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Published by ScrivKids,
an imprint of Scrivenings Press LLC
15 Lucky Lane
Morrilton, Arkansas 72110
<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

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Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-436-9

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-437-6

Editors: Erin R. Howard and Linda Fulkerson

Cover design and interior illustrations by Brent Golembiewski.

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Dedication

To my boys.
Keep dreaming!

Chapter 1: Something's Odd

In the depths of space, read a sign:

Siler Station Cellular Route E49B
Last stop for 289 light years, Population three.

Nico bolted down the sleek corridor. His rubber boots squeaked on the freshly waxed floor. Sliding to a stop, he faced an automated meal machine.

“Nosh, I’ll have some nuggets today.”

“Nuggets for breakfast? Your parents wouldn’t approve,” a soothing robotic voice replied.

“Fine, some sausage and eggs, I suppose.” He huffed.

He glanced at his watch. It was 9:55 a.m. He bounced on his toes, begging for Nosh to finish his breakfast. He couldn’t be late again. The machine plated his food in a plastic container, which he snatched quicker than a jackrabbit. There was no way he would make it to the far side of the station in one minute, no matter how fast he ran, but he had to try. Nico was blessed that the station now housed only one family, or it would have been impossible to traverse the whole complex in five minutes. He couldn’t imagine sharing his station with over forty-nine other families.

Nico slipped into the classroom—large and with multiple desks, each holding thin virtual reality glasses. A few held tattered leather-bound books, which he had always found fascinating. Pushing a book aside, he slipped on a pair, immersing himself in a new reality. A tall, thin woman stood in front of him. Her nose was long and pointed like an arrow. She glared down at him over small, thin-rimmed glasses.

“Seems you’ve chosen to be late for your lesson. Again.”

Nico began to spit out a rebuttal but stopped. Today was a day he didn’t want to be late. Today, he was learning about a tiny, frail planet called “Earth.” And for the next few hours, he learned a myriad of its history, technology, and all other things about the small

planet housing life. He daydreamed, thinking of what it would be like living in such an environment. More than once, the teacher had to snap him back to reality. At noon, his wristband alarm buzzed. He bid farewell to his virtual instructor and headed to the maintenance hangar, grabbing a bite to eat on the way. As he stepped in, a blast of blue light nearly blinded him. Squinting, he proceeded forward toward the engine of an enormous ship. A large, muscular hand popped out. He stumbled back.

“Can you hand me the Turbine support wrench over there?”

Nico gathered himself, picking up the requested tool. He handed it to the hand.

“How did you know it was me?”

After a grunt, a muscular man slid into sight, riding a rolling chair. His hair was salt and pepper, and a thick, graying beard covered his face. He grinned ear to ear. It was Nicodemus, his father.

“I can always hear you coming. You walk like you’re carrying a Carillion cow. I can’t remember—you ever repair a Catalonian power converter before?”

Nico shook his head.

“Well, get over here. Class begins now.”

The two of them dug into the converter. His father had a way with electronics. The station had been a stop on the Cellular highway, frequented by thousands of star freighters shipping precious metals to distant planets. Nicodemus was an exceptional mechanic, able to work on the most challenging ships. But a new route formed, and the ships stopped coming. His father was content fixing the few stray starships that docked on their way to better places, but the other families moved on. Nicodemus constantly muttered to himself, and there were plenty of times Nico believed he saw lights emerge where there shouldn’t have been. Nico also seemed to have the gift and a mechanical mind. He once built a miniature spaceship out of spare parts, though he lost it outside the hangar door, where a stray meteorite obliterated it. Soon, the converter was fixed, and the two made their way to their living quarters.

There, Nico’s mother prepared a grand meal for the three of them. Afterward, he was tucked into bed, where she sang a beautiful song about kings, queens, grand palaces, close friends, and epic adventures. Each night was new and different. Nico gazed out his bedroom window. A purple and blue galaxy floated motionless outside. Stars littered the

sky, and the edge of a large planet peeked over the bottom rim of the window. He gazed up at his mother. She was beautiful, and seeing her warmed his insides.

“Mom, where do your songs come from?”

His mother gently pushed his blond hair from his forehead, giving him a kiss.

“From the old country, my dear.”

