



Snow White and the Seven Droids

by Kristin J. Dawson

A bead of sweat rolled down the side of Snow's cheek as she double-checked *Subtle Chaos'* systems. Letters and numbers scrolled across her tablet screen, verifying the starship's systems. A smile tugged at the corner of her lip. Perhaps checking the wiring to the nav system did the trick.

A dreaded red blip. The oxygen system. Snow slammed a fist against her workbench. She had a hundred things to finish and only hours left. She couldn't cut corners. Not this time. It wasn't some school test. History depended on her success.

"Injuring your hand will reduce your speed and accuracy by nine point one percent." Doc's stilted voice warned as he pressed the "request" button on the shop's water cooler. Again. "The delivery person is four days late. I will send another customer service message."

"Don't bother," Snow whispered under her breath. Customer service no longer existed.

Snow's stomach growled. She barely registered her hunger. She'd eat as soon as the ship was out of the stratosphere. Besides, food would just make her anxious stomach churn.

Snow flopped into her chair, her body aching, while her scanner finished its reports on the oxygen system. She wiped the sweat from her brow with a shop rag and threw it aside.

"Another record-breaking day." Doc's egg-shaped body rolled over. The orange and blue lights blinked on his upper arm as usual. Though nothing was normal anymore. "With no water, you'll need another bag of fluids."

Snow stilled as Doc threaded a needle into her arm. Doc had ordered more pre-packaged fluids. They would never arrive. She glanced up at the shuttle where she'd stuffed all the freeze-dried goods and water needed for the long flight.

The afternoon air was stifling, and the fluids pumped enough liquid into Snow's veins to keep the sweat flowing. As the report ran, Dopey's program calculated what was needed to fix the problems.

Dopey strode around the shop, gathering tools and parts, smooth gears whirling under his transparent polycarbonate chest plate. Adding the latest in droid tech to his system used to be a hobby of Snow's sister, Apple. Snow's stomach twisted.

The lies she'd been telling Apple over the past eleven days replayed in her head.

"All truth eventually becomes known." Her stepdad used to say.

Snow pinched herself. *Stop it.*

When Apple put the pieces together, she'd feel betrayed. Abandoned. Angry. And Snow didn't have space in her heart for emotion. Only panic.

With the fluids, her energy returned. Snow pulled out the elastic from her slick black hair and re-tightened her ponytail. The fluids would take another hour. This would be plenty good for what she needed to do. Ripping the needle from the port in her hand, she jumped up, knocking her sweat-filled rag to the ground.

Everyone abandoned on Earth, left sweating and cursing will soon wish for even a memory of this heat when the globe turns icy.

Doc rolled over, his lights flashing.

Snow put her hand out. "I'm fine doc. I'll return to the fluids momentarily. I promise."

"Your mother would not approve. I sent an alert to your mother's phone and-"

"She'll understand, this once." Snow cut him off, the mention of her mother bringing a lump to her throat. She straightened. There would be time to mourn later.

The tablet beeped and displayed the starship's oxygen system. Snow scratched her head. It wasn't electrical. She'd triple checked the wires.

There was a physical leak. She smacked her forehead. Then took a deep breath. In her tired panic, she'd missed the obvious.

"Blowtorch." Snow laid her back on a creeper, ready to roll

under her cruiser.

"Remember your safety mask." Doc rolled to the far wall.

"I'll be fine." Snow pulled the goggles that hung from her neck up over her eyes. The lenses tinted everything in the hanger green.

"Goggles only protect 83.6% of the harmful light. You need the visor." Doc rolled back with the mask, the blue-glass viewing slit reflecting the overhead lights.

Snow groaned. *I can only see 50% as well with it.* Besides, what statistics would he give her if he calculated her chance for survival over the next twenty-four hours?

To avoid an argument with Doc, Snow respected her mother's protective coding and swapped the goggles with the mask. "What would I do without you?" Her breath was now hot and thick against her face under the heavy welder's mask.

"At nine, you would have lost a finger when you were first learning to repair a fuselage leak. At nine-and-a-half, you would have bled to death after falling from the air bike you built. At ten you —"

Snow flicked on the flame and tuned out the mistakes of her past. The future was the only thing that mattered now. Not the future she'd hoped for, but at least there would be one. And the historical records would survive, if, and only if, she could get this piece of junk cruiser together by dusk. The damp heat

pressed against her back and sweat stung her eyes. Every second that passed, Mars' orbit swung it further from Earth. Her chance for this crummy moon commuter to reach it slipped away by nightfall.

The metal connector beaded, and Snow flicked off the torch. She rolled out from under the cruiser and yanked off her mask. Tapping on her tablet, Snow yelled out. "Sleepy, run the oxygen line test again." Her voice echoed and bounced off the tall ceiling and metal walls of the hanger. *I think we've got it this time.*

Snow looked around the cavernous hangar, mentally preparing to say good-bye. She shuddered thinking about what she'd seen, passing the lower security areas just days earlier. Burned out, tagged by vandals. Snow swiped the tablet screen over to "security."

