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PART ONE
TWIN SHIPS

PROPOSAL

The other ship hung in the sky like a pendant, silver in the ether light cast by the nebula. Waverly and Kieran, lying together on their mattress of hay bales, took turns peering at it through a spyglass. They knew it was a companion vessel to theirs, but out here, in the vastness of space, it could have been as tiny as a OneMan or as immense as a star – there were no points of reference.

'Our ships are so ugly,' Waverly said. 'I've seen pictures, but in person . . .'

'I know,' said Kieran, taking the spyglass from her. 'It looks like it has cancer or something.'

The other ship, the *New Horizon*, was exactly the same misshapen design as the *Empyrean*. It was egg

shaped, covered with domes that housed the different ship systems, making it look like a Jerusalem artichoke, the kind Mrs Stillwell always dropped off with Kieran's family after the fall harvest. The engines released a bluish glow that illuminated the particles of the nebula, causing the occasional spark to fly when the heat of the engines ignited a pocket of hydrogen. Of course, the ships were accelerating too quickly to be harmed by these small explosions.

'Do you think they're like us?' she asked him.

Kieran tugged at one of her dark brown curls. 'Sure they are. They have the same mission as we do.'

'They must want something from us,' Waverly said, 'or they wouldn't be here.'

'What could they want?' he said to reassure her. 'Everything we have, they have.'

Inwardly, Kieran admitted that it was very strange they could see the ship at all. By all rights, the *New Horizon* should be trillions of miles ahead of them, considering it was launched a full year before the *Empyrean*, forty-three years ago. The ships had never been close enough to get a glimpse of each other. For some reason the *New Horizon* had reduced its speed to allow the *Empyrean* to catch up. In fact, given the distance and the velocity at which both ships travelled, it must have decelerated years ago – a radical deviation from the mission plan.

The other ship was a source of excitement aboard the *Empyrean*. Some people had made large welcome signs with big, exuberant lettering and hung them in the portholes pointed towards the other ship. Others

were suspicious and whispered that the crew must have some disease, otherwise why wouldn't the Captain let them come aboard? Captain Jones had made an announcement soon after the ship appeared, telling the crew not to be alarmed, that he and the other Captain were in negotiations and all would be explained. But days had gone by, and nothing happened. Soon the feeling among the crew had changed from excitement to restlessness and finally to fear.

The *New Horizon* was all Kieran's parents talked about. The night before, Kieran had quietly spooned vegetable soup into his mouth, listening to them chatter about it.

'I don't understand why the Captain doesn't make another announcement,' said his mother, Lena, running nervous red fingers through her dark gold hair. 'The Central Council should at least tell us what's happening, shouldn't they?'

'I'm sure they will when they understand the situation,' Kieran's father replied irritably. 'We don't have anything to fear.'

'I never said I was *afraid,* Paul,' Lena said with a look at Kieran that communicated just how afraid she actually was. 'I just think it's strange, is all.'

'Kieran,' his father asked in his firm way, 'has Captain Jones mentioned the ship to you?'

Kieran shook his head, though he had noticed the Captain seemed more preoccupied lately, and his palsy was worse – it made his hands tremble all the time. But he hadn't said a word about the *New Horizon*'s mysterious appearance. 'Of course he wouldn't say

anything to *me* about it,' Kieran said.

'Well,' his mother said as she tapped thoughtfully at her teacup, 'nothing explicit, of course, but . . .'

'There was one thing,' Kieran said slowly, enjoying the way his parents were hanging on his every word. 'I went into his office too early yesterday, and he was just shutting off the com station and talking to himself.'

'What was he saying?' Lena asked.

'I only caught one word. He said "liars".'

His parents looked at each other with real concern. The lines in Paul's face deepened, and Lena's teeth worried at her bottom lip, making Kieran sorry he'd said anything.

Now, feeling warm and safe with Waverly, he decided he would ask today before his broadcast. The Captain might not like his questions, but Kieran thought he could get something out of him. Kieran was, after all, Captain Jones's favourite.

That was for later. He'd had a reason for asking Waverly to meet him here, and there was no sense putting it off, no matter how anxious it made him. He forced his breathing to quiet.

'Waverly,' he said, wishing his voice were deeper, 'we've been dating a while now.'

'Ten months,' she said, smiling. 'Longer than that if you count kisses in grade school.'

She cupped his jaw in her hand. He loved her hands and the way they felt warm and soft. He loved her long arms, her strong bones beneath olive skin, and the silken hairs that wandered up her forearms. He lay back on the hay bale and took a deep breath. 'You know

how I can't stand you,' he said.

