

Chapter One

Amy Sutter tightened her grip on the yoke as she stared at the monitor on the console. Sixteen oval-shaped, purple objects dotted the screen. She took a deep breath, targeted one of the alien ships and fired her first missile. The enemy craft exploded and created a fireball that destroyed the ship beside it. Amy smiled and wiped some sweat from her forehead. The other ships began firing missiles at her as she turned the *Liberty Bell* to the right and dove hard toward the surface of the planet below. A proximity alarm sounded behind her as the missiles flew over the top of her ship. Amy then pulled back hard on the yoke and lined up her next shot.

She waited until the enemy fleet got closer before she fired the laser cannons mounted on the outside of her 150-foot long spacecraft. She obliterated two more vessels before the *Liberty Bell* took a direct hit of laser fire on the portside wing. The shielding held but the concussion of the blow caused Amy to smack her head against the console. Thankful she was wearing a helmet, Amy shook off the momentary dizziness and tried to line up another shot. Before she could, three more laser blasts wiped out her cannons. Two more blasts caused another alarm to blare. Amy looked at the console and saw that her life support systems were failing. However, her engines were still online. She sent out a distress call as the enemy ships started to surround her. She then steered the ship away from the fleet and initiated the Sprint Drive system. The *Liberty Bell* bolted through a gap in the enemy's formation and the crafts disappeared from the ship's radar as they fell far behind the spaceship.

Amy let out a sigh and quickly searched the digital maps for a suitable planet to land on. Before she could find one, the *Liberty Bell* began to violently shake. The

temperature inside the cabin shot up. Before she should shut down the Sprint Drive, Amy heard a loud explosion behind her. Then all of her instruments stopped working and the cabin grew dark.

The exasperated pilot unbuckled her safety belt and flipped a switch on a side panel. The door over her head opened and the twelve-year-old girl climbed out of the simulator and down a ladder to the concrete floor. She took off her helmet and looked at her reflection in a small window on the simulator. She brushed back a lock of her dark brown hair and saw a welt forming over her right eye. Amy shook her head and smiled at her clumsiness. “Serves you right for sneaking in there,” said a voice behind her. Amy turned around and saw Lt. Yale Brown marching toward her. The officer had a clipboard in her hand and a relaxed look on her face.

Amy shrugged. “I got four of them this time,” she said. “Then the Sprint Drive exploded as I was getting away.” She handed the helmet to the lieutenant and walked with her toward the equipment storage room. Around them other pilots were training for various missions, while security officers stood guard at the building’s four entrances. Amy glanced at the busy soldiers and noticed their tense expressions.

“You can’t trust that engine,” said Yale. “They haven’t perfected it yet.” At 5’10”, the twenty-eight-year old woman towered over her young friend. Yale’s frame was lean and strong as a result of her military training and her short blonde hair fit neatly under her green cap. She wore a camouflage shirt and matching pants, standard issue for Union soldiers, and no makeup. Her light green eyes had a tendency to change colors in differently lighted rooms.

They reached the door to the storage room and Yale unlocked it by running a blue key card with a magnetic strip along a black keypad. Amy followed the lieutenant into the room and watched Yale tuck the helmet on a shelf next to other flight gear. Then she turned to face Amy. “Should I even bother asking how you got into the machine?” she asked. She put her hands on her hips and smiled.

Amy reached into her pocket and pulled out another blue key card with a magnetic strip. She waved it in front of Yale’s face. “Just got to have the right tools,” she said. Yale glared at her and yanked the card out of the girl’s hand. The lieutenant stuffed the card in her shirt pocket and pointed to storage room door. “I’m going, I’m going,” said Amy. The girl tiptoed past her friend and watched the lieutenant lock the door.

Yale chastised the guards on duty for letting Amy slip past them, before she handed another officer the clipboard. Then she escorted the girl out of the facility and they walked side-by-side toward the adolescent’s living quarters. The crisp morning air was a delightful change from the normally arid atmosphere on Paldor, a small hot planet just outside the Milky Way. The Sutter family resided in building 400, in one of the more elegant homes in the 23 square-mile Pioneer Settlement.

A fighter jet flew overhead. Amy squinted at the tail markings for Earth’s Union Defense Fleet. She thought about their ongoing war against the Crownaxians, an alien species that no surviving human has ever seen. The highly intelligent warriors attacked a human settlement on the planet Blaros. More than 3 million people were killed in the attack and eight years later the human death toll had skyrocketed past 29 million, with no end in sight.

Amy knew that Earth's overpopulation and dwindling natural resources forced mankind to seek shelter elsewhere among the stars. However, the Crownaxians refused to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the conflict, which had forced the Union to institute martial law on all human colonies. The five major settlements on Paldor all fall under the jurisdiction of Gen. William Knox, a 55-year-old career officer. Amy had heard rumors that the general had become overly cautious, sending out only defensive patrols, and that some of his subordinates had lost faith in him.

