

Chapter 2: The MMM

The 2080s

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Chapter 2: The MMM

12.30pm GMT Thursday 1 January 2085

‘Thanks for the vid,’ said Tom. ‘That was some of the best destruction I’ve ever seen – hilarious!’

‘Yeah. My mum didn’t think so,’ said Zak.

‘It must have been a tough week.’

‘The worst Christmas ever. Being banned from the computer is like having half your brain chopped out. Apart from watching the snow, all I could do was look forward to my miserable new life on Mars.’

Tom paused. His avatar became sad.

‘I’m crushed that you’re going mate. Moving off-planet is a killer. I know a few players on Earth-orbiting stations, but even the Moon’s too far away and needs its own league.’

‘Yeah. My appearance in Earth’s top 10,000 will be quickly forgotten. No-one ever checks the Mars rankings.’

‘So much for becoming world champion then,’ said Tom. ‘Have all our plans come to nothing?’

‘I’m not going to give up. I didn’t sit there all week thinking the dream is over. I’ll still practice. I will achieve it, somehow.’

Zak hoped his optimistic tone would convince Tom, even though he was far from convinced himself.

‘Zak, I’ve found a problem,’ said Tom. ‘The cheat we’re using only applies to the Earth network.’

‘Oh,’ said Zak, his head dropping with despair. He hadn’t considered that.

‘So you’d better make the most of your time over the next week, as you’ll be back to fighting Spongeymen when you leave,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah, I’ll do that,’ said Zak, with a sigh.

‘We’ll keep in touch,’ said Tom. ‘It’s just a shame we never got to meet face to face.’

‘I’m sure we will one day,’ said Zak. ‘As soon as I turn eighteen, I’ll dust myself off, and return to live on Planet Earth.’

‘I doubt that mate,’ said Tom. ‘Mars is a one-way trip. Your muscles will waste away with the low gravity. Few people have returned to Earth after years of bouncing around on Mars.’

‘Uh!’ said Zak. He shook his head slowly. ‘Couldn’t there be any sliver of hope he could cling to?’

‘You’re young, you might be okay,’ said Tom. ‘Count yourself lucky you’re not going to the Moon.’

Zak laughed uneasily.

‘I am worried though,’ said Tom sheepishly. ‘Who knows what will happen when you get to Mars. You might change, get interested in something else...’

‘No!’ protested Zak. He bolted upright to try and dispel his own gloom. He couldn’t let Tom give up hope. ‘We’ll talk regularly. You can still keep an eye on me.’

‘I hope so,’ said Tom sincerely.

‘Of course!’ insisted Zak. ‘We can even talk on the journey. I’ll call you when I get onboard the ship. Although I don’t know how easy it will be with the time lag.’

‘I’ll look forward to it,’ said Tom. ‘In fact, I wanted to talk to you about the journey.’

‘Sure,’ said Zak. ‘But I don’t know much about it.’

‘Do you know what ship you’re travelling on?’ asked Tom.

‘Hang on,’ said Zak.

He glanced at the top of the wall and navigated the house computer via the icons. He accessed Dad’s files and opened the travel details. Several documents were displayed, tiled across the wall. Zak scanned them and found one that contained information about the ship.

‘It’s called the *Colossus*,’ he said. ‘That’s a bold statement eh?’

‘I’ve been reading up on these passenger ships,’ said Tom. ‘The *Colossus* is the biggest one yet built. Each new ship gets bigger and bigger, so I’m not sure what they’re going to call the next one.’

‘It doesn’t look that impressive from the image,’ said Zak.

‘That’s probably because you can’t tell its true size,’ said Tom. ‘It should look better when you see it for real. You know, inside it’s like a hotel, it’s got everything to keep you amused.’

‘Cool, but I’ll probably just stay in my room and play *Arctic War 3*,’ said Zak. ‘Oh! I bet the cheat won’t work!’

Tom didn’t reply. Zak noticed that the commando was glancing around nervously.

‘Zak,’ said Tom. ‘Have you heard about the attacks on ships going to Mars.’

‘Er... what attacks?’ asked Zak.

‘So far, it’s only been a couple of cargo ships. There was a big fuss on the news a few months ago.’

‘I didn’t see it. But surely passenger ships are well protected,’ said Zak.