Bashful, the shop's private security system, was still quiet. No intruders in the complex. Yet. The backup generator's power showed at thirteen percent capacity.

By midnight, it would fail.

If it was like the gauge in her skimmer, the last twenty-five percent was closer to five. She bit her lip. The electrical company's employees were long gone. Once the generators were down, these hangers would be raided and cleaned out within hours.

This shop had been Snow's home away from home when she was growing up, where she'd built her first air bike, fixed a land skimmer, and later where her stepdad taught her about star cruisers, inside and out. She'd leave it all behind tonight.

Outside was the afternoon lull, but not for long. The skirmishes were growing more intense each night. Snow checked the time. Her heart leaped; minutes were flying by.

Snow rushed to the hull of *Subtle Chaos*. The pipes gurgled. Holding her breath, Snow checked her tablet readings.

Any weakness would be disastrous.

"Sleepy, is this full pressure?" Snow called across the shop. Inside the control center office, Sleepy didn't respond right away. He never did. As an information storage device, not as a communicative A.I., he was operating far outside his parameters. After Sneezy broke down, Snow salvaged his parts and integrated some of his parts to help Sleepy in prepping the cruiser. Sleepy-Sneezy wasn't the fastest bot in the shop, but they were accurate.

Sleepy's choppy voice came through the com system.

"Capacity 100%."

"Your capacity is 100%." Apple's bubbly, joking voice sounded through the open door.

Snow spun around to see her half-sister, her blonde curls bouncing as she jogged in. Her chest tightened. It couldn't be

time yet. Could it? Snow wasn't ready. Not yet. Snow's gaze darted to the door of *Subtle Chaos* and back to her little sister, ready to intercept her if needed.

Snow cleared her throat. "You took the land skimmer here?"

"It was completely safe. I brought Happy with me." Apple stood tall and smiled.

"Are you serious? Happy's weapons attract attention." Snow turned away from her younger sister and glanced at her tablet readings. The numbers looked good. Snow shouted to Sleepy, "Keep it on full blast for the next twenty minutes."

Apple stepped in front of her sister, blocking Snow's line of sight to the office where Sleepy was calculating. "I can tell you're mad that I got here early, but I'm almost twelve years old. Let me help, for once." She punched her fist to her waist. "You're not that much older than me, anyway. You're still in high school yourself!"

Snow paused. She didn't want their last conversation to be a fight. She took a breath before answering in a slow, calm voice. "Apple, high school doesn't exist anymore." The words felt hollow. The truth of it barely scratched at the wall Snow had built around her heart.

Snow remembered how focused she was on her study abroad on the Moon when the asteroid slammed into Kenya. Now all her previous worries about grades and scholarships seemed like

another lifetime ago.

Sleepy's voiced cracked over the intercom. "Will do. Keep. Capacity a hundred percent."

"*Your* will do. Capacity a hundred percent." Apple muttered under her breath.

Snow used to think that her sister was funny when she mocked Sleepy. Now all Snow wanted to do was to get this over with. Still, a deeper, instinctual part of her wanted to stretch this day as long as possible. She put her fingers up to the bridge of her nose and rubbed, hoping to keep her oncoming headache at bay.

"Something is totally up." Apple folded her arms and searched her sister's face. "I know you're hiding something from me, and I want to know what it is. Don't you trust me?"

Snow's words caught in the back of her throat. For a moment, she second-guessed all the decisions she'd made in secret. No, she wouldn't put her burdens on Apple. But, her sister deserved to know the reason, didn't she? Before the end, she should know.

Snow squeezed her eyes shut and let out a deep sigh. "Remember what your dad said about Sleepy?" Snow pulled over her shop stool and sat on the edge, eye level with her sister.

"Sleepy's records are more important than one human life." Apple recited her father's mantra when he was buried in his

historical research.

Snow leaned in. "They have all our scientific tech on Mars, of course, but not the cultural and historical records. The World Heritage Project was supposed to be uploaded in phases over the next five years, but with everything falling apart, and Earth's impending ice age, it will be lost. Probably forever."

Apple fiddled with the hem of her shorts. "I didn't tell you I was listening in when Mom contacted Unity Base about the Heritage Project. Dad's project. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but the look on Mom's face. I knew it wasn't good."

"Nope, not good. Years worth of data needed to be uplinked when the Earth had weeks, months at best." Snow brushed an errant dark hair off her sweaty forehead. "You did great to remind mom about Sleepy. The copy of the records your dad kept was in the safe."

"And that's why we're taking Sleepy with us." Apple furrowed her brow.

