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CHAPTER 1

Ambush!

Rawling McTigre, the director of the Mars Project, had warned me that, on this practice run in the Hammerhead space torpedo, I wouldn't be alone in the black emptiness 3,500 miles above the planet. But I'd already circled Phobos, one of the Martian moons, twice and seen nothing, so it was a complete surprise when my heat radar buzzed with movement from below.

Actually, it's wrong to say I had seen nothing.

What I'd really seen was the silver glint of sunlight bouncing off Phobos. To do that, I'd raced at the moon with the sun behind me. At the speed I moved in the Hammerhead, the moon was almost invisible coming from any other angle. It was so tiny, and the backdrop of deep space so totally dark, except for the pinpoints of stars.

Without the sun at my back, straining for visual contact with Phobos was like trying to see a black marble hanging in front of a black velvet curtain.

It was also wrong to say the movement came from below.

In space, there *is* no up and down. It's difficult, though,

not to think that way because I'm so used to living in gravity, weak as it is on Mars. So I thought of the Hammerhead's stabilizer fin as the top.

When the movement came from the belly side of the space torpedo, my mind instinctively told me it was below.

Just like my mind instinctively told me to roll the Hammerhead away from the movement.

In one way, rolling my space torpedo was as easy as thinking it should roll. It's similar to how you move your arms or your legs. Your brain wills it to happen, and the wiring of your nervous system sends a message to your muscles. Then chemical reactions take place in your muscles' cells and they burn energy, causing you to move.

It was the same way with the Hammerhead. My mind, connected to the computer, willed it to roll and it obeyed instantly. But it was really the computer on board that did all the hard work. It ignited a series of tiny flares along the stabilizer nozzles, allowing the torpedo to react as though it were flying through the friction of an atmosphere, not the vacuum of outer space.

I rolled hard to my right, then hard left, then downward in a tight circle that brought the giant crescent of Mars into my visual.

The top of the massive red ball shimmered with an eerie whiteness, the thin layer of carbon dioxide that covered the planet. And behind it was the glow of the sun.

But I didn't have time to admire this beauty. The planet was getting closer—fast.

I told myself I wouldn't crash, that its closeness was just an illusion because it filled so much of my horizon. After all, the top of the Martian atmosphere was still over 3,000 miles away.

But I was moving at over four miles per second. That

meant if I didn't change direction within the next 10 minutes, I'd get fried to a crisp upon reentry.

I rolled upward, back toward Phobos, hoping to buy some time.

I didn't even bother trying to get a visual confirmation of my pursuer. Because of Rawling's earlier warning, I didn't need to see what was chasing me to know it was another space torpedo. This was the ultimate test of my pilot skills. Against another pilot.

I knew if I looked, I wouldn't be able to see the other space torpedo anyway. My Hammerhead was hardly longer and wider than a human body. Plus, space torpedos are painted black, so they're almost impossible to detect visually in space from more than a hundred yards away.

Right now, with the other pilot chasing me, I was locked in a whirling dance with another space torpedo a hundred miles away, with both of us ducking and bobbing at around 15,000 miles per hour. Not even the best eyes in the universe would be able to watch this dogfight.

No, the only way I could detect the other space torpedo was with heat radar. Tiny as the vent flares were, the heat they produced showed up on radar like mushrooms as big as thunderstorms. Especially in the absolute cold of outer space.

That was good for me, being able to track the other space torpedo as easily as watching a storm cross the sky. But it also meant the pilot of the other torpedo could follow my movement too.

And my Hammerhead was the lead torpedo, a sitting duck in the computer target sights of the pilot behind me.

I made a quick decision. I flared all of my vents equally for an instant. I knew my direction wouldn't change. But it

would cause a big blast of heat, hopefully blinding the pilot behind me.

An instant later, I shut down all my vents, knowing my Hammerhead was now shooting through the mushroom of heat I'd just created.

I exited the other side of the heat mushroom with no power or flares to give away my presence. To the heat radar of the pilot behind me, my Hammerhead was as black and cold as outer space itself. I was now invisible.

I congratulated myself for my smart move.

Then I panicked. There was no heat mushroom on *my* radar either. The pilot behind me must have done the same thing—shut down all vent flares.

It could only mean one thing. The pilot had guessed my move and taken a directional reading of my flight path just before I shut down my vents.

I knew I was dead. Without vent flares to control the direction of my Hammerhead, I wouldn't be able to change direction until I reactivated them. It would take my computer 30 seconds to run through its preignition checklist. In space warfare, 30 seconds was eternity, because torpedo computers reacted much more quickly than human brains.

In 30 seconds, the computer of the torpedo behind me would figure out my line of travel and shoot me with a laser before I could reactivate and change direction.

Only 20 seconds left.

White flashed over my visual from the other torpedo's target scanner. I was dead center in the laser target controls.

I swallowed hard, preparing myself for the red killer-flash that would follow in an instant, blowing my spacecraft to shreds. The explosion of my Hammerhead torpedo would

be soundless since you can't hear screams in the vacuum of outer space.

Another white flash hit me instead.

I jumped. The target scanner behind me didn't need confirmation.

A third white flash.

There was still no red laser to superheat the fuel tanks and blow the Hammerhead apart.

I didn't understand. Three times I'd been right in the other pilot's sights. Why hadn't the other pilot fired the laser pulse?

Without warning, my vents reactivated at the 30-second mark. I rolled, safely out of the way.

I looped, scanning my heat radar again to find the other space torpedo.

Then my visual and my consciousness melted into black nothingness.