‘They’re not protected at all,’ said Tom. ‘There’s a lot of security at the spaceports, but there’s no military escort. Once a ship leaves, it faces a lonely journey across the solar system. It’s assumed they’re safe from attack because they travel at such high speed. It’d be impossible for a short range ship to get alongside a large ship and force it to dock. There’s plenty of dodgy gangs roaming the solar system, but none of them would have the resources to launch such an attack.’

‘So what happened to the cargo ships?’ asked Zak.

Tom sent Zak a news item, which appeared on Zak’s wall. It was a report on the loss of a ship. The footage was simply a view of space, with a grey streak stretching off into the distance.

‘They exploded,’ said Tom.

‘Blimey,’ Zak gulped.

‘No-one knows how for sure,’ continued Tom. ‘The debris is travelling out into deep space, so it’s not possible to recover the evidence. But from the debris, experts ruled out engine catastrophe and asteroid impact.’

‘What haven’t they ruled out?’ asked a worried Zak.

‘Bombs,’ said Tom. ‘Probably planted on board before the journey. And at the moment, suspicion has fallen on the MMM.’

‘Never ’eard of ’em,’ said Zak.

‘The Militant Mars Movement,’ said Tom. ‘A secretive organisation on Mars. They want to stop development on the planet and return it to wilderness.’

Zak remembered bits of news he had seen.

‘Lots of people complain about space development, don’t they,’ he said.

‘Yeah,’ said Tom. ‘But you should take a look at the MMM site. These guys are different. Get on the Mind Mat and I’ll activate the link. This’ll show you what Mars is *really* like.’

Zak wondered if Tom was just trying to scare him for amusement. He tilted back the gaming chair, rested his head and closed his eyes.

The scene opened. Zak stood on a flat area of rock, up the side of a Martian mountain. In front of him stretched a great canyon. It was all very orange.

A burst of dramatic music made him flinch. He sighed, and turned around.

Standing right behind him was a tall man. Zak nearly fell over as he jumped back with fright. The man was wearing a dark red mask, with only his eyes visible beneath ruffled blond hair. His outfit would have suited a commando, being the classic camouflage pattern, but in shades of dark orange and red.

‘Welcome comrade,’ he said, as the music faded. ‘My name is Kort.’

Kort stepped up to Zak again, and offered to shake hands. Zak didn’t respond. The man withdrew his hand, but remained facing Zak, towering over him.

‘Mars, the most majestic wilderness in the solar system,’ he said, sweeping his hand across the view. ‘It was once protected by the scientific community. But in 2052, the governments of Earth gave in to the corporate lobby, and opened it up for development.’

Kort looked Zak straight in the eye. Sorrow crept into his voice.

‘The result has been a tragedy. Mars is being destroyed.’

Zak glanced around, embarrassed.

‘Don’t you believe me?’ asked Kort.

‘No,’ said Zak.

Kort looked up to the sky. A dark cloud grew from behind the peak. Within seconds, strands of grey fog drifted at their level.

Zak tasted the air, which was thick with chemicals. After a breath, it made him cough. This was unpleasant. He gasped a few times, but now he couldn't breathe. He coughed and choked at the same time. He sunk to his knees, and fell forward onto all fours. Now, the cough came from deep within his belly, and he retched. What was this supposed to demonstrate?

His hands clenched, plunging into the red dusty soil. On the ground there was material he hadn't expected, odd-shaped bits of plastic and metal. A flash of white appeared to his left.

'Ow!' he cried, taking a slap to the side of the face, hit by a piece of foam that had blown around.

'This way,' said Kort.

Zak lifted his head. Kort stood on the edge of a crest a little higher up. The air was clearer, so he crawled forward hurriedly, getting his breath back.

He struggled on until he reached Kort's feet, and found a mighty view of a plain bordering the other side of the mountain. In the centre stood a vast industrial complex - countless factories spewing smoke into the air, creating the cloud that was blown in their direction. The side of the mountain had a huge scoop taken out of it. A mining operation was clearly responsible. Like ants, a trail of trucks led from the giant hole to the factories. From there, convoys stretched in three different directions out to the horizon.

'This is the reality of Mars today,' said the man. 'Not your video-postcard images of geodesic domes and kilometre-high towers. Those little centres of civilisation are minute compared to the vast tracts of destruction. The surface of Mars is less compact than that on Earth, and its great features are crumbling under the assault.'

Zak tried to get to his feet. But as he did so, the ground that he stood on collapsed beneath him. As he tried to dart to safety, the whole area began to sink. He was caught in a landslide! It dragged him down the mountain, towards a slow moving river of brown sludge.