"That's true. Sleepy is going on the shuttle. And the record must arrive safely. If we don't physically transport the record, your dad's life's work, huge portions of the earth's cultures will be lost forever."

"Those who can't remember the past are doomed to repeat it." Apple's words echoed her dad's somber tone. To him, history was a religion to be respected, for it carried the whispering of

the souls who walked the land before and shaped the lives yet to come.

Apple sighed and glanced up at *Subtle Chaos*. "I didn't sleep all night. I just packed and got everything ready and came here as soon as the fighting outside died down. I couldn't just sit around and wait for Doc to fetch me." Apple walked over to the shuttle and pressed her hand against the metal. "But, you know what? I'm not worried anymore. We're so close. Between Kennedy Aeronautics Secondary School and your training on the moon, the records are in the hands of an ace flier." Her voice dropped, "Mom would have been proud of you."

Snow's muscles went rigid.

By the time the asteroid hit, their mother had already made arrangements for them to leave the planet. They would leave with the first convoy in their mom's top-of-the-line starship cruiser. She was at an army depot gathering final supplies when it was attacked by a mob. Snow and Apple waited all afternoon and night, with Happy guarding the house, while they watched their news feeds in horror at the explosions and raids caught on camera. Their mother never returned; her contacts and their access to the starship vanished with her. The date of the first convoy came; shuttles and cruisers blasted through the sky. That day, Snow decided to take matters into her own hands.

I miss mom, too. The words were unbearable. Saying them out

loud could unleash the torrent of emotion Snow was holding back.

Apple looked up with her big, blue eyes. "I saw raiders moving to the other side of town. They're not moving just at night anymore. Several gathered outside the house while I was packing. It's freaky. Without Happy, I don't know..." Apple's voice trailed off before squaring her shoulders and lifting her chin. "I'll grab the last supplies from the skimmer."

Apple put two fingers to her lips and whistled for Happy to join her. A strong whistle like Mom taught them. Snow swallowed. Her sister would need all her strength to survive alone.

As soon as Apple was out of earshot, Snow hit a button on her watch and growled into the com. "Grumpy, it's time to prepare for Apple's final ride."

A flat voice responded, "Affirmative."

Snow let go of the button and glanced out the door at her sister unpacking the skimmer. She wiped her sweaty palm on her cargo pants until her hand burned. *Focus, Snow*, she chastised herself.

Snow examined the readings on her tablet. The oxygen numbers were perfect. The glorious, green checkmark was lit. Snow allowed herself a millisecond of pride before moving on to the next item. She ran a secondary report on the subsystems to review the yellow alerts. Snow and Dopey exchanged tools back and forth while she directed the other droids from under the

starship.

"Doc, inspect and weigh the items Apple's bringing in. Calibrate your clutter sensor to ninety-eight percent. It's critical to stay within weight limits."

"Get these cables connected and ready to go." Snow handed a cutter to Dopey. She'd salvaged new cables from an abandoned neighboring hangar.

From under the fuselage, Snow could hear Doc's wheel clicking and Apple's feet running back and forth from the base of the ramp to the jumper. A million things could go wrong tonight, but Snow just focused on one thing. The only thing she could control – getting this bucket of bolts off the ground.

Snow rolled out from under *Subtle Chaos* and shouted.

"Systems check!"

Apple picked up her large, pink backpack from her pile of gear at the base of the ramp. Before she could load it onto *Subtle Chaos*, Snow hopped up and blocked her path.

"Grumpy, you're up," Snow said into her wrist com, "Please take Apple out for a last run."

Apple slammed her backpack to the ground. "Another run? You've got to be kidding!"

"A skimmer run is dangerous." Doc rolled over to Apple and locked his metal fingers around Apple's wrist like handcuffs.

"There is an eighteen point seven percent chance she'll be shot

down."

"Doc, voice over-ride," Snow commanded. "Release Apple."

Doc's fingers hissed and unclasped from Apple's wrist. Snow turned to her sister. "You need to practice evasive maneuvers, and I'd rather you practice on Earth with Happy and Grumpy in tow."

"Final systems. Ready for. Check." Sleepy called over the com.

Snow shouted back. "Run the check now!"

"I don't see why I need so much practice flying when you're brilliant. You could have led the convoy to Mars." Apple narrowed her eyes, studying her sister.

"Every brilliant flier needed to start somewhere." Snow did her best to look firm, but her inner voice was screaming at her to hold Apple's hand and never let go. Snow shoved her trembling hands in her pockets. "We need to plan for contingencies."

Apple stomped her foot on the ground. "I don't know why you're pushing me so hard. I could be here helping you load the historical records while you run the systems check." Her face flushed. "It's so unfair."

Snow's vision blurred. She needed food and sleep, but she forced herself to focus on her sister. "Life isn't fair, and it doesn't make sense. One day you'll understand why I'm doing what I'm doing."

