER ONE

Survey

Thursday, June 8, 2034, 1000 hours

The five hundred-mile-wide crater had been thoroughly radar-mapped, though nobody had ever seen it. They all knew the ground was still burning eight months later. Copilot Joe Commer looked away. All he could picture was the red-orange lava beneath all that soot.

“You know, I still can’t believe it,” he muttered. “Those were the *Himalayas*.”

His older brother Jack shrugged from the command seat to his left. “Are the sensors deployed?”

Joe took a breath. “Yep, they’re out. All five up and running. No problems.” Far to starboard hung the icy white fragments of the moon, beginning its eons-long spread into a complete ring. Joe listened to the whirring of the ventilation fans and the beeps of the electronics. The Control Room of the *Typhoon I* was brilliantly lit, and the reflections of its interior curved through the cockpit window, obscuring the line of twilight on the ruined planet below.

It was the first run where they hadn’t come to pick up a passenger shell. Nothing to do but drop off a few sensor satellites. Nobody else to rescue, nobody who wanted to be rescued. They were really saying goodbye.

Joe shuddered at the charcoal blanketing most of the planet. He could all but smell the death below. How could he ever have lived there?

The United System had declared June 5th the final day for mandatory evacuation, and three days ago the USS *Celeste* had picked up four hundred refugees, all against their will. There were only handfuls of human beings left down there anyway, all doomed, but they’d made their choice. What good did it do anymore to send USSF troops into the refugee camps, taking casualties fighting the diehards, just so they could haul a few survivors back?

Captain Jack Commer punched an orange square on his console. “Jim, prepare standard navigation program for the ride home.”

“Up and running,” came the crisp voice of Jim, the third Commer brother, from his workroom down the fuselage. “Tell me when you’re ready and I’ll lock ’er in.”

“Stand by,” Jack said, his face solid and square, his deep-set brown eyes intent on the readout panels. “First let’s download some sample readings from New Orbiter 1. John?”

“Got it, Jack!” came John Commer’s high voice. “This is an amazing interface! The satellite’s actually *talking* to us! That’s incredible! And the software was so easy to set up! All I had to do was flip a switch!”

Jack sighed. “Fine, John. Go ahead and patch it through so we can all hear it.”

“Okay, Jack! Fine, just fine! It’s so easy! All you have to do is *activate* it, and the default settings are *perfect*!”

Joe watched Jack struggle whether to reprimand or indulge the fourth and youngest Commer. Jack finally shook his head with a half-smile. “Just patch it through. If there’s a problem, talk to Ken.”

“No problem,” came the voice of communications officer Ken Garrison. “Downloading to all crew now.”

“Wait! I was programming the *voice*!” John cried.

“Forget the voice! Just patch the damn thing through!” Jack snapped. Joe caught his disgusted glance. How many times had they had the *John* discussion, alone here in the Control Room?

“General Summary, Planet Analysis Report One,” New Orbiter 1 spoke to each of the eight *Typhoon* men in their compartments. “Atmosphere poisonous for human beings. Cloud cover has destroyed most plant life. Radioactivity levels in major urban areas and in Central Asia fatal to human beings. Planet still experiencing magnitude four earthquakes at all locations. Entire planetary surface deadly to humans. 40,500 humans estimated left on Earth, all expected to die within two months. Specific data totaling 1,200 petabytes feeding into crystal storage.”

“A couple months,” came Harri McNarri’s voice over the intercom’s ship-wide circuit. “Wow. There were six hundred thousand in March.”

“Guess next time we’re back those last people will be gone,” Joe sighed. “If we ever come back. What’s the point?”

“We aren’t gonna try to convince ’em to evacuate?” McNarri said.

“The computer automatically radioed messages to the various refugee camps,” Jack said. “No replies. They were serious when they said they’d die on Earth. The Evacuation is officially over, and I’m going to respect their wishes.”

Joe scanned the garbage below. “Well, sometimes I wonder.”

“About why anyone would stay?” Jack said.

“About why anyone *ever* stayed. What the hell did we think we were doing down there for five thousand years? Just crashing around through one war after another?”

“You mean millions of years, don’t you?” McNarri put in. “Millions of years of human evolution led to *this*.”

“Well, I was talking about recorded history. Seems to me that once we started recording it all, we should’ve grown up somehow. Was all that *crap* down there just a training ground for space? For getting us off the stupid planet?”

That silenced the crew.

No, nobody was supposed to say that. You were supposed to say how sad it all was and how grief-stricken you were. Hell, Joe wasn’t grief-stricken. He’d been kicked out of the damn nest and now he had a new life in space. Sure, it had been a painful kick, but he guessed it needed to be.

“Well, people just want to forget,” McNarri finally said. “Can’t say I blame ’em. Won’t make much sense coming back here until a couple thousand years or so. And even then, this place will still be a godawful mess.”

Joe shook his head. The ship’s engineer still didn’t get it. He thought somebody would really want to come back. In a thousand years people would’ve put this disaster way behind them. Earth would be a polluted curiosity, a place where daredevils in rad suits might climb Mt. Everest for kicks. Well, not Mt. Everest, that one was gone, maybe some other slag heap.