As he hit this, he gasped at the heat of it, and was quickly pulled under. Submerged, he couldn't breathe - his body tightened up as he experienced death.

The ordeal had ended. He was now bodyless within the site, facing a huge flag that pictured the globe of Mars. Upon the ashen orange surface, the major geological features of the planet were clear. Stamped in white in the bottom left corner were the letters “MMM”.

The flag billowed a little as if some draught had caught it, and a piece of music started playing. Zak didn't recognise it, but it sounded like a national anthem.

‘The MMM,’ said the man, spelling out the letters slowly, ‘has one simple purpose - to end the human devastation of Mars.’

‘We cannot turn to the law to protect it, because the law has been crafted to support the corporations. Therefore, to succeed in our purpose, we must conduct a campaign of direct action. We will drive away those who abuse this land.’

The flag billowed violently and tore away. In the distance was a factory, with smoke streaming fiercely from its tall chimney. A huge explosion ripped through the central building, and the chimney fell, in relative slow motion.

Zak gulped.

‘This is what we, the MMM, can do and will do. Our message goes out to all humankind. To those living on Mars – leave now. To those not on Mars – don't come. To those who manufacture and transport goods for Mars – cease work. Anyone who ignores that advice will be regarded as a legitimate target.’

The man took a deep breath, his tirade apparently over.

Zak decided he'd seen enough, and opened his real eyes.

‘Thanks Tom,’ he said, ‘I'm struggling enough with this move, and now you tell me that a bunch of nutters will try and kill me and my family.’

‘I thought you should know,’ said Tom. ‘You don't watch the news much, but there are often reports of political instability on Mars.’

‘I don't get it. Mars is an uninhabitable wasteland anyway. What is there to spoil? You can't breathe out in the open – why do all these virtual-Mars worlds overlook that. It's a big, dead rock. These people are just mad.’

Zak slumped forwards with his head down.

‘You’ll find security tight at the space port,’ said Tom. ‘But to me it doesn’t sound like enough is being done. I’m worried that something bad could happen on the journey.’

‘Right!’ said Zak, irritably.

He wasn’t grateful for Tom’s warning. He had tried to hold firm, to believe in himself and his dream, despite his world turning upside down. But he could no longer keep up the bravado.

‘Well if it was up to me – I wouldn’t be going!’ he blurted.

*

2.30am GMT Monday 6 January 2085

Zak awoke to his alarm - the V-Commando theme tune. He jumped out of bed before touching his Mind Patch to turn it off. A single yawn was enough to get him wide awake. He was used to getting up at all hours to take part in a mission. With Tom in the USA, Van in Germany, Arnie in Iran, and competitors all over the world, he often had to ditch standard time.

After quickly throwing on a set of smart clothes he had laid out the night before, he opened his bedroom door.

There, lurching about the landing like an android on low battery was Skye. Rover sat in the corner, looking confused.

‘Uh! Remind me why this was a good idea?’ slurred Skye.

Dad popped his head round the bathroom door, and removed the teeth cleaner from his mouth.

‘Your Gran insists that we make it an early evening visit,’ he said miserably. ‘You’d think she’d be more accommodating given the effort on our part, but that’s your Gran for you.’

‘I wish she’d get a Mind Mat,’ said Skye. ‘Meeting someone in virtual space is just as good as the real thing. Travelling to Australia is such a drag.’

‘You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,’ muttered Dad.

Rover whined. Mum appeared from the main bedroom.

‘What was that?’ she asked.

‘Um. Just explaining why we need to travel to your mother’s,’ said Dad loudly. ‘There is one good reason to make the trip Skye. Gran says she has a special present for you, and wants to give it to you in person.’

‘In that case, let’s just send Skye on her own,’ said Zak.

Dad frowned. It was a bit early for cheek.

Zak wasn’t too put out about the visit. This would after all be the last time they would see her. She had retired many years ago to Melbourne, Australia. He was fond of his Gran, but hated these day trips. Aside from the travelling, he was expected to sit quietly and listen for hours to boring family conversation.

If anything, Dad endured the most discomfort on these visits. Zak sometimes passed the time watching him squirm.

By 3am GMT, they had left the house.

*

4.00pm EST Monday 6 January 2085

It was only a two hour flight from England, but the travel to and from the airports added another hour. The family arrived at Gran’s house, bleary eyed from the bright Melbourne afternoon. A very elderly lady answered the door.

