

Chapter I

I was so focused on my impending death that I stopped doing anything. I knew the procedures. I'd run crash landings in simulators, sometimes doing extra ones just out of boredom. But no matter how realistic they were, you always knew in your mind that you weren't in danger. They jostled you around a little more gently - no sense getting whiplash in a simulator - and you knew that succeed or fail, at the end you'd walk out of the simulator in one piece.

The way the ship was shaking now was in no way gentle. But getting whiplash was not as big a concern as whether the ship was going to stay together or if that thunderous groaning was metal about to break apart. Even if the ship held together, all it would take was one wrong piece coming loose. One little hole and we'd lose all our oxygen and heat and pressurization. We had on our space suits in case that did happen, but they were only good for a very limited amount of time and there wasn't anyone in a position to be able to save us. We were on our own.

And then there was the planet we were hurtling towards. The space ship and the space suits weren't going to do us any good if we collided with Mars.

I'd been asked one question a million times by everyone who knew where I was going before I'd left: "Are you really ready to die on Mars?" I'd come up with what I considered a witty answer: "I'm ready to go live on Mars, and part of life is death. So I guess that means yes."

Outside the window there were flames. The ship was on fire. There had been flames in the simulator, but not like this. In the simulator, it had small flames that danced up from the nose of the ship, which was built to take the brunt of the heat of pushing through the minimal atmosphere. But these flames completely covered the windows. The whole landing pod was in a giant fireball. The rest of the ship wasn't meant to survive the heat levels that the nose was. How long would the sides be able to hold the flames out?

But I hadn't gotten to live on Mars yet. I hadn't gotten to step foot on it. Dying while trying to land was not something I'd ever considered.

My head hurt. Maybe it was the way my helmet kept colliding with the headrest of the chair, causing my head to knock against the helmet. Maybe it was the alarm sounding over and over again with a blaring whine.

I stared straight ahead at the panel of buttons and screens in front of me. They all seemed useless now. The screens flashed message after message telling of parts of the ship that were inoperable. Everything was breaking, piece by piece. I didn't want to die.

Then I heard Andre shout, "Snap out of it! We need you! Seiji and I need you!"

Suddenly I was reminded that I wasn't alone in the crashing ship. Andre was strapped in his chair beside me and, though I couldn't see him, I knew Seiji was strapped into the chair behind me. I may have felt helpless to save my own life, but I

sure as hell wasn't going to let them die without putting up a fight.

I activated the emergency thrusters. My brain raced through the checklists I'd committed to memory. I knew what to do. Andre knew what to do. He'd already started doing his part. I hurried to catch up with him.

We made it through the outer atmosphere and the shaking of the ship became less violent. We were still flying towards the ground way too fast.

"Get her around!" Andre shouted. "We don't want her landing on her nose."

Even with the comms built into our helmets, it was hard to hear him over the noise of the ship being destroyed.

It was harder to keep pressing buttons. Gravity was back and it was amazing how much power the pull seemed to have on our bodies. Mars' gravity was less than Earth's, but having not experienced any gravity for six months, it was jarring. As the ship struggled to turn and momentum dragged on our bodies, too, I felt like I was having to slog through mud to push each button. Speed was still essential. I grunted like I was bench-pressing a heavy weight, rather than just moving my arm.

The ship came around. We'd at least gotten the right side facing the ground.

"Landing gear out!" Seiji shouted.

"Our speed's still too high!" Andre said.

I said, "Thrusters are on maximum. There's not much more we can do."

"Brace for impact," he said. "This is going to be rough."

"We have to make it!" Seiji said. "All of us!"

The ship hit the ground hard, but we weren't done moving. We bounced and were thrown around in a different direction each second. Something collided with my head and, even with the helmet, it hurt. My vision blurred. I tried to reach for the back of my head, but I was too tired. I thought I heard Andre yell and I tried to ask him if he was okay, but I wasn't sure I was forming words. Then I was out.

* * *

"Sadie, stay conscious. Don't let things go dark. Keep talking."

It didn't feel like I had been conscious until just now, so I wasn't sure what I should keep talking about. My arms were reaching above my head even though I wasn't telling them to do that. We must still have been floating in space with no gravity, because my whole body was pulling against the restraints to float out of the chair.

I turned my head and looked at Andre. He was hugging his arms across his chest. His reflective visor was up, so I could see most of his face inside his helmet.

I found my voice slowly in my dry throat. "What...happened? We didn't land? How did we get out of the atmosphere again? That's impossible. There's no fuel to take off again."

Andre's breathing was heavy and scratchy as his voice. He said, "We crashed.

We're on Mars."

"But the gravity?" I said.

