

KEEPER OF THE STARS

DAWN FORD

*To Erin, Jennifer, and Brett. Thank you for letting me tag along on
this novella journey.*

chapter one



Star Date 75, in the Earth year 2135

Mars Sector Nine

Genesis Colony

Starlighter Star Station One

VENUS BOLT'S boots echoed as she ran down the hallway in Sector Five, the aluminum composite making her movements loud despite their insulating nature. Even with the space suit and helmet on, she could hear the thumping footfalls clearly. Her grandfather's words chased her like a monster on her heels. "*Save yourself. You know what to do.*"

Tears trickled down her heated cheeks as she blasted across the familiar path. Her grandfather would be gone by now, floating among the stars. His treason charges, all lies, cooked up by Commander Ridenour, her space colony's self-elected and corrupt cyborg leader.

Humans, the commander insisted, were weak vessels. He'd augmented himself early in his career, slowly leaving his humanity behind. Too late, their sector realized his plans to eradicate the very humans that built the Genesis Colony.

The hallway went on for what seemed like forever to Venus's frayed nerves. It had been years since she'd come this way. Light

glowed from red emergency beacons that ran along the gray walls. A few remained dark, a result of the Commander's orders. He didn't need light to see with his advanced-vision eye implants.

Venus's foot caught a loose tile, and she stopped. She bent over the silica-coated vent cover, which would lead to her destination and hopefully her freedom. Or her death. Her hands were damp as she muscled the square free. Dusty air spiraled around her face shield, glimmering in the dim light.

She'd spent much of her childhood in these vents, helping her grandfather with his maintenance job. A scientist by trade, he'd taken the only job left open when he'd entered the space program. He'd been brilliant but woefully unappreciated. Her heart fluttered at her loss. She hadn't stayed to watch them send her beloved grandfather to the stars from the safety of the vents.

Venus shook her head. She didn't have time to linger. One of the Commander's bots had spotted her sneaking between the barracks. It was only a matter of time before Ridenour found her. Her mission now was to make it to her grandfather's storage unit to access his Starlit Transporter stowed there.

Feet first, she slid into the vent, her vaporizer gun snagging on the side. Then her helmet caught. She grasped it tight and gave it a hard yank and fell sideways as it let loose. The oxygen tank dug into her back and side, but she needed it too much to let it go yet. Every molecule was necessary until she reached the storage area.

Carefully, she secured the thick tile back, grimacing as it screeched into place. Green symbols radiated from seventy-five-year-old phosphorescent paint illuminating the vents, lighting her way. Some things stood the test of time.

With a quick movement, she reached into her pocket and took out the piece she'd saved as a marker. It matched the chunk missing from the tile. Venus added the last of her sealing tape, reinforcing it. She wouldn't be going back.

Belly to the bottom of the duct, she crawled and tried to keep her breathing restrained. Shut down years ago due to population loss, this vented section of the station received no fresh air. That's

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why she needed the air tank. Sweat drenched the inside of her space suit, but she ignored it. She secured the face cover in place and flipped on the oxygen switch.

These vents had been her childhood playground. It wasn't so any longer. Her helmet, tanks, and larger adult size made the going difficult. She moved past the other inlets and ticked them off in her mind. At last, she made it to the one she needed—a thankfully larger chute leading down to the substation dock and storage area. Her heart thumped in her ears like the *whomp-whomp-whomp* that the station's massive ceiling fans made. Venus braced herself.

With hands firmly planted on the slick metal walls, she pushed herself forward and plunged down the chute. She plummeted and then landed on the section that angled at the end. Her gloves had been little help in slowing her descent.

At the bottom, her body tried to flip over itself, and her legs hit the other side of the wall. "Ow!" Her helmet muted her scream, but she clamped her lips closed. She couldn't chance the possibility of a sensor being live, alerting the Commander and his bots to her whereabouts.

Venus righted herself. She panted, getting dizzy from the low oxygen setting she'd placed on the tank. Like a fish out of water, she realized she'd used up the small supply, so she unsnapped the helmet, removing it and her suit. Gaspings, the non-circulated air chilled her sweat-damp body, and she shivered. Couldn't be helped. The space suit was of no use to her now. She did, however, grab her vaporizer gun.

Security lights revealed the maintenance hall doorways. Each of the essential personnel had a small room to store their tools and necessary items to support and repair the station. All but one had a pin code security system attached to the outside wall. Without electricity, though, they wouldn't work. Her grandfather was a genius, after all.

She removed the antique key that they'd hidden in their quarters for years from her jumpsuit's pocket. Before her, at the

last of the doors, an equally vintage lock secured her grandfather's storage unit. The key fit and the padlock opened easily.

Venus walked across the threshold, each of her boots' steps echoing, her body a shadow among the ghostly cloth-covered items. Oil and metal scented the brisk, stale air. Though the Commander's regime barricaded this area off, they hadn't completely shut it down because they needed access to the rooms to repair the bots. Thankfully, Ridenour hadn't understood the value of her grandfather's treasures. And here, there would be enough oxygen to do what she needed to do—or die trying.