And I hope you forgive me.

Apple rolled her eyes, "I know how to secure Sleepy's records in the cargo hold. I'm careful, and you should let me help." She opened her mouth as if to say more, but Grumpy tapped her shoulder with his dark, matte digit. He was black from boots to the top of his polished head. He was several inches shorter than Happy, but he still towered over both sisters.

"Fine, just fine. I'll get out of your way." She spun on her heel and followed Grumpy. To Apple's credit, she didn't look back.

Grumpy closed the hangar door behind him. An emptiness threatened to overtake Snow. She forced herself into action. She tapped her tablet, watching all the lights turn green.

Yes, yes, yes!

"Dopey, prepare Sleepy to be loaded into the ship immediately!" Snow rushed to Doc who was dutifully reviewing and weighing the items he'd dumped from Apple's pink baggage.

"Doc, are you done separating out the luggage?"

"Affirmative. Into the three categories you suggested: necessary personal hygiene, entertainment, and clutter. Everything has been weighed." Doc gestured to the pile of items that had been deemed "necessary."

A loud blast outside signaled Apple's take-off. Snow pushed thoughts of her sister into the far recesses of her brain.

Focus, Snow, you can't turn back now. The historical records are essential. She loaded the last items onto the ship, leaving the pink backpack forlorn at the base of the ramp, next to the unnecessary weight.

Snow darted to the control room. Dopey's gears whirled as he unhooked Sleepy's mainframe from the control panel. In the corner, floor tiles were upended, moved to the side. Snow stood over the hole in the floor that recessed into the cement slab. Dopey had spent hours digging out the coffin-sized crevasse.

Snow punched a code on her tablet and counted to ten. The tiles began to move, pulled on a track, sliding over the hole. No one would ever guess at the secret cavern below. Or she hoped they wouldn't.

"Sleepy, how are we looking?" Snow scanned the screens lining the wall. The computer wired directly into *Subtle Chaos* verified what her tablet had already shown her. The starship cruiser was ready for take-off.

"Weight good. Seventy point six kilograms under capacity." Sleepy's words slurred as lights flickered off. Dopey unplugged Sleepy's last remaining cord.

Snow calculated in her head. *Perfect. That'll be plenty for one person, plus Sleepy's records.*

Snow re-opened the tiles and dropped down to inspect the Plexiglas structure inside the hole.

Doc rolled into the office behind her, a food ration in his hand. "Your calorie intake is low."

He jerked to a stop. His lights blinked rapidly as he inspected the floor, open like a wound.

Before Doc finished computing the situation, Snow snatched the tablet and flipped to the A.I. interface. With a few taps, Doc's blue and orange lights faded. A click sounded, and the droid's body settled, the food ration still clutched between his digits.

"Good-bye, Doc. You've taken care of me until the end." Snow's whisper caught in her throat. She patted his round head. Her fingers trembled. He was only a droid, but he was her mother's creation. A friend. And she'd shut him down much more abruptly than she'd wanted to. But records of the secret chamber couldn't exist. Snow knew her mother was likely to have all of Doc's memories sent to a back-up server.

Snow had kept her plan from Doc all this time, but in her rush, she hadn't fingerprint-locked the door. Her eyes stung. She clicked open his back panel and ripped out the wire to his upload link.

Focus on the future.

Snow turned away.

Scanning the computer screens, she ignored the flashing alert of the dwindling power and settled on the green lights for

Subtle Chaos. When she started reconfiguring the shuttle for the trek to Mars, she'd worked and re-worked the math late into the night. The trip was far, and the supplies were heavy. Either both sisters stayed on Earth to freeze to death, or one attempted the trip alone. Her instinct was to send her sister. If only it was that simple.

Her fingers skimmed across Sleepy's computer components, landing on the historical drives. Sleepy-Sneezy made up a seven-foot-high wall that stretched three feet wide. One by one, Snow pulled Sleepy's drives, leaving Sneezy's conversational components behind. The translucent drives were tucked in between folds of pale grey foam that filled three boxes. With only this historical data as a companion, the flight to Mars would be long and lonely.

Snow couldn't help but check her watch for Apple's stats. Her little sister's pulse and blood pressure were racing. Snow's stomach clenched. Had she made the wrong choice?

The records are more important than your feelings. Focus.

"Dopey, load Sleepy's drives into the spaceship." Snow led the way to *Subtle Chaos*.

She'd kept Apple from seeing the cockpit; it would be obvious the trip was for only one sister, not both. Snow had painstakingly redesigned the second passenger area to house Sleepy's drives, leaving room for only the pilot.

Snow's headache flared, threatening to derail her focus. She gripped the captain's seat with one hand, her fingertips white. Turbulent emotions tugged at the edge of her awareness