'I can't stand you, either,' she whispered in his ear.

He pulled her closer. 'I was thinking of taking our contest of wills to the next level.'

'Hand-to-hand combat?'

'In a manner of speaking,' he said, his voice vulnerable and small.

She was unreadable in the way she looked at him, waiting, saying nothing.

He drew away from her, leaned on an elbow. 'I want to do this right. I don't want to just jump into bed with you.'

'You want to marry me?'

He held his breath. He hadn't quite asked her, not all the way, but . . .

'I'm not even sixteen,' she said.

'Yes, but you know what the doctors believe.'

That was the wrong thing to say. Her face tightened, almost imperceptibly, but he saw it.

'Who cares about doctors?'

'Don't you want children?' he asked, biting his bottom lip.

Waverly smiled slowly, deliciously. 'I know you do.'

'Of course. It's our duty!' he said earnestly.

'Our duty,' she echoed, not meeting his eyes.

'Well, I think it's time we think about the future.' Her huge eyes snapped onto his. '*Our* future *together*, I mean.'

This wasn't the way he'd meant to ask her.

She looked at him, her expression wooden, until a slow smile crept across her face. 'Wouldn't you rather

marry Felicity Wiggam? She's prettier than me.'

'No, she isn't,' Kieran said automatically.

Waverly studied him. 'Why do you look so worried?'

'Because,' he said, breathless.

She drew his face to hers, stroking his cheek with the chubby ends of her fingers, and she whispered, 'Don't worry.'

'So you will?'

'Some day,' she said playfully. 'Probably.'

'When?' he asked, his voice more insistent than he meant.

'Some day,' she said before kissing him gently on the tip of his nose, on his bottom lip, on his ear. 'I thought you didn't like that I'm not religious.'

'That can change,' he teased, though he knew this wouldn't be easy. Waverly never came to the poorly attended ship's services, but she might if the ship had a pastor, he thought. The few spiritual people on board took turns delivering the sermon during their meetings, and some of them could be kind of dull. It was too bad, because otherwise Waverly might see things differently, understand the value of a contemplative life.

'Maybe when you have kids,' he said, 'you'll care more about God.'

'Maybe you're the one who'll change.' One corner of her mouth curled into a smirk. 'I'm planning on making you a heathen like the rest of us.'

He laughed and laid his head on her breastbone to listen to her heartbeat, breathing in time to it. The sound always relaxed him, made him want to sleep.

At sixteen and fifteen, they were the two oldest kids

aboard the *Empyrean*, and their relationship had felt natural and even seemed expected by the rest of the crew. But even without the social pressure, Waverly would have been Kieran's first choice. She was tall and slender, and her hair draped around her face like a mahogany frame. She was a watchful person, and intelligent, a trait that showed in the deliberate way her dark eyes found their mark and held it steady. She had a way of seeing into people and understanding their motives that Kieran found almost unnerving, though it was a quality he respected. She was definitely the best girl on board. And if he was chosen to succeed Captain Jones, as everyone assumed he would be, Waverly would make the perfect wife.

'Oh no!' She pointed at the clock over the granary doorway. 'Aren't you late?'

'Damn it!' Kieran said. He wriggled off the hay bale and slipped into his shoes. 'I've got to go.'

He gave her a quick kiss, and she rolled her eyes.

Kieran ran through the humid air of the orchard, jogging between rows of cherry and peach trees, and took a shortcut through the fish hatchery, enjoying the spray of salt water on his face. His feet pounded the metal grating, but he skidded to a stop when Mrs Druthers appeared out of nowhere, carrying a tub of minnows. 'No running in the hatchery!' she scolded.

But he was already gone, racing now through the dense caverns of green wheat, where harvested sheaths hung from hooks on the walls and ceiling, trembling with the shudder of the engines. It took five minutes to reach the end of the wheat fields and then a quick jaunt

through the humid mushroom chamber, before a seemingly endless elevator ride up to the Captain's suite, where he was supposed to begin recording his show in four minutes.

The studio was really a small anteroom outside the Captain's office, but it was where the Captain preferred to record their webcasts. The room was lined with large windows that looked onto the nebula, which the *Empyrean* had been traversing for the past year and a half. Below the windows were short couches arranged in a row, where anyone who wanted to could sit and watch Kieran's show for Earth's children or the Captain's longer show that relayed the adult news back to Earth. In front of the couches was a small but very powerful camera and, above them, a row of bright hot lights shone on the desk where Kieran sat to deliver the news.

