

Chapter One

"Oh, nuts," he said to himself. Jasper pulled the covers tightly around his neck and shoulders and rolled over to face the wall. The alarm kept buzzing, but he just didn't want to get out of bed. Every day since a tribe of Gorans had captured his dad, Jasper had been required to wake at 5:00 a.m. Every single day! Saturdays came and went without ever once being able to sleep in. It was like he was the captain's personal slave. "If you want to stay on this ship," the captain had told him, "you better be ready to earn your keep, orphan or not."

And now the alarm was ringing once again. Another day of fetching the captain's foul smelling tea, making his bed, peeling varnus root in the kitchen or polishing water spots off the captain's silver. All Jasper wanted was to have another hour of sleep; just one. His body ached for it. Every joint felt weary and sore, but he knew that the alarm would not stop ringing until his feet touched the floor. He pulled his pillow over his head, but he could still hear it. Just as Jasper Crane was about to give up hope of ever going back to sleep, it occurred to him that there was something a little bit different about the alarm.

His cabin shuddered a little around him. Probably some solar turbulence, he thought. He rolled over again and pulled his blanket over his head. He was warm and comfortable, despite the alarm. His blanket felt familiar as it fell across his cheeks, but it

smelled funny. It smells a little like the kitchen, he thought as he became more awake. A little like the fire under the grill.

Suddenly, his grogginess was replaced by sheer terror. The warmth and comfort of his bed was gone, and he sat straight up in his bed. The alarm he was hearing was a Red Alert.

He sprang out of his bunk and hit the floor with both feet. The ship never had a *real* Red Alert before. The crew had gone through fire drills in the past, but Jasper knew immediately that this was no drill when he saw smoke pouring in under his hatch. The alert light was spinning, casting sudden shadows in every corner of the room, all at once. Noise. Smoke. Lights. Jasper's heart pounded. On the other side of his hatch he could hear the faint call of commands being shouted by the fire crew leader and the sailors echoing them back.

He had never panicked during the fire drills, but now, during the real thing, his mind was blank. He could not think of one single thing he was supposed to do. *What? Grab his socks? Call the bridge? Press the fire alarm?* He was so confused, and his heart was racing. He just stood there like the statue of a 10-year-old boy, in his underwear, frozen with fear.

His room shook again, but this blast was for real. It wasn't just solar turbulence; it was weapons fire hitting the ship! He was knocked onto his bunk by the blast. His hatch flew open and smashed violently against the wall outside his cabin with a tremendous crash. The whole cabin shook and groaned as though it were being ripped from the belly of the ship. The explosion was so violent that Jasper could imagine the whole quadrant of the ship below the main thruster chamber was being torn right out of the hull by a

terrible pirate's claw -- the charge locker, ballast, 30 cabins and the enormous thruster chamber of the Noble Ray itself. Jasper saw an intense fire just down the corridor, blasting out of Lt. Carrison's cabin door like a flamethrower. If Carrison had been in his bed he was a goner for sure. The Noble Ray shuddered again, and this time Jasper could feel her listing to port. Jasper hung onto to his bunk, completely frozen by fear, as two more explosions rocked the vessel. She trembled along her entire length and Jasper heard the Noble Ray give a tremendous moan.

Fire door. Fire door. He rolled those words over and over in his head, but they didn't make any sense. *Fire door?* What was a fire door? He clung to his bedding, and he could hear the creaking and groaning of the metal bulkheads as though the ship were writhing in pain. He heard shouting from the other side of Carrison's cabin but could not understand what they were saying. Fire door, he kept thinking.

"FIRE DOOR!" he shouted. Jasper sprang for the control panel just to the port side of his hatch. A turn of the black knob opened the panel door. Jasper reached inside to find the red, mushroom shaped lever. He could feel the intense heat coming down the corridor. He turned the lever and pulled sharply downward. There was a sudden hiss. "Warning," the automated attendant said calmly, "the fire door is closing." With a sharp exhale of compressed air the thick gray door closed like a robotic guillotine.