He explained, "We're upside down. We made it through the atmosphere. The ship held."

His voice faded out. I looked at him again. His eyes were closing.

"Andre?"

He shook his head and opened his eyes again. "We came in too fast. Got her around, but couldn't slow down enough. Hit the landing gear and bounced. Tumbled. We're upside down."

I was starting to remember that. Andre kept talking, but his words were getting farther away.

Then he shouted, "Sadie! Stay conscious. We have to stay conscious."

I nodded my head.

"What about Seiji? Are you there?" I called. I couldn't turn around to see him.

Andre asked, "Why did you want to come to Mars?"

I looked at him. His eyes were pained.

"Can you see Seiji?" I asked.

He told me with the look on his face.

I started to breathe harder. I thought I was going to start crying, but then it felt like I was hyperventilating. He was so young. He was just eighteen when he got into the program.

Andre said, "You promised when we got to Mars, you'd tell me why you wanted to come. We're here now. So tell me. I want to know."

I kept taking overly deep breaths.

He said, "Sadie, you cannot lose control now. That won't help either one of us. Put it from your head for now. Tell me why you wanted to come. You did promise."

It hurt so much, I didn't think it was possible to just put it aside. But I pictured the first time I'd met Andre when we'd started the training program. He was an unusual man. A black Dutch man, the tallest man I'd ever met and quite buff, but kind to a fault, and, as I was 26 and he was 42, I was surprisingly attracted to this "old" man. Of course, Mars Erkunden had made it abundantly clear that relationships were forbidden. They said it was too dangerous. We weren't equipped to have babies in space yet. A rumor of a secret relationship was enough to get you booted from the program.

Andre told me I looked like Kate Middleton. I never admitted it to people, but the first time I'd seen her in a magazine, I thought we had the same shape of face and, though my brown hair was a few shades lighter than hers, I started trying to style it like her. Nothing wrong with wanting to look like a duchess.

One of the first things Andre asked me was why I'd applied to be one of the colonizers of Mars. I'd given him some superficial answer about "Helping mankind by opening new worlds to them."

He'd given me a huge smile and said, "Perhaps when you know me better, you can tell me the real answer."

Even though he was calling me out, I felt drawn to him. Sometimes it was nice to have somebody find a way through your walls.

I'd told him, "The day we land on Mars, I'll tell you."

He held out a hand and I shook it. We had a pact.

The pain didn't stop. It just went numb as I closed myself off to it. I focused on that day eight years ago and now fulfilling that promise. But that came with its own pain.

"It was cancer," I said. "I was so afraid of it or something else taking my parents. They found a growth on my father and they thought it was cancer. It took weeks before they removed it and tested it and we found out it wasn't. Before we knew it wasn't, we'd tried to make a plan for what to do. Everything from driving him to chemo to moving my parents into a one story house if he was too weak to use the stairs." The tears fell upwards out of my eyes. "I tried to be there for them while we went through that horrible two weeks, but I was so scared. And even after we found out it wasn't cancer, it was like suddenly I realized something would eventually take my parents. Cancer or Alzheimer's or Parkinson's or something. And I didn't want to be there for that. I didn't want to have to watch them get weaker and sicker and not be able to stop it."

I wished I could rub my eyes, but the helmet was in the way. "I actually Googled 'how to face death' because I just didn't know how to do it. One of the things that came up was an article about a company called Mars First that was going to be sending people to Mars in ten years and those colonizers would be facing the rest of their lives and eventual death on the red planet. And it was crazy and selfish, but it was a way to not have to watch my parents die. While I was researching Mars First, I found Mars Erkunden, competing to get to Mars even sooner, in just six years. So I applied to both and got initial acceptance for both programs, but six years sounded better to me than ten, so I joined Mars Erkunden.

"My parents supported me through the whole thing, but I never told them the real reason. I never told anybody. I told my parents we'd stay in touch, knowing one day they just wouldn't be there anymore. I wouldn't have had to watch them slowly fade. I'd be on Mars, paving the way for the rest of humanity to come live here. I'd be doing something heroic. And maybe that would make it not so bad that I am such a coward.

"And this is what I get for trying to escape death. Now Seiji's gone and I don't know what's going to happen to us."

Andre reached out a hand, though even his long arm could only stretch three quarters of the way across the aisle. I reached my arm out and took his hand. It felt strange through our space suits. Not very comforting.

I said, "Why did you want to come to Mars? I know you told me before, but just

tell me again.”