There were only a few people in the studio today, and Kieran hurried past them and straight to the make-up chair, where Sheryl was waiting with her powder puff.

'You're cutting it close these days,' she remarked, wiping the sweat off his face. 'You're all sweaty.'

'It never picks up on camera.'

'Your panting does.'

She ran a small fan in his face to dry him, which felt wonderful, then patted him with talcum. 'You need to be more mindful.'

'We're only recording it. We can't send it until we're out of the nebula.'

'You know how the Captain likes to keep the archives

up to date,' she said with a smirk. The Captain could be fussy.

Kieran didn't know why they bothered with the webcasts any more – there hadn't been any communication from Earth for years. The *Empyrean* was so far from the home world that any radio signal would take years to reach its destination. And, when it did, it would be so distorted that it would require extensive correction before it could be understood. He might never know if there was anyone back on Earth listening to his newscasts, which made Kieran feel like a figurehead of precisely nothing.

He examined his reflection in the mirror, still undecided about his looks. He might be kind of handsome, he thought, if his nose weren't so crooked and his chin weren't so square. But at least his amber eyes weren't bad, and he had nice rusty-coloured hair that mussed in a thick pile over his forehead. He thought it looked good that way, but Sheryl ran a damp comb through the curls, trying to get them to lie straight.

Captain Jones came to stand behind Sheryl. A tall man with a potbelly and trembling, thick fingers, he walked as if listing from side to side, which on first impression made him seem aimless. In truth, the Captain was the most purposeful man on the ship, quick with his decisions, which were almost always right, and trusted by all the men on the ship, though he was less popular with women, Kieran had noticed.

The Captain frowned disapprovingly at Kieran, who

didn't mind it. He knew the Captain was extremely fond of him.

'Kieran, you spend too much time with Waverly Marshall. I ought to intervene.'

Kieran forced a smile, though he didn't like it when the Captain talked about Waverly this way, as though he owned her and were only loaning her out.

'I trust you've practised?' the Captain asked, eyebrows smashed down in an attempt at sternness. He let out a puff of air that disturbed the grey hairs of his beard, which he smoothed with his thumb and forefinger.

'I read it all over twice last night.'

'Out loud?' he pressed with a glimmer of humour.

'Yes!'

'Good.' The Captain handed a data-dot to Sammy, the technician, who was readying the teleprompter. 'I've made a couple of small changes at the end, Kieran. I'm sorry, but you'll have to wing it. I'd planned to discuss it with you ahead of time, but you were late.'

'What are the changes?'

'Just a small mention of our new neighbours,' said the Captain with an attempt at nonchalance. When he looked out of the porthole, though, he sighed heavily.

'What's going on?' Kieran asked, trying to sound carefree. But when he met Captain Jones's eyes, all pretences sank away. 'Why did they slow down?'

The Captain blinked a few times in that strange way he had, bottom lids flitting upward. 'They have a new captain, or . . . leader, and I don't like the way she talks.'

'How does she talk?' Kieran wanted to know, but the

perpetually frantic Sammy jabbed his finger at Kieran.

'Thirty seconds,' he said.

'Later,' said Captain Jones, guiding Kieran to his seat in front of the camera. 'Have a good show.'

Uneasy, Kieran placed his palms flat on the oak desk in front of him. Then he assumed the bland smile he wore at the beginning of every webcast and watched the opening montage.

It began with the crew of the *Empyrean*, two of them Kieran's parents, young and fresh faced as they helped transplant a tobacco seedling in the occult nursery. Then came a scene of doctors in white surgical caps, leaning over a row of test tubes, carefully dropping samples into them with a long syringe. Finally there was a picture of all 252 kids on board standing in the family gardens, surrounded by apple and pear trees, grapevines growing up the walls, and baskets of fresh carrots and celery and potatoes. The image was meant to communicate plenty and prosperity so that the hungry people back on Earth could believe in the mission.

The light over the camera winked on, and Kieran began.

'Welcome to the *Empyrean*. I'm Kieran Alden,' he said. 'Today we're going to give you a special look at our fertility labs. As you might remember, long-term space travel can make it difficult for women to get pregnant with healthy babies. For six years, women aboard the *Empyrean* tried to get pregnant, and failed. This was a tense time, because if they couldn't have children to replace the original crew, there would be no surviving colonists to terraform New Earth. So

creating the next generation was more important than anything else. We've prepared a video for you that looks back at how our team of scientists solved the problem.'

The studio faded to black, and the screen behind Kieran showed the video segment about the fertility labs. Kieran had a few minutes to catch his breath while the video ran.