Yale and Amy walked into Amy's home and found Clayton Sutter sitting at the dining room table. The diplomat was typing on a laptop computer. His chestnut brown hair was prematurely receding toward the top of his skull and his fierce brown eyes stared intently at the screen in front of him. Amy said a quick hello to her father and tried to duck into her bedroom, but her mother spotted her in the hallway.

Pam Sutter's hazel eyes widened as she put her hand on her daughter's chin. "What happened to you, young lady?" she asked, shifting her gaze from Amy to Yale, who was still standing behind the girl.

The lieutenant spoke first. "I'm afraid she bumped her head while running a program in the flight simulator," said Yale. She tightened her fists as she glanced at Clayton. Amy watched her dad rise and walk toward her. He put his hand on his daughter's shoulder and looked at the bruise. "I promise this won't happen again," said Yale.

Clayton shrugged and turned toward his wife. "It doesn't look too bad to me," he said. Amy let out a sigh of relief. Then she saw him turn and glare at her. "But you shouldn't have been in that simulator," he said. His face reddened. "What were you

thinking?” He moved his face close to hers. “This base is not your playground. You cannot go wherever you want any time you want to. There are a lot of dangerous places that you need to stay away from. I want you to promise me that you will follow the rules from now on,” he said.

Amy nodded, having heard this before, and forced herself not to blink. “I will, Daddy. I promise,” she said. She opened her arms and wrapped them around him. He hugged her back and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. Then he let go and sat back down at the table. Pam crossed her arms over her chest. Amy knew what she was waiting for. “I’m sorry,” said the young girl. “It won’t happen again.”

Pam looked at her watch and sighed. The auburn-haired woman was a few inches shorter than Yale, but Amy found her far more intimidating. She was a meticulous and ambitious physician with a strong need for order and discipline. Pam tended to be less affectionate than her husband, at least toward her daughter, who frequently felt uneasy around her.

The doctor glared at Yale. “I hope this breach of security is not commonplace, lieutenant,” she snarled. “I’d had to think what a spy for the Crownaxians could do if given the chance.”

The lieutenant cleared her throat. “I assure you it is not,” she replied. “And those responsible will be punished.” She glanced at Amy, who offered a sympathetic shrug.

“I have to go to work,” said Pam. Then she addressed her daughter. “There’s an ice pack in the freezer. Put it on your bruise for twenty minutes, then take it off for twenty, then put it back on for twenty more,” she said to Amy, without looking at her. “It will help keep the swelling down.” Amy watched her grab her physician’s bag and move

toward the door. Pam stopped by her husband and kissed him on his forehead. He looked up at her and smiled. "I should be home by six," she said.

He kissed her goodbye, and then continued typing. Yale held the door open for Pam, and then followed the woman out. Amy noticed the pained look on Yale's face and she wondered if her friend would get into trouble for her stunt. After the door closed, Amy went into her bedroom and quietly shut the door behind her.

She flopped down on the bed and quickly forgot her mother's medical advice. Instead she stared up at the stars and planets painted on the bedroom ceiling. She silently counted each star and gave each one a name, something she always did when she was trying to calm her nerves. Then she thought about the Union Academy again. It would be two more years before she would be old enough to apply. Not that she thought she could get in. Amy knew that her math grades weren't high enough and that her language skills needed to improve. Still, she hoped that she could follow in her parents' footsteps and graduate from the academy someday. Then she would study for her pilot's license and try to get a job on a real spacecraft.

After dozing off and dreaming about the academy, Amy awoke to the sound of someone knocking on her door. She sat up and told the visitor to come in. Amy brightened when she saw Madison walk through the doorway. The 6'6" robot closed the door behind it and walked to the middle of the room. A briefcase dangled from the robot's left hand. The sleek, dark green metallic machine was modeled on the human form. "I'm sorry I'm late," it said. "Suzy Porter asked me to stop by and replace the Science data file she lost over the weekend." Amy smiled at the familiar brass sound of

her friend's voice. Madison rested the briefcase on the desk that sat four feet away from the top of Amy's bed. The robot took out a mini-comp and turned it on.

Madison was the first fully automated, sentient being to successfully emerge from the laboratory of a Union science group headed by biologist Stanley Greenland. Unfortunately for the group, they were not able to duplicate that success with later models, nor were they ever able to explain why the androgynous Madison worked and those that followed didn't. Amy believed that it was because Madison had a soul, an opinion not shared by anyone else.