She turned to leave.

“But are they true?”

“To some,” she said. “Now get some sleep. You need it for your studies.”

Nico rolled over, snuggling up against a pillow. He smiled at his day, a day like any other.

* * *

The following day, Nico finished his academics as usual and headed back toward his living quarters. Along the way, he stopped at one of the automated kitchens for a snack.

“Hello, Nosh. I’d like chicken strips and fries, please.” He stared at the window where he had ordered the same thing many times before, but nothing happened. Perplexed, he asked again. “Nosh, chicken strips and fries, please.”

Still nothing. *Strange. I always get chicken strips and fries here. Maybe my parents figured out my secret stash.* He leaned forward, glaring at the screen displaying his favorite items. *No, that can’t be it.* His finger touched the screen, hoping maybe the physical contact would wake the device from its slumber. Still nothing.

Shrugging his shoulders, he walked to their living quarters. *Must be a glitch in the system, or maybe they’re out of chicken.* Shaking his head, he came up with other possibilities as he made his way through the tubular tunnels. Colorful galaxies peeked in through the multitude of windows. He loved his home and the wonders outside. Though he wished he could leave it a bit more. His father occasionally took him on trips for parts or supplies, but that was a rare occurrence.

Nico stepped into his quarters and froze. The door to his living room was open. That never happened. Doors were programmed by the station to always remain closed, keeping the warm air in. He felt a cool breeze on his face. He stepped in, commanding the door to shut, and waited a second for the familiar hiss of the sliding door.

Nothing moved.

“Mom,” he called. “You home?”

At this time of the day, she was usually reading or working on some project around the quarters. His mother’s loving voice would always answer, “Yes, dear?”

A shiver engulfed his body as nothing but silence answered him.

He walked into the kitchen, finding it too empty.

“Dad?”

Again nothing. *Maybe they’re at the hangar working on a ship.* He remembered times his mother had helped his father with projects. That must be the answer. Making his way down to the hangar, his stomach growled. Another automated meal maker greeted him along the way. He tried another order, resulting in the same sad outcome. No food.

Giving up, he proceeded down the corridor.

“Dad must be doing maintenance on the automated systems. That’s got to be what’s going on. And Mom’s helping him.”

This thought reassured him and brought a smile to his face. In no time, he stepped into the hangar. The black abyss of space greeted him from the far wall of the five-sided room. Though there was no glass, it looked like a large window and always gave him the feeling of floating.

“Mom? Dad?”

He made his way around the scattered ships. A small recon fighter his father was rebuilding for a customer in the Ceres system sat off to the side, a larger cargo cruiser from the Lexion system near the middle, and an escape pod off a Star Glancer toward the back of the hangar. Stopping, he placed a hand on the pod and gazed at the beautiful stars flickering outside. He still didn’t understand how space was kept at bay, but that didn’t matter. He was mesmerized by the sight and, for a moment, forgot what he was doing and just stared. Faster than a static shock, a ship appeared just outside the hangar, causing him to jump as if stray voltage had coursed through the pod. The ship was headed directly toward him.

Chapter 2: The Girl

Nico leaned against the escape pod, his eyes fixated on the incoming ship. It resembled a container called a “lunchbox” he had seen in his studies of Earth. The cockpit was near the top, and the pinkish-red tint of the windows hid the pilot, or whoever—or whatever—was on board.

His stiff posture relaxed as he remembered the hangar’s shields. Not only did they keep the cold depths of space at bay, but any physical object was also locked out. But still, what was this lunchbox doing outside their hangar? Was the crew lost? Did they need repairs? The ship continued forward. Nico glanced around, once again looking for his parents. He called out for them. Cold silence responded.

The lunchbox continued its trek toward the hangar. The shield would hold. It had to. He had worked with his father long enough to know that entry had to be approved through the station’s systems. They wouldn’t let just any random craft enter. But the lunchbox continued. Nico’s spine stiffened, and he rubbed his moist fingers together as he again called for his parents.