His cabin fell silent like someone had suddenly turned off a very loud and disturbing radio. The Red Alert light was still spinning, but the alarm had stopped, and he could only faintly hear the havoc out in the corridor. Then Jasper felt the room begin to pressurize. He sat down on the floor with a thump and his ears popped. What should he do now? His lessons on fire doors had gotten through to his thick, ten-year-old brain, but

now what? The room was being pressurized with oxygen, and he knew that if he opened the door before the fire was out, he and everything in his room would be sucked into the inferno like incendiary juice through a drinking straw.

He felt another shudder, and he knew that the Noble Ray was in deep trouble. He wasn't sure what kind of trouble, but he knew that if the fire had come this far below decks, cannons of some kind were involved. He also knew that if you were in this part of space facing down the barrel of a cannon, chances were good that a Goran pirate was on the other end. They were a mean bunch -- beautiful in appearance -- but mean and clever pirates. It had to be Gorans. Ever since his father had been abducted about a year ago, the Noble Ray had come across a dozen or so ships that had been wrecked and gutted by pirates. Jasper had to shake the picture out of his brain -- the picture of the wreckage of the Noble Ray, her crew dead, her back broken, drifting among the other carcasses the pirates had left behind.

He could never get a straight answer as to why the Noble Ray was slinking around in Goran space anyway. Jasper guessed that the captain must have something to prove or a vendetta to carry out. He certainly wasn't looking for Jasper's dad -- in a year's time they certainly would have found him. Jasper hated the captain, and resented being there.. His dad and the captain had been friends, or so it had seemed. But Jasper thought that he was cruel and callous, and he wasn't the only one who thought that. Several times, when Jasper was working in the officer's mess, he overheard the cook talking about the captain. There was nothing good ever said -- not ever. Most of it wasn't even repeatable in polite company.

From the outside, Captain Franks looked smooth, professional and polished. His hair was never unkempt, his flight suit was always cleaned and pressed (thanks to Jasper mostly) and he always spoke very softly. But Franks was fond of cruelty. He never liked to confront the men directly, but would send out hideous memos, ordering the mates to carry out notorious punishments or to perform some other heinous duty. Jasper himself delivered the memo that ordered a man to be whipped for simply stealing a fork from the galley, and another man was put off the Noble Ray for swearing. As cabin boy, Jasper saw the captain in his private moments and knew Franks was the worst kind of hypocrite. Franks swore all the time, in whispers of course, and stole rations and pay from the men constantly. Franks was like a tall, good-looking, well-dressed, soft-spoken rat. Greedy and foul.

Franks was especially cruel to Jasper. The captain hated the fact that he was saddled with a boy out of some debt to Jasper's dad. At the same time, however, he loved having a cabin boy to boss around. Before Jasper had come aboard, the captain relied on his mates to do his dirty work, like housekeeping chores or delivering the constant stream of memos. An experienced sailor can get pretty close to mutiny when he is ordered to do menial chores like wash the captain's boxers. So when Jasper had become trapped on the Noble Ray, the captain had wasted no time in spelling out his duties. Within days of his dad's abduction, Jasper found himself scrubbing Franks' cabin floor.

As Jasper sat there on the floor of his own cabin wondering what to do, a glimmer of a thought rushed through his head. If he got out of this mess in one piece, he actually might be free of Franks forever. The thought of finally being able to flee the Noble Ray helped Jasper set aside just a little of his fear.

Fire door, then prepare for eject. It was all coming back to him. He jumped up from the floor and reached for his flight suit. It wasn't on the back of his chair where he had left it. He figured it must have been sucked into the corridor when the hatch blew. He stepped to the gear container and cracked the seal. It slid open to reveal his emergency pressure suit. Every cabin on the Noble Ray was equipped with a gear container. It housed a complete pressure suit, including lining, gloves, helmet, and radio. It also contained two backpack modules, one holding about two weeks worth of the nastiest food rations, and the other containing a scrubber pack to recycle your air and fluids when trapped in space.