Originally conceived as a supersoldier for the Union Defense Fleet, Madison was reassigned to Paldor after several Union Council members lost faith in Greenland's work. The constant setbacks became too disheartening for the biologist, who then decided to retire after the Council cut off his funding. With no teachers living in the Pioneer Settlement, Madison was reprogrammed to tutor the students of various ages who resided with their parents in the small hamlet. Since none of the other kids were Amy's age, Madison taught her privately. Amy felt honored to be among the robot's pupils but she still wished that she could attend a regular school on Earth. Her father's numerous assignments kept them moving from place to place and the Sutter family hadn't been back to Earth in nearly four years.

"We are going to start with Algebra today," said Madison. The robot pulled a chair away from Amy's desk, placed it against the wall and sat down in it. Another chair was pressed against the desk.

Amy plopped down in the empty chair and rolled her eyes. "Algebra is so boring," she said. "Can't we start with something else?" She picked up a pencil and

started doodling on a small pad of paper. Without thinking, she began to sketch the outline of a spacecraft. Although she had never seen the real *Liberty Bell*, Amy could imagine what it looked like from having been in the simulator. When she finally realized what she was doing, she filled in the details of her sketch from what she thought the outside would look like.

“Please turn on your tutor-comp and go to page 43 of the math section,” said the robot. “We have a lot to cover this morning. Your last test score was very disappointing.” Amy frowned and put aside the sketch. She picked up her tutor-comp and sighed as she searched for the page. “Look at the first problem and tell me how to begin.”

Amy did as she was told and the duo spent the next hour deciphering the mysteries of Algebra. Then they moved on to History, Science, English and Social Studies. After the lessons ended, Madison packed up its teaching materials, while Amy sat on the bed and stared at the stars on her ceiling. “Why did this stupid war have to start?” she asked, looking over at the robot.

Madison zipped up the briefcase and sat down on the bed beside her. “You know all about that,” it said, shaking its head. Amy shrugged. “I don’t have anything new to tell you. Blaros was attacked and the Union fought back. It certainly is a terrible thing, this war.”

“Have you ever seen a Crownaxian?” asked Amy. The robot shook its head no. Amy leaned against the wall. “I know, I know, no one has ever actually seen one. But I hear that they want to take over every planet in the universe. And nobody can do anything to stop them.”

“Where did you hear that?” asked Madison.

Amy crossed her arms over her chest. “From some of the other kids. They say the Crows are mindless killing machines, just bred for war. And they’ll eat anything, even each other.” Amy grimaced. “That’s so gross. I hope I never have to see one of them. If I did, I think I would just die.” The words slipped out before she realized the gravity of them. “Oh, I don’t mean like the people at Blaros. I know that was tragic and all. But I’d be terrified to come up against a Crow unless I had a laser gun in my hand.”

Madison stood up and grabbed the briefcase. “I wonder what their children say about humans,” it said. The robot extended a hand and helped Amy stand up. The cold, metal surface of the robot’s hand made her shiver. She quickly let go and led the instructor to the door. Amy exited first and Madison followed her through the living room to the front door. Clayton walked over from the kitchen and thanked Madison before the robot left.

Amy and her father spent the rest of the afternoon together. They ate lunch, cleaned up the apartment, and played two games of chess before Pam came home from work. The doctor watched her husband prepare dinner while she talked about her busy shift at the hospital. Amy sat in the living room and played a video game until dinner was ready. The scent of lasagna drew her to the dining room table.

The Sutters had just started eating when Clayton’s beeper sounded. The diplomat read the text message and excitedly rose from his seat. “It’s Gen. Knox,” he said, pushing his chair in. “He’s calling my staff in for a meeting at his office. I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

Amy watched her mother nod as Clayton moved toward the master bedroom. He closed the door and Amy continued to eat. After a few bites, she noticed that her mother

was sitting very still with her fingers wrapped tightly around her fork. The girl took a sip of milk and studied the tense expression on Pam's face. "What's wrong, Mom?" she asked.

Pam looked at her and sighed. "Oh, nothing. I guess I'm just annoyed that he has to go." She laid her fork on her plate, and then pushed the plate away from her. "We're both so busy. We get so little time together." An eerie silence then filled the room as the woman stood and drifted over to the living room couch. She picked a magazine up from the end table and flipped through the pages as she sat down. Amy shrugged and kept eating.

Clayton hustled out of his room a few minutes later. He was wearing a dark blue suit and a red tie. Amy watched him pack up his laptop computer and dart toward the front door. "I'll be home as soon as I can," he said, not looking back toward his family. The door closed behind him and the eerie silence returned. Amy quietly finished eating, and then brought her plate, utensils and glass into the kitchen. She rinsed them off and carefully placed them in the dishwasher.

She entered the living room and asked her mother if she was done with her dinner. Pam glanced at her daughter with a sad smile on her face and said yes. Amy nodded and cleared off her mother's dinnerware. She dumped the food into the garbage disposal before rinsing off the items and putting them in the dishwasher. The girl wanted to watch TV on the big set in the living room but she didn't want to bother her mother, so instead she sauntered into her room and closed the door. The youngster relaxed on her bed with a tattered paperback copy of *Little Women*.

