

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.”