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CHAPTER 1

Asteroid.

I used to have this picture in my mind that an asteroid collision meant a rock the size of a mountain ramming a planet or moon at full speed. That the impact would have the power of 10 nuclear bombs. That there would be a massive crater and earthquakes and maybe even parts of the planet or moon splitting off to spin back into space.

Not with this asteroid.

At the most, it had been half the size of a pea. Barely more than space dust. If it had been headed toward Earth, the friction of its high-speed entrance into the atmosphere would have burned it in a brief flare of glory. Anyone seeing it from the ground—and they would have, because even a pea-sized asteroid throws a lot of light when it burns—might have wished upon a star.

It had not hit Earth.

It had hit our spaceship, over three-quarters into its 50-million-mile journey from Mars to Earth. It wasn't like running into an iceberg. We hadn't felt the impact inside the ship. But instantly alarm bells had started to clang, waking all nine of us inside and throwing us into emergency mode.

The tiny piece of intergalactic rock had punctured the outer hull, and now valuable oxygen bled into the vacuum of space. Worse, like a tiny stream of water wearing through soggy paper, the hole was growing far too quickly.

It was too dangerous to suit someone up and send him out attached by a safety cable.

Which meant I was the one to step into outer space.

Well, not me. But my robot body, because it didn't need the protective clumsiness of a space suit.

I was actually still inside the ship, my brain hooked up by computer to the robot controls. Everything that the robot body sensed, however, reached me as if it were my own body out there.

The robot body was connected to the ship by a safety cable, and it floated and bobbed as I tried to find the source of the leak at the back part of the hull. The view beyond the ship was incredible. We were headed directly toward the sun and, at some 120 million miles away, it still seemed like the center of the universe.

It did not look yellow. No, human eyes need an atmosphere to filter colors and out here in space, there was no atmosphere. Instead, it was a circle of incredible brightness.

The Earth was close enough now that I could see it clearly too. Not in front of the sun. That would have been like looking into a floodlight and trying to see a marble glued to the bulb. No, the Earth was off to the side of the sun, and it reflected light as purely as the moon on a dark night.

As a backdrop in all directions, millions and millions of tiny pinpricks showed the light of stars and galaxies. It boggled my mind to think that some of those tiny dots were actually clusters of thousands of stars.

"Tyce? Find anything?"

This was my dad's voice coming through the radio. Not that I needed reminding of the urgency of my mission. If the hole in the hull exploded, all of us inside were dead.

"Nothing yet," I said. "Hang on."

Sunlight caught the rounded hull at an angle that showed me a tiny dent in the perfect titanium skin.

"Think I found it," I said. "Just in front of one of the hydrogen tanks."

I heard Dad gasp. "You mean it hits us a couple feet farther back and . . ."

Pressure inside the hydrogen tank was easily 1,000 times higher than pressure inside the spaceship. If the asteroid pea had hit the tank, we would have blown apart into space dust.

"I will be careful," I said. "Promise."

I'd been handling a robot for years, so I wasn't worried about how to move the robot arms and hands and fingers.

What I was worried about was the welding torch in the robot's right hand.

My job was to seal on a square thin sheet of titanium about the size of a human's palm, like slapping a bandage over a cut. Except it wasn't that simple.

In the fingers of my robot's left hand was a thin rod of titanium alloy.

Because it wasn't pure titanium, it melted at a slightly lower temperature than titanium. I needed to touch the rod and the flame of the welding torch together at the edge of the titanium patch, then melt the tip of the rod so that liquid titanium alloy dribbled over the edge of the patch. As the titanium alloy cooled and solidified again, it would form a seal. Almost like using a glue gun. Once I'd sealed off all sides of the square patch, my job would be finished.

Trouble was, the welding torch flame generated heat at over 2400° F. And I hadn't used a welding torch much.

In fact, this was only my second time.

My first had been on Mars, under the dome, in practice sessions with my friend Rawling McTigre, the director of the Mars Project. That was over 40 million miles away.

I didn't give myself any more time to worry. This hole had to be sealed. Immediately.

I let myself drift closer to the hull. The robot wheels made a dull clank as they hit the hull. It wasn't a sound that reached the audio components of the robot's body, however. Sound can't travel through a vacuum. Instead, I heard it through the slight vibrations that traveled up the robot body.

I was ready.

The titanium patch had a temporary glue to keep it in place as I welded. I pushed the patch down, and the glue held.

Under the lights of millions of stars I began to weld.

What I couldn't adjust to was the intensity of the flame's light. "Dad," I said into the radio, "you need to roll the ship a little so I am not in the shadows."

The sun was on the other side. Its light would make it easier for me to see what I needed to do.

Seconds later, the ship rolled. Just slightly. In space, it takes too much fuel to overcorrect any sudden movements.

It also takes very little change of direction for the movement to be felt.

The robot body started to slide along the hull.

Without thinking—as if I were in gravity instead of outer space—I put out a hand to balance myself. The robot's right hand. The one with the torch.

The hand hit the hull, and the torch bumped loose.

This wasn't a total disaster. In the floating weightlessness of space, I could catch it before it went another 10 feet.

Except two feet away was the hydrogen tank.

I made a slow-motion grab for the torch, but it flipped end over end, in agonizing slowness, just out of reach.

I could see it happening but was helpless to stop it.

The torch flame touched the side of the hydrogen tank. All 2400° F of flame concentrated on high-pressure gas inside. The metal of the tank glowed briefly.

Silently I screamed. But it was too late.

Before I could think any more thoughts, all existence disappeared in a blinding flash far brighter than any star.