A siren sounded as the ship’s nose broke through the shield and, to his surprise, continued forward. He had imagined it would impact the invisible barrier and bounce off like a rubber ball. But it entered without any problem, while a pair of doors opened on the underbelly of the lunchbox for the extending landing gear. Nico searched the area for something to protect himself. He shivered, and goosebumps broke out down his arms. He spotted a rivet gun. Maybe whoever was in the ship wouldn’t know the mechanical uses of the tool, and he could pass it off as some sort of weapon. He snatched it up, sliding behind the escape pod.

The ship touched down, the landing gear squealing from the weight of the craft. A door hissed open off the side, and out stepped a humanoid figure in a tight-fitting space suit. The being was small, around his size. Its mirrored helmet visor reflected its surroundings. Nico peeked around the escape pod, watching its movements. It headed

straight for him. He took a couple of deep breaths, working to calm his nerves. Think big. His reading had taught him that predators could be fended off if they were threatened by a larger creature. With some effort, he could be the larger creature. He had a weapon, after all. The suited figure continued to march toward his position like it was on a mission.

A few steps away, Nico jumped out, pointing the rivet gun toward the intruder. “Stop and identify yourself!” It sounded better in his head, but when he spoke, his voice wavered.

The intruder paused, stiffening its arms and spreading out its hands.

Nico continued to point the rivet gun toward the suited figure. “I said, who are you?” Nico attempted to sound stern, but his voice came off rather weak. His arm had a slight tremor, and he grasped it with his spare hand, hoping it went unnoticed.

“Planning to bolt me to that ancient escape pod, are ya?” the intruder asked, its voice digitized and robotic.

“Huh?” Nico leaned forward, pinching his eyebrows.

“That rivet gun. Not gonna do much harm with that thing unless I’m a piece of sheet metal. I guarantee you, I’m not.”

The intruder twisted off its helmet. Nico stared for a moment, unable to speak. It was a girl. Her hair was blonde, short, and shaved around her neck. The shape of it reminded him of a mushroom. A pixie cut, he thought he remembered from his studies. But that wasn’t what had him staring. The most peculiar thing besides her cute button nose was her ears. They were pointed. He had never seen anyone with ears like that. The girl marched forward, swinging her helmet in her hand.

“What? I got something on my face?”

Nico continued to stare, his mouth hanging open.

“Where’re your parents?” she demanded. “I’m looking for Nicodemus. I assume somebody at this station knows where he is.”

She was looking for his father? Relief rushed through him like an unkinked garden hose. She must be in need of repairs. He lowered the rivet gun, now embarrassed he had tried to pass it off as a weapon. “Aren’t you a little young to be flying a starship?”

“Yes ... Yes, I am,” the girl stated, looking past him, searching for something.

She walked toward the doorway that led into the station. Nico followed, still gawking at her ears. She stopped, spinning to face him, and threw her hands toward the ground.

“What?”

Nico pointed. “Your ears, they’re—”

“Pointed?” She rolled her eyes. “Never seen a girl with pointed ears before?”

“Well ... no.” He absentmindedly rubbed his own. “Only round ears. And I’ve seen all sorts of people come through here.”

His stomach churned for pointing them out. His mother always told him to mind his manners and to keep things like that to himself. He shook his head and forced his focus on what she was doing here.

“I think you’re looking for my dad. Your ship need some repairs?”

The girl smirked. “Now we’re getting somewhere. But no, I don’t need repairs. I need to talk to him.”

“About what?”

“That’s my business. Now, can you direct me to your father, please?”

The way she spoke made her seem entitled ... or maybe just titled, like she was from a royal family he had read about in a book. Where was she from? What planet? So many questions filled his mind. She had to be about his age. He didn’t see many children come this way. Most travelers were older and shipping supplies to far off systems. There was one time a family of four showed up. Their navigation system was on the fritz, and their father thought he could navigate himself using old star charts.

Nico extended his hand. “I’m Nico. Sorry about earlier. I wasn’t sure who you were, and many strange things have happened today.”

The girl set her helmet on a nearby bench and shook his hand aggressively. “I’m Maddie. Now, if we could find your father so I can attend to my business and be on my way, that would be lovely.”

Nico gave a nod, then remembered. “I’m sorry. You see ... I can’t ... I can’t find my parents.”