‘Hello. And a Merry Christmas to you,’ said a delighted Gran.

‘Merry Christmas Mother,’ said Mum, greeting her with a hug and a kiss.

Dad was next in line.

‘Oh you should have come earlier, the day is nearly over,’ said Gran.

Zak watched for Dad’s reaction. It was a forced smile.

After Skye, Zak stepped up to greet his Gran.

‘My, how you’ve grown since I last saw you Zak,’ she said with a grin, reaching up to tap him on the cheek.

‘No, I think you’ve shrunk Gran,’ said Zak.

‘Zak!’ said Mum.

But Gran chuckled.

‘Oh the youth of today. No respect for their elders. Not like in my day,’ she said, raising her eyebrows.

They made their way into the living room. To Zak, it was like stepping back into a bygone age. Only one wall was covered with video sheet, and it displayed a single static image, of a nativity scene. The other walls were covered with paper, which like the carpet and sofa covers could only show the single pattern originally printed on. Zak balked at the silvery cut-outs that hung from the ceiling, which he recognised as old-fashioned Christmas decorations. But what he found most unsettling was that nothing was moving. If it were not for the ticking of a small analogue clock on the mantelpiece, he would have thought the room was frozen in time.

‘It’s so nice of you all to pay me one last visit,’ said Gran.

‘Oh Mother don’t be like that,’ said Mum. ‘I’ve explained to you why we have to leave Earth. We would love to join you here, but the government won’t allow it.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said Gran holding her hands up, ‘you’ve got to get on with your own lives, not fret about mine.’

Dad rolled his eyes.

‘You get along quite nicely living on your own,’ he said.

‘Of course, and why shouldn’t I, I’ll be only ninety-five next month.’

Zak noticed Dad biting his lip. His Gran appeared reasonably self-sufficient, but while living to ninety-five wasn’t unusual these days, she had refused rejuvenating drugs. She looked like the oldest person he’d ever seen.

‘Anyway, sit down at the table,’ said Gran, ‘I want us to make the most of our last ever get-together. I have a meal being prepared in the kitchen.’

‘It may not be our last,’ protested Dad, ‘If journey times to Mars continue to shorten, it may be feasible to pop back in a few years.’

‘Oh I won’t last that long for goodness sake,’ said Gran, tutting.

Both Mum and Dad let out a loud sigh.

Zak realised he would be eating an evening meal at the time he normally had breakfast. He always found Gran's dinners somewhat strange. He'd been told she grew up in an era when vegetables were fashionable.

After dinner, they shifted to the sofas.

The family spent much of the time reminiscing. Zak sat there in a daze, behaving himself, but not paying much attention. He noticed that Skye seemed a little more interested, but then she had been promised a present.

This brought home the finality of the move. They talked as if they would never see each other again. It would be four years before he could legally leave his new home and return to Earth. He would lose his competitiveness at the crucial age, never to be recovered.

It was now four days until the journey. Once he boarded that flight to Mars, his ambition to become world V-Commando champion would turn to dust.

His parents did not care about this at all. For them, it was a highly convenient outcome. Well, they'd be lucky to get to Mars at all if the MMM had their way.

Zak despaired. It had all gone so horribly wrong. As the rest of the family waffled on, he alternated between leaning forward, chin on hands, and leaning back staring at the ceiling. Since the news was delivered he had been trying to think of a way out.

He checked the time. To his surprise, it was almost time to go. They planned to leave at 10pm Melbourne time.

It wasn't long before Gran also noticed.

'Well hasn't time flown. It's nearly my bedtime,' she said, 'You know I must keep to my hours or I start to get narky.'

'Of course,' said Dad.

'Now Skye, I have a little something for you.' She went to the mantelpiece, picked up a small navy box and brought it to Skye.

'I have always wanted to give this to you in person,' she said. 'That's so much better than you finding it in a crate of my belongings.'

Skye took the box and opened it.

‘A beautiful ring!’ she said with delight. She plucked the ring from its cushion and held it up. It was a gold ladies band with engraved flowers.

She glanced around, open-mouthed. Mum and Dad were smiling enthusiastically.

‘Oh god,’ groaned Zak.

‘It’s more than that,’ said Gran. ‘This ring has a past. It was given to me by my grandmother when I was sixteen. I have worn it ever since.’