He stared ahead like there was something to see other than our damaged ship. “I just never had a big dream before. I didn't have something I had always wanted to do. I traveled around, worked and lived many places and tried many things. Nothing ever captivated me before until I heard about colonizing Mars. That was like I had finally found the reason for my life. That was the thing I was looking for, but never dreamed possible. I was born for this reason. I liked the name; 'Erkunden', to explore. And I was living in Germany at the time, not too far from where Mars Erkunden was headquartered. So even though Mars First was operating in my homeland in the Netherlands, I applied to Mars Erkunden. Claiming they would get to Mars faster didn't make me favor them. I was in no rush. I wanted simply to get to Mars eventually.”

He looked at me and smiled. “We made it to Mars, Sadie.”

That was so hard to take in. Eight years of training, preparing to be here through delays and disappointments, but it was still surreal that the day had come that we were actually here. I would try and hold onto that thought as we attempted to move on from this disastrous beginning.

Andre said, “The first group, the Primaries, they would have seen the fireball we caused and know something went wrong. They will be coming for us.

“In the meantime, we can care for ourselves. I'm going to get onto my feet, then I'll come to help you.”

He tried to undo his restraints with one hand. That's when I noticed that his arm wasn't just sitting across his chest. He was cradling it protectively against his body.

“Andre, is your arm broken?”

He looked up at his arm. “I think it is.”

I said, “You stay there. Let me help you down or you'll hurt yourself worse.”

I looked over my head to what was below me on the floor. It wasn't too far to the wall I'd be falling onto. I wrapped my legs around the chair as best as I could, then started freeing myself from the restraints. When I was loose, I started to fall, but I grabbed onto the armrests and, between my arms and legs, was able to keep from falling. I let go of the chair with my legs and kicked them over my head. As I flipped, I let go of the chair arms and fell the few feet onto the wall, where I hit my feet then stumbled onto my side.

Andre said, “I don't think I can do that.”

I said, “I was in gymnastics as a kid. Apparently I remember some of it. Just not landings.”

Getting Andre down was no easy feat. He was six foot five, the tallest Mars Erkunden allowed their astronauts to be. That made him a foot taller and a lot heavier than me. I couldn't exactly catch him as he fell. But with a lot of brainstorming, we came up with a plan. He unstrapped one side of his restraints. Then, using his good arm, he

held onto the restraints, slid sideways and twisted around until he could drop down onto his feet. I don't think I helped much.

As soon as Andre was down, I went to Seiji. His arms hung lifelessly above his head.

"Was the ship breached? Do we still have life support?" I asked.

Andre stumbled over and looked up at the control panel.

"No and yes. It's all still working."

I took off my own helmet, then twisted Seiji's off his head. His short hair was sticking up like the spikes he used to style it in back on Earth. His eyes were closed and his face expressionless. I twisted off a glove, then reached up and put a hand on his neck and closed my eyes to concentrate. I felt Andre come up and stand beside me, but he waited silently.

"He's not dead!" I exclaimed, my eyes popping open. "We have to get him down."

Luckily Andre was tall enough to reach the fastener on Seiji's restraints. I had my hands on his shoulders and was able to stop him from falling long enough for Andre to grab a leg and together we lowered him to the wall.

I ran to the compartment containing my medical supplies. I didn't think about how that stuff had gotten thrown around, so when I opened the door stuff fell out everywhere. I grabbed what I needed and ran back to Seiji. Mars Erkunden required every team to have at least two people trained in medical care to be the team doctors. When budget strains had cut our team down from six people to three, I was left as the only doctor. I'd gone through a sort of speed medical course to learn not only basic diagnosing and treatment, but also field medicine, which required a lot of improvising.

I knelt beside Seiji. Putting a hand on his forehead, I gently tried to open an eyelid. That's when both his eyes shot open. For a moment he looked frantic.

"It's okay!" I said. "We landed. We made it."

As he looked around him in bewilderment, I turned back to Andre. Tears were filling my eyes again, but now I was grinning broadly. "We made it to Mars! All of us."

Chapter II

Seiji was horribly sick for two days. Readjusting to gravity was exhausting, but Andre and I traded off cleaning up after Seiji every time he threw up, since he often didn't make it to the toilet.

Andre's arm had what I suspected was a hairline fracture. I set it in a cast, a little thinner than a normal one so that he could still fit in his space suit comfortably.

I'd escaped our crash landing with bruises, a minor concussion, and a new phobia of landings.

Andre and I had inspected every inch of the ship to make sure there weren't any cracks in danger of becoming holes. There were mostly dents. We were missing one fin on the ship entirely. A lot of the equipment was damaged. I would not have trusted the hull to get us back to Earth again, but that wasn't really a concern. It had done its full job: it had gotten us here.