The room was twice the size of their living compartment and stuffed full of all her grandfather's equipment and tools. She ran her hand across his astronautic engineer uniform, which hung from a hook inside the door. Though worn, it was as wrinkle-free as she remembered it. Her fingers lingered on the star insignia stitched on the chest. Two strides away, grime coated the top of a computer her grandfather tinkered on and secretly taught her school lessons.

She searched for the rounded frame of her grandfather's greatest inventions and found it at the center of the room. Dust clouded the air as she flung the cloth off it. The surface of the transporter was odd. It was convex, resembling a cut pie, with the slices overlapping each other in the center. Red bricks embedded the metal machine frame in an arch pattern. Cords ran from panels on the back of the unit to a GenerAC Pwr Flow generator. They'd used it a handful of times, sending objects like books or a piece of jewelry into it, but Grandfather wasn't brave enough to try anything alive.

Venus recalled his words after the coup as if he said them now. *“One day you might need to use the transporter. It's not powerful enough for two, but it can support you, my Venus. If it comes down to death by Ridenour's hand or stepping into the unknown, choose faith.”* In him or the God he proclaimed waited on the other side, she wasn't sure.

She swallowed back grief. He'd always called her his joy. There

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was no joy left in her life now. But she could make him proud. She flipped the switches in order from memory and then turned the generator on. Its black display board lit up and hummed to life. *STRLT* glowed blue on the screen embedded in the bricks. The convex shield snicked open, revealing a mirrored round opening. The surface glimmered like liquid steel, moving as smoke.

Venus stared at the transporter, her watery eyes wide, her pulse racing. Beside the GenerAC Pwr Flow unit, she found her “bugout” bag, as her grandfather dubbed it. He’d used one when the plague hit, telling her it saved his life until making his way to the Starlit Space Station in some place called Bethel, Virginia. Embroidered on the canvas tote was the Starlit Station’s logo. She ran a thumb over the raised threads and swiped a hand across her dewy eyes.

Heat radiated from the frame’s surface, and the scent of the machine components warming made her choke. The generator hummed beneath her calloused palm as she leaned against it, waiting for it to fully power up. This was Plan A. If that failed, Plan B, staying and submitting to the Commander, was a fate worse than death.

She set her gun on the generator and hefted the bugout bag onto her back. It was lighter than the space uniform and oxygen tanks had been. She didn’t need to look inside it. She recalled what she had packed. A plain change of worn clothes she’d pilfered beneath the supply monitor’s nose. Along with the first aid and dried food items was an envelope of Earth money, something no one used on the Genesis Coloney, where digital tokens ruled.

A noise from outside the room caught her attention. The Commander’s voice echoed, as did the beeps of the bots. The sound ricocheted off the bare hallway’s walls.

Her heart leaped into her throat. She’d expected them, but not so soon. She stepped in front of the flowing silver surface of the mirror. Its meter showed a full charge. The bluish light brightening made her squint. The surface’s radius was large

enough to step through. She aimed the gun at the open door as she stepped one foot in, and cold enveloped her leg. The surface crackled, but there was no pain thanks to the subatomic particle stabilizer. She pulled her leg free, unsure, but it was intact. An object had to be fully engulfed before the molecular fragmentation was engaged.

The Commander's voice boomed, ordering his machine army to search every inch of the storage area for her. They were getting closer. Their eye beams lit up the open storage doorway, flashing a menacing yellow. She should've thought to close the door. It was too late for that now.

Air caught in her lungs, but her determination overruled her doubts. Scenery flickered across the surface like an image on a computer screen and then disappeared. It had happened before when they'd sent her grandfather's journals into space. With a heavy gulp, Venus stepped into the mirror, the backpack steadying her as she moved.

Intent on escaping without one of the Commander's bots following her, she lifted the gun and aimed at the generator as she stepped inside onto a plank attached to the transporter's frame. Sparks flew as her shot hit the power source dead center. The subsequent explosion hit her in the gut and made her ears ring. It propelled her backward as light burst from the laser's impact and the fragmentation engaged. She fell into nothingness.

about the author



Winner of the 2016 ACFW Genesis Award and Finalist in the 2023 Carol awards and 2024 & 2025 Realm Makers Realm awards, Dawn has been recognized for her published and non-published works.

As a child, Dawn often had her head in the clouds creating scenes and stories for anything and everything she came across. She believed there was magic everywhere, a sentiment she has never outgrown. Nature inspires her, and her love for the underdog and the unlikely hero colors much of what she writes.

Dawn adores anything Steampunk, is often distracted by shiny, pretty things, and her obsession with purses and shoes borders on hoarding. Dawn lives in Iowa with her husband, a chef and food service business owner.