Chapter 3: The Agreement

Nico and Maddie trekked through the space station and crawled over every inch of it. His parents had just ... vanished. Where could they be? Nico was beginning to worry, and Maddie wasn't very good company. She was tight-lipped and focused. All she wanted to talk about was finding Nico's father, Nicodemus. She opened up a bit once they found a working automated meal machine, but he could only glean that she came from a planet named Elvendish and was an only child. She had to be an elf. He was sure of it. Though they were vastly different in disposition, her being an only child comforted him. At least they had that in common.

Entering his room, Nico flopped on his bed. Exhausted, his stomach tightened into a knot. *Where could my parents be?* They had never left him before. He peeked over at Maddie, who was standing near the window. Something about her eased his mind. He sat up, realizing he hadn't checked his parents' bedroom. He slapped his forehead.

That's where they were. That's where they had to be. Why hadn't he looked earlier? He would feel very silly when he opened their door to find them napping or working on some project. Sheepishly, he mentioned it to Maddie, and her face reddened. She mumbled a few things under her breath, stating he was an idiot.

Standing at his parents' door, he knocked. Nothing. He knocked again with the same result.

"Oh, just open it, will you?" Maddie exclaimed, manipulating the door controls.

They wouldn't budge. She tried pushing them open.

"That's not going to do you much good. They're hydraulically sealed."

"Well then, what do you suppose we should do? What if your parents are dead in there?"

Nico's felt the color drain from his face.

Maddie's face went somber. "I'm sorry. I ... didn't mean that. I'm sure they're fine."

Nico ran out of the room, turned a corner, and grabbed a small leather bag. He bolted back in, finding Maddie had flopped onto a nearby chair, biting her lip. Unzipping the bag, he extracted a small screwdriver and dismantled the door controls.

“What are you doing?” Maddie jumped up and marched over.

Nico didn’t say a word. He popped open the control’s faceplate, and within seconds, the door whipped open with a deafening sucking sound. The force violently pulled Nico into the room. A gaping, jagged hole replaced what once was a wall. Darkness and stars beckoned him to join them. Nico hung onto the door jamb, screaming. Maddie jumped at the doorway, her body weight propelled by the rush of exiting air. She landed, feet planted on either side of the door, straddling the opening. Maddie reached down and pulled Nico toward her.

“Close the door!”

Parts of the room dislodged and flew toward the vacuum created by the gigantic hole. Maddie was in a full squat, holding Nico at the waist just outside the doorway. Nico scrambled to reverse what he had done. The screwdriver was long gone by now, sucked into space. He searched for something to work with. Realizing he had nothing but himself, he pulled the panel wires up to his teeth and used them like scissors to snip two of the wires. He frantically stripped them and then twisted them together. The door slammed shut, and both Nico and Maddie crashed to the floor.

“What in Tameria’s garden were you thinking?” Maddie railed.

Nico rubbed his head, trying to figure out what had happened.

“You could have killed us,” Maddie continued. “Don’t go opening locked doors in a space station.”

“You’re telling me you knew that would happen? It was your idea to figure out how to open the door!” Nico was getting more comfortable with his new visitor, and her pompous attitude was wearing on him.

Maddie crossed her arms. “Of course, I knew that. We’re on a space station, and your parents are missing. It only makes sense they were lost in space. And I didn’t tell you to open the door.”

Nico froze. Until that moment, he hadn’t put two and two together. His parents had been sucked out.

Maddie stood as Nico went catatonic, like a wax dummy. She bit her lip, and her eyebrows raised. “I mean, I knew there was a breach in one of the walls. Maybe your parents are outside repairing the damage.” She grabbed Nico’s hand. “Let’s go have a look. I have an extra suit in my spacecraft.”

Nico tugged away. “No, thanks. I have my own, thank you very much.”

“Well then, let’s grab it.” Her response was snappy and quick. “Where’s the nearest access to spacewalk? I need to find Nicodemus.”

“Ugh ... why is it so important to find my dad?”

“That’s my business. Look at it this way. You figure out where he is, and I get to ask him my questions. Let’s stop this bickering and work together. Deal?” She extended her hand.

Nico squinted his eyes, not exactly trusting her, but something about the events so far told him he needed her. A growing feeling inside him told him they were more connected than either of them realized. He grabbed her hand. “Deal.”