‘So how old is it?’ asked Skye.

‘It is at least one hundred and forty years old, but possibly much older,’ said Gran. ‘It was in the possession of my grandmother from the end of the Second World War.’

Skye appeared to be enthralled, but Gran looked uncertainly at her.

‘Have you heard of that war?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ said Skye. ‘We learnt about it in History. It’s now called the Last Great War, by the way.’

‘Is it now,’ said Gran, suspiciously. ‘Well, at the end of the war, my grandmother was allowed to travel to France to help in a military hospital. There, she met and fell in love with an American soldier. They had a wonderful few months together, and he gave her this ring.’

Gran smiled and sighed.

‘Did they get married?’ asked Skye excitedly.

‘Sadly no. Shortly afterwards, he had to return home to the USA.’

‘Oh,’ said Skye.

‘My grandmother kept the ring, and wore it all her life. Only when she was dying did she decide to hand it on. She gave it to me.’

Skye smiled.

‘She told me that it saved her life,’ said Gran dreamily.

‘How?’ asked Skye.

‘Ah, er..,’ muttered Gran, nervously. ‘Now that’s a story for another day. I’ll leave that in my crate of belongings.’

Skye was about to respond, but Gran interrupted her.

‘Will you promise me something?’ she said quickly.

‘Of course,’ said Skye.

Gran put her hand to Skye’s cheek.

‘My grandmother gave this ring to *me*, her daughter’s daughter. I am giving this ring to *you*, my daughter’s daughter. Wear this ring all your life, and when your daughter’s daughter reaches sixteen, pass it on to *her*. Together, we’ll have created a tradition that could last centuries.’

Skye beamed.

‘I will,’ she promised. ‘It’s a wonderful idea.’ She embraced the elderly lady with joy, then placed the ring on her left middle finger.

‘What if she never has a daughter?’ asked Zak.

Everyone ignored him.

He sat there with his arms folded. He’d not seen Skye so enraptured in a long time. She had been bought off with a leaving present. They hadn’t even bothered to bribe *him*.

‘What was it like when you were growing up Gran?’ asked Skye.

‘Oh, not that much different from today,’ she said. ‘Girls spent their time trying to impress boys, and boys spent their time shooting things on computer, although in those days they had to watch it on a box.’

Skye frowned. ‘Doesn’t sound at all like today, it sounds terrible.’

‘It wasn’t as bad as in my grandmother’s day. Their only amusement was rolling hoops down the street.’

This was met with blank looks from all the family.

‘Well that’s it,’ she said, impatiently. ‘I haven’t got any more presents.’

‘Look at that. It’s time to go,’ said Dad.

Zak looked at his grandmother. Despite her sharp manner, her eyes began to twitch and well up. Underneath that cranky exterior, she faced her only surviving family leaving her for the last time. She would be left all alone.

Zak thought that very sad.

He had always taken Gran for granted. Now he thought about it – he would miss her too.

The idea came to him, as if someone was inside his mind shouting it. He could stay here and look after his Gran, even if officially the other way round. He was sure Mum and Dad would rule it out if he proposed it right now. But maybe he could give them no choice. A plan began to crystalise in his mind.

‘Gran,’ he said. ‘Can I have a present?’

Everyone stared at Zak as if he had broken wind.

‘Well dearie I’d love to give you something,’ said Gran. ‘but I don’t have any boys’ things?’

‘How about that clock,’ he said, pointing at the mantelpiece.

Gran shook her head.

‘What would you want that old thing for?’

‘Because I’m going to make you a promise,’ said Zak. ‘One day, I will return here and give it back to you.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she said, with a tear in her eye. ‘I’ll be lucky to see next Christmas. But I appreciate the thought.’

Zak gazed sorrowfully at her.

‘Oh alright then,’ she said. ‘I can’t take it with me.’

She retrieved the clock and handed it to Zak.

To everyone’s surprise, including his own, Zak jumped up and gave her a big enthusiastic hug.

‘Thanks Gran,’ he said. ‘I’ll see you then.’

Anxious that tears were about to flow, he rushed to the front door.

Outside, in the warm night air, he took a deep breath to calm his emotions. He allowed himself a little cheer. The first step to freedom had been taken.

He called Tom. An image appeared on his video wristband, showing a tent in a small jungle clearing.

So ashamed was he of his own body, that even when communicating by video, Tom used his avatar in a virtual setting. A commando emerged from the tent, wearing only a vest and trousers.