The ship shook again, and Jasper realized that there wasn't time to put on the full suit, so he grabbed the lining, jumped into it and zipped it up to his neck. It was an ugly, pale gray-green just like the flight suits everyone wore, but it had no pockets. Instead, it had special adaptors at the chest and crotch to carry away waste when inside the suit. These clipped to adaptors inside the suit that fed the scrubber pack. During his training, he had felt completely sickened by the thought of having to drink his own waste, scrubbed or not. But that didn't occur to him now. He was only concerned with getting off of the Noble Ray alive.

The trouble with wearing the liner without the pressure suit, however, was that the adapter in the crotch tended to make you walk funny. The sailors called it the "scrubber shuffle." You had to sort of walk with your feet apart, because if you didn't, the adapter would continually smack you in an unmentionable place. It was worse for him because the lining was made for an adult human, not for a 10-year-old kid. It only took Jasper one step to remember the scrubber shuffle. The crotch adapter smacked him right where it

counts, and he let out a sigh. He might be able to escape the Noble Ray as it fell apart from under him, he thought, but if he weren't careful, he would never have any children to tell the story to.

The next step--what was the next step? Prepare for eject. Ejecting was an absolutely horrible way to get out of a moving spacecraft. As a ship hurls through space, especially as she moves toward the light speed cusp, there is a radiation wake surrounding her. The engineers use this wake, which is created by a combination of high speed and nuclear exhaust, to deflect small objects away from the vessel. Someone had, at some point in time, described to Jasper how efficient it was to recycle the nuclear exhaust in order to protect the ship. However, he could only remember that an eject pod had to reach a very high velocity to escape the ship's pseudo-gravity and to blow past the radiation wake. Ejecting was like being tied to a chair inside a cannonball. And without the right preparations, the rider could easily become paint coating the inside of the pod. Likewise, anything that was not securely fastened down would become ballistic inside the pod and could pass through the rider or even the walls of the pod.

He reached for the control panel again, and this time he pressed the yellow lever down and twisted it to the left. There was another hiss of air. " You have twenty five seconds to abort eject. Ten seconds to mag storage," the automated attendant said, and began to count down.

Jasper spun around to his bunk. He threw the bedding out of the way and bent down to grab a lever that was sunk into the floor beneath. As he pulled the lever, the cot bent in half and spun out to face the room, forming an emergency chair. He pushed the lever back, and the chair locked into place.

"Five . . . four three . . ." the attendant droned. Jasper threw himself into the chair, and four steel bands slapped soundly around his chest, forming a restraint system with a release button on his solar plexus. The bands smacked him sharply and almost knocked the wind out of him. But there was no going back now, the eject sequence had begun.

There was a loud alarm, and a tube, bigger around than a dinner plate, opened up right above the table on the opposite side of the room. A large magnet slid out of it and began to buzz. Everything metal began to fly across the room toward the magnet. "Mag storage sequence started," said the attendant. Then she started the final countdown. "Eject in fifteen . . . fourteen . . . thirteen . . ." Cups, photos, his belt and just about everything but his bedding flew toward the magnet. It was a horrid clatter, like a poltergeist was stealing everything that was not tied down. "Eight . . . seven . . . six . . ."

The room shook again as cannon fire hit the deck above Jasper's cabin. There was a tremendous groaning and shudder as the Noble Ray's gigantic charge locker collapsed and fuel began to leak from the ship. "Three . . . two . . . one . . ." The mag storage tube closed around the magnet and the stuff it had collected. There was a little bounce, then a sudden jerk. The cabin was now an eject pod. It was like an unguided missile with a living payload, flying away from the Noble Ray at half the speed of light. Jasper passed out.