A few hours later, Amy finished taking a shower and walked down the hallway toward her bedroom in her bathrobe when she heard the front door open. She glanced over and saw her father enter. She said a quick hello to him then went into her room to get dressed. With her door slightly open, she listened to her parents' conversation, hoping for some news about her father's meeting. Clayton excitedly told his wife about his conference with the general. "The council approved my plan this afternoon," he said. "And the Crownaxians agreed to meet with us. We take off in two weeks."

Eager to hear more, Amy came out of her room in her pajamas and sat on the couch. The diplomat smiled at his daughter before he continued. "We're going in the *Harmony*," he said, sitting across from his wife at the dinner table. "We'd go sooner but my staff and I need to brush up on our emergency training. Just to be safe." He reached over and placed his hand on Pam's. "This is what I've always wanted. A chance to make a real difference." Amy saw his right foot tapping against the floor and noticed his shortness of his breath. "After all these months, our work here is finally paying off."

"How many ships will be escorting you?" asked Pam. Amy could hear the apprehension in her mother's voice.

Clayton looked down at the table for a moment, then back up at his wife. "There won't be any escorts," he said. Pam gasped and Amy saw her close her fingers over Clayton's hand. "It's the only way the Crownaxians would agree to meet with us," said Clayton. "Any military presence would jeopardize the whole mission. Besides, we're bringing the triboleserene they asked for. They won't try anything with a substance that valuable on board."

Amy rose and walked over to her father. She stood by his chair and put her right arm over his shoulders. “I don’t know, Dad. It sounds really dangerous,” she said. He gave her a comforting smile. “What if something goes wrong?” she asked.

“Yes, Clay, what if something goes wrong?” asked Pam. She pressed her lips together and pushed a lock of hair away from her face. “Do you really trust the Crows after all they’ve done to us? Why do you have to put yourself in such a dangerous situation?”

“Someone has to take the first step toward peace,” he replied. “We’ve all suffered enough, seen enough misery, enough death. Both human and Crownaxian.” He leaned over and gave Amy a gentle kiss on the cheek. “This is important, honey,” he said to her. “The fighting has to stop.”

“I know Daddy. I’m just scared,” she said. She hugged him tightly and pressed her head against his shoulder.

“It’s ok to be afraid,” he said. “I’m afraid too. I’m sure everyone on this mission is. But we can’t pass up this opportunity. We may never get this chance again.” He then tousled her hair and she playfully put up her hands to ward him off. She giggled for a moment, before stepping away from him. Amy appreciated his enthusiasm and she tried to put on a brave face.

Pam didn’t say much the rest of the night. Amy knew better than to try to get her to talk, so she stayed out of her way and did her best not to make too much noise. Her father appeared to be doing the same thing. Clayton went back to work on his computer, while Amy hung out in her room. She played a few video games on her computer until it was time for her to go to bed.

Clayton knocked on her door just before 10 PM. “Lights out,” he said, walking up behind her. Amy was playing “Space Pirates,” a game he bought for her on her last birthday. “New high score,” he said, looking over her shoulder. “Very impressive.” She nodded and saved the game before turning off the computer.

Amy took a deep breath and turned toward her father. “I’m really glad they’re letting you do this,” she said. “They couldn’t have picked a better person for the job.” She stepped forward and hugged him.

Clayton kissed the top of her head, and then let her step back. “Thank you honey,” he said. “I wouldn’t do this if it weren’t important, and I’m glad that you understand that. Besides, it won’t be that bad. My staff and I should only be gone for a few weeks. And maybe I’ll find a little souvenir to bring back for you.”

Amy smiled. “A Morleanne space rock would be cool,” she said. “It shouldn’t be hard to find one. They’re all over this part of space.” She climbed onto her bed and pulled the covers up to her chin.

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Clayton. He turned off the light and closed the door behind him. Amy heard him move toward his bedroom and she was glad that he was finally quitting for the night. She lay back in her bed and closed her eyes.

A half-hour passed and she was still awake. She couldn’t stop thinking about her dad’s mission, so she sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. Her bedcovers had fallen to the floor and her tiny body was shivering, so she leaned over the bed and pulled the blankets into her lap. She cloaked herself up in them, and then spoke in a soft voice. “God, it’s me, Amy Sutter,” she said. “I know I don’t talk to you that much but I have a problem. Well, you already know what it is.”

She looked around in the darkness and felt a little foolish for speaking out loud. “Can you please watch over him? We love him so much and I don’t know what we’d without him.” She paused to fold her hands. “Please. Let him come home safely,” she said. She then lay back down and closed her eyes, hoping that He heard her prayer.