Orion Lost

Alastair Chisholm



To Rose and Amelie, who are the masters of their own ships.
And to Catherine, for everything.
A.C.

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Author's note

In this book you will meet an alien species, called the *Videshi*. Some of you may know that this is a real word – in Hindi, *Videshi* (विदेशी) means *foreign*, or *foreigner*, or *stranger*.

This book takes place in the future, and when I was imagining the world of the future, I thought that India would probably become a prominent power, perhaps even the leading spacefaring nation – the captains and commanders of space exploration. I imagined that it might be an Indian crew who met the first alien ship. What would they call this alien? I thought they might call it *stranger*. *Foreigner*. *Alien*. And they would report it back to the people of Earth, who would use their word … *Videshi*.

Prologue

There was a ship, in space, lost.

It was a large, old, mining transport, designed for long-haul trips to small moons and asteroids. The enormous squat engines and hydrogen scoop underneath gave cheap and steady propulsion, but not much acceleration. The command module was small, but its cargo section was huge, taking up most of the ship.

It was broadcasting a radio signal: —*Earth ship* Orion, *four months out of Earth and heading for Eos Five. Our location is Sector 278. Coordinates 549 dash 2 by 902 dash 8 as of—*

An experienced miner might notice odd things about the ship. It had been patched and refitted, and its life support systems – gravity, oxygen, food processing – extended to cope with a much larger crew. Extra equipment was fastened round the hull, designed for planet exploration. Rovers, diggers, habitats, all with landing gear but no launch rockets of their own. They could land but they'd

never take off again.

Not a mining transport any more then, but a colony ship, taking a group of brave new-worlders off to some distant settlement, and then staying to help them set up.

—*currently adrift*, said the message, *and we have no propulsion, although our Jump drive is functioning.*

Four large power generators bulged out near the base, but two of them were cold and dark and only a few of the ship's outer lights were working. It was turning gently, and as it turned, it revealed an enormous scorched rupture near one of the engines.

We have experienced severe damage to the ship.

A ship in deep space hardly ever sent out a distress signal. What would be the point? Ships were like tiny motes of dust in the vast sky, so far apart that the chance of one coming across another by accident was effectively zero. Near Earth, or around the Solar System, sure, perhaps heading to one of the older and more established colonies, on a well-known route. But not out here. Here you could travel for six months and see no one, and no evidence that anyone else had ever existed. Here there were no friends.

Command has been compromised and we are unable to establish order. All command crew ranked able-bodied or higher are disabled and cannot resume control.

In fact, this far out – so far from Earth you could barely see its sun as a tiny flickering star – if you found anyone at all, it would be more likely to be Scrapers, pirates and thieves. Or worse still, the mysterious, alien Videshi: strange, half hidden, half understood, terrifying.

A ship in deep space hardly ever sent out a distress signal, because if you were helpless enough to send one, then you did not want to be found.

The message repeated: *This is a general Mayday from the Earth ship* Orion*, four months out of Earth…*

Something found them.

1

Beth

"I think I'm going to be sick," said Beth.

Her mum, strapped into her seat like the other passengers and crew of the shuttlecraft, looked up from her mission manual.

"No you're not," she said.

"No, really, I don't feel so good. It's the gravity, it's—"

"No, you're *not*." Beth's mum leaned across and gazed into her eyes. "I know it was pretty intense when we launched. And yes, zero gravity is strange, and a long time ago people *did* get sick, but not these days. You've had your pill, and you'll be fine. Trust me."

Beth nodded. She didn't feel fine. She felt as if her stomach was turning over and over, floating free and ready to jump in any direction. She tried to smile.

"OK … I guess. I feel a bit funny, though."

Her dad turned to her and grinned. "Me too. I think everyone's twitchy, don't you?"

Beth looked around.

The ship they were on – the *transport*, her mum called it – had about sixty seats, all full. Suitcases were strapped against the walls and ceiling to stop them flying around during launch, but a few of them had been unfastened since; they trailed tendrils of Velcro and bobbed slightly, like jellyfish. Most of the passengers were also strapped in, though some had undone their webbing after take-off.

Take-off… Wow. Beth had flown on planes and travelled on the Hoop, but she'd never felt anything like the launch, when the transport and everyone on it had hurled into the sky like a thrown pebble. She hadn't felt sick then; instead there had been a sensation that she was going to faint, that she was melting into the chair, that she was on the world's biggest, maddest roller coaster and *she couldn't get off*.