‘Zak,’ answered Tom. ‘Don’t you know what time it is?’

‘I haven’t a clue. I’m in Australia for the day visiting my Gran, and I had to get up before 3am.’

‘Its 6am here. I wanted a lie-in after yesterday,’ said Tom.

‘I want to update you on the plan,’ said Zak. ‘Don’t go looking for a new team-mate just yet. I won’t be on that flight to Mars.’

‘Wow,’ said Tom. ‘How’s that?’

‘I’m going to escape before the Colossus leaves port.’

‘Brilliant,’ said Tom. ‘Then what are you going to do?’

‘I’m going to return to Earth, then come here and live with my Gran.’

‘What does she think of that?’

‘She doesn’t know yet, but I’m sure she’ll be fine.’

Tom’s avatar looked happy, but a little uncertain.

‘Hang on, didn’t you once say she was at death’s door?’

‘Yeah, but she should last a few more years, that’s all that matters.’

‘Okay,’ said Tom tentatively.

‘Only joking. I can give her some company, she doesn’t go in for your standard old lady robo-cat.’

Zak closed an eye and accessed his personal video record via the Mind Patch.

‘Here’s a bit of video, from today,’ he said. ‘It’ll be a bit of a culture shock, but all I need is my Mind Mat.’

‘Got it. So, the career path is back on track.’

‘You bet. I’m gonna practice really hard and learn as quickly as I can.’

‘That’s what I like to hear!’ said Tom, his avatar punching the air.

‘So, you still reckon I can make it?’ asked Zak.

‘Totally,’ said Tom. ‘You’re the most talented player I’ve ever played with.’

‘Thanks,’ said Zak. ‘At least someone supports me. My family couldn’t care less.’

‘I’m sure they’ll take an interest when you’re earning billions from tournament prizes,’ said Tom.

‘Yeah. What a great thought,’ said Zak. He paused, and dwelled on the prospect of becoming world champion. He thought of the glory, the fame, and the money.

‘Snap out of it!’ said Tom, able to see Zak’s eyes glaze over.

Zak heard the door open behind him, and turned to see Skye come out.

‘Hey, I’ll check the video later,’ said Tom. ‘I’m going back to bed. See you tomorrow.’

‘Yeah. Whenever that is,’ said Zak.

The commando went back inside his tent, and Zak turned off the video wristband.

A pair of arms wrapped around his neck.

‘Hello Zak,’ said Skye. She was hugging rather than strangling him.

‘Is that it now, are we going?’ asked Zak.

‘In a minute.’ She stretched out her fingers to show him the ring. ‘What a fantastic present, don’t you think?’

‘Better than a piece of tat I suppose.’

‘When Gran’s Gran received it originally, she could never have imagined that one day it would end up on Mars,’ said Skye.

‘Yeah,’ said Zak. ‘And who knows what may happen to it in the distant future.’

Skye let go, and Zak turned to face her.

‘So how do you feel about it now?’ she asked. ‘Going to Mars.’

Zak didn’t want to reveal his plot. He had to lie.

‘I’ve no interest in the place,’ he said. ‘But I’ll put up with it, until I’m old enough to come back.’

‘Well you’re going to be fun to live with for the next few years,’ she said. ‘I’m really excited now. I’ve never taken much interest in space, but this is something new. I’ve been reading about the cities on Mars. The people there have an easy-going attitude. There’s a good music scene and lots of clubs. It sounds like it might be the place to be.’

‘Yeah, but on Earth you can be anywhere that is the place to be.’

Skye lunged at Zak, gave him a full-on hug, and laughed.

‘You’re so stubborn Zak,’ she said.

Zak refrained from pushing her away. It would only make her angry.

He gazed into the clear night sky. He noticed that he did not recognise most of the patterns of stars, but quickly realised why. He was viewing from the Southern Hemisphere. At one time he had been fascinated by the universe, but that interest had been replaced by other things.

He recognised one familiar pattern, Orion's Belt. To its left and low in the sky was a distinct orange dot, Mars. Zak was sure that it wasn't normally so prominent. The distance between Earth and Mars varied tremendously. Dad had told him their journey to Mars would take one week. In the coming months, it would get much longer. Once he had averted this trip, it would be too much hassle for Dad to come back and get him.

Zak laughed quietly to himself. It would be a bold escape. He was about to have some real-life adventure.