At the back of the studio there was a sudden flurry of activity. Winona, Captain Jones's beautiful secretary, came running in and whispered something in his ear. The old man darted up and hurried out of the room.

Kieran watched the video, which showed clips of his own birth. Kieran was naturally shy, so it was uncomfortable to have the entire human species know what he looked like, slimy and screaming after emerging from his mother's womb. But he was used to it. Kieran was the first successful deep space birth. When he was born there was a great celebration, not only on the *Empyrean*, but probably back on Earth as well, which was why Kieran had been chosen to host the webvision broadcasts. He never got to decide what was said on his show; he only read the news. His job was very simple: give the people of Earth a reason to believe that Earth-origin life would not go extinct. Give them hope that even if they themselves could not emigrate to the new home world, maybe their grandchildren could.

The video was drawing to a close, and Kieran straightened in his chair.

'Five, four, three . . .' Sammy whispered.

'Unfortunately, things didn't go as well on our sister

ship, the *New Horizon*. Though their scientists worked very hard, the women aboard the *New Horizon* never got pregnant.'

Kieran's heart pounded. He had never heard this before. As far as he and everyone else knew, there were lots of children aboard the *New Horizon*, just as there were on the *Empyrean*. Now he realized that communication between the two ships had been minimal for a long time. Had that been intentional?

Sammy, whose face had turned ashen behind his round spectacles, made an urgent gesture for Kieran to keep reading.

'No one knows why the *New Horizon* kept their fertility problems a secret,' he went on, 'but recently they've slowed their progress in order to rendezvous with the *Empyrean*, so we expect to find out soon.'

The theme music began, an upbeat melody with piano and strings, and Kieran tried to match the cheerful tone with his own voice. 'This has been webvision broadcast number two hundred forty-seven from the *Empyrean*. I'm Kieran Alden, signing off.'

When the music faded away, Kieran heard shouting. The Captain, normally calm and self-possessed, was yelling so loudly that Kieran could hear him through the metal walls of his office.

'I don't care what you *think* you're going to do! You're not boarding this ship until I review the situation with my Central Council!'

He was silent for a moment but soon began shouting again, even louder. 'I'm not refusing a meeting. Come aboard in a OneMan and we'll have one.'

Silence.

'I don't understand why you need to bring an entire crew, ma'am, if all you want is a conversation.'

Silence, an angry one. When the Captain spoke again, it was with intimidating calm: 'I've given you no reason whatever to distrust *me*. I have never *lied* to you, or deviated from the mission plan without an explanation . . . Oh, that's just paranoid trash! There was no sabotage! I keep telling you!'

Kieran heard the Captain pacing. He felt guilty eavesdropping, but he couldn't stop himself. Judging from the hush in the room, neither could anybody else.

'If our two vessels cannot work together . . .'

Suddenly Sammy was in motion again, flicking switches on the studio console until the screen behind Kieran's desk glowed with a video image from the starboard side of the *Empyrean*.

Someone in the room gasped.

The *New Horizon* loomed on the screen, huge and shadowy, close enough for individual portholes to be seen with the naked eye. At first Kieran thought the image must be magnified, but with a tightening in his gut he knew this wasn't the case. In the short time it had taken him to do the show, the *New Horizon* had closed the three hundred kilometres between the two ships and was now cruising alongside the *Empyrean* at extremely close range.

Why?

A subtle movement caught Kieran's eye, a tiny dot moving like an insect away from the *New Horizon*, towards the *Empyrean*. From its bulletlike shape, he

guessed it must be a shuttle craft, the kind of vessel designed to carry the colonists and their equipment from the larger ships on short missions to the surface of New Earth. These shuttles were never intended for deep space travel or for docking from one ship to the other, but that was what this one was doing now. Whoever was aboard was clearly planning to land on the *Empyrean*.

'Oh, my God.' Sheryl sat in the make-up chair, hands clamped over her pink mouth.

'How many people do those things carry?' asked Sammy, sounding bewildered and frightened.

The Captain burst out of his office and pointed at Sammy. 'This is an attack,' he announced. 'Sammy, tell the Central Council to meet me in the starboard shuttle bay.'

As an afterthought he added, 'Call a security squad, too. Hell, call *all* of them.'

Kieran's heartbeat tripped crazily. His mother was on a volunteer security squad, working every now and then to settle a dispute between crew members or help out during a community event. The squads never carried weapons.

'What's happening, Captain?' Kieran asked, his voice cracking.

The Captain put a hand on the boy's shoulder. 'Honestly, Kieran,' he confessed, 'I just don't know.'