Then the odd awareness of reaching the top of the climb, and the weightlessness, and that moment just before you fall back down to Earth … only there was no falling back. Instead they fell *forward*, very slightly, and Beth had watched in astonishment as one end of her strap had floated, gently, in front of her.

And then the seat-belts had unlocked and most of the children had scrabbled to free themselves, and the adults had pretended that it was all completely normal. But

they'd been shaking and gaping as much as the kids.

That was two hours ago. After the launch, there had been the long slow drift towards the exit point, and the sight of Earth through a thick window, gradually shrinking. Gasps as the moon came into sight – still small and far away, but perfectly clear. And after a while, the wonder and astonishment becoming slowly normal.

"We'll see the *Orion* soon," said her mum. "Look out for it, towards the left."

Beth peered through the porthole but couldn't see anything. She shrugged. It would show up on the screen soon enough – the portholes were just a luxury, only on this ship, command class. The other transports were sealed in and twice as full. Benefits of her mum's command position as a lieutenant. Beth smiled. Not quite as posh as the *first*-class cabin ahead, for the captain and senior officers, but even so. Pretty cool.

Her stomach was still bouncing and jumping around. She wondered if Dad was right, if everyone else was really feeling like this. The other children seemed fine. One girl, three rows down, was typing rapidly at a pad on her lap and staring at two screens that floated in front of her, held in place with some sort of thin elastic. Her hair was tied into dozens of thin black braids drifting around her head, fastened with pink butterfly clips; the screens bobbed and

turned and the girl's head bobbed with them. *How is she OK?* wondered Beth.

The other girl felt her looking, glanced up and waved. Beth managed a pallid smile and moved her hand in a tiny 'hello' motion.

Beneath her, she felt a rumble and a momentary sense of weight to one side.

"Look," Mum said. "You can see her on the screen."

On the display panel, small but very clear, hung a tiny ship, small as an acorn and about the same shape, fat and round. As it came into focus, passengers looked up from their pads, stopped their conversations. Someone gave a small whoop and people laughed.

"Isn't she something?" said Mum. They stared at the little acorn.

"I dunno," drawled Dad. "Looks a bit small to me."

"Oh, she's not!" exclaimed Beth. "She's six hundred and seventy-two metres end to end and four hundred side to side, and – oh, shut up." Her father grinned and she rolled her eyes.

Mum said, "Ignore him. She's a good size. Plenty of storage, plenty of room for berths." She smirked. "Even enough for your space chickens, dear."

"Hah!" he snorted. "And space *pigs*, I'll have you know. And space wheat, and space courgettes, and a whole

space farm for that matter. And if you don't want to be eating flavoured yeast all the way to Eos Five then you'll be nice about them, and nice to the farmer."

Her mum sniffed. "Nothing wrong with transport rations; I've eaten them many times. And your two pigs aren't going to feed a thousand colonists. But don't you worry – we'll still let you have your little garden."

"You do know which way to point that old pile of junk, do you?" he asked. "Could be more than nine months. I've seen you trying to read a map before."

They glared at each other and then giggled.

"Shut *up*, you two," said Beth, going red, "everyone's *looking*."

Mum waved a hand. "Let them." She shook her head. "Anyway, I won't be navigating. I'm purely third class, scraped in by my knuckles. I'll mostly be making the coffee."

Beth looked across at her. She couldn't imagine anyone ordering Lieutenant Carol McKay to make coffee. With a face apparently chiselled from stone, Beth's mum had grey eyes that looked like they were staring into a storm at sea, and white-blonde hair cropped into an army bob. She was born to lead a battalion into battle. Compared to her, Dad seemed like a cheerful bag of laundry.

The *Orion* was closer now, and Beth stared at the screen.

It *did* look like an acorn. And for the next nine months it would be their home. They would live in it, all bundled together, and it would carry them far, far away – so far it was impossible to imagine – to a tiny prick of light, and a tiny pebble around that light, and then…

"It's a new world out there," said Mum softly. "Ship life is awkward sometimes, but it's not so bad. And when we get to Eos Five … there's a future waiting for us. A chance to make our own decisions, create our own lives."

"I know," said Beth. "But what if something happens on the trip? What about the Scrapers? Or the Videshi…" She shuddered.

Beth's mum shook her head. "No. We're going well away from the common routes. And space is so … *big*. There's no chance of meeting anything, really. Trust me – the worst thing that might happen on this trip is boredom." She bumped heads gently with Beth. "I know you're nervous, but it will be fine. And when we get there it will be hard work. But it will be *ours*."

She grinned, and despite her worries, Beth grinned back. Yes. She could do this. Everything was going to be great. Yes.

Then she was sick.