We agreed that no one would set foot on Mars until we all could go together. Procedure dictated that we wait on the ship 48 hours to allow our bodies to re-adjust to gravity again. Seiji didn't regain his color for three days. Even on day four, as his physician, I didn't feel he was up to the excitement and strain on the body of getting off the ship. As his fellow explorer, though, I was going out of my mind. Mars was right outside and I couldn't get to it. The fact that everything was stamped with the Mars Erkunden name didn't help. I wish I hadn't known erkunden meant explore. We would have liked nothing better than to be able to get out and "erkunden" the heck out of Mars.

By day five, Andre and I both had our faces pressed up against the windows.

There it was. It had been so red when we were approaching it outside the atmosphere. Here, through the rusty atmosphere, it was actually more of a mix of tan and yellow, like butterscotch chips. Unlike the deserts we'd trained in, it looked to me more like a rocky expanse of beach, but without the ocean. In the distance were hills that I longed to climb. I wanted to see Mars from every angle, walk every inch of it.

After another physical exam and some debate, we decided to leave the next day. I hoped I was making a good medical decision and not being completely swayed by my own eagerness to set foot on Mars.

Early on day six, Seiji threw up again, but he assured me it was just nerves. I still made him wait to make sure he could keep breakfast down before I said we could finally go.

Standing together in the decompression chamber, the guys agreed to let me go out first. I didn't argue. As soon as the hatch to the outside opened, I was climbing down the ladder. I barely touched the rungs and skipped the last few all together, jumping down to the martian soil below. I landed on my feet, but went down to my knees right away. I scooped up a handful of dirt in my hands. It was just sandy grains

with little red flecks in it. It would be the ground beneath my feet for the rest of my life. But in this moment, the first moment of meeting my new home, it seemed like something sacred. I didn't want to walk on it. Who was I to leave my footprints here? One of the first ten people to ever be here.

Maybe I thought that because I had seen the footprint already there in the corner of my eye. It was a series of little ridges in a sort of cartoony, over-sized foot shape. These boots made your feet several sizes bigger in all directions. Maybe the footprint bothered me because I didn't want to see human-made things. I wanted to see Mars, in all its unknown alien beauty. The wind had already been slowly blowing tiny grains of red dirt away from the little ridges, but I hurried the process, brushing the footprint away with my hand.

It wasn't until I'd erased the mark from the terrain that I suddenly asked myself, "Whose footprint was that?"

I looked behind me. It wasn't one of the few I'd left before I'd hit my knees. Andre and Seiji were running all over with a more energetic excitement than my reverent one. But I could also see the clear path of their footprints leaving the ship and heading away from me to give me a moment to myself. I was grateful for that, given we'd spent the last six months rarely more than an arm's length away from each other. But then whose footprint was that?

I stood up and found there were others continuing the path. They were not as pronounced as the one I'd seen. They traveled along the side of the ship, then disappeared in a rocky patch. I couldn't find where they picked up again.

I heard someone coming behind me.

It was Andre. He said, "Don't wander too far on your own."

"I found some footprints," I explained, leading him back to the ones I saw. He'd stepped on some of them.

"Are you sure those aren't ours?" he asked.

"Some of them are. Look, these are mine. Those are yours. But under yours are another set."

Seiji rushed over. "What is it? Signs of alien life?"

Andre laughed. "The opposite. Sadie found another set of footprints of someone wearing official Mars Erkunden space boots. That's not very unusual, given that there are six other people already living here."

I asked, "But why would they come walk around the ship and not make themselves known?"

Seiji turned back to face the ship. "They probably thought we were dead. Look at the ship. I'm surprised we're not."

I looked at Andre. The visors on our helmets were reflective, so with it down, all I could see was a golden, inverted image of myself in a space suit. There was something missing in not being able to see the nuances of his facial expressions as we talked, or to

let him see mine. I didn't want to say what I was thinking in front of Seiji. Maybe it was strange, given that he wasn't even a decade younger than me, but I felt very protective of him. I didn't want to say anything that would make him worry. Even if I was worried.

I tried to ask calmly, "So they find our ship looking like that and they don't come in to see if we're dead or injured or in need of help?"

Andre shrugged. "Perhaps...perhaps they went back for help. These tracks could be recent. If that is the case we should try to get to them before they all come rushing back here in a panic. Seiji, do you feel up to getting the lift ready?"

"Of course!" he said, with a salute.

Andre said, "Just make sure you don't get puke on the lift like you did every other part of the ship."

Seiji said, "Shut up!" but he was laughing as he jogged back to the ship.

Neither Andre or I moved. The helmets had proximity sensors that only let you hear and speak to people you were within ten feet of unless you activated the override.

Once Seiji was out of range, I said to Andre, "You don't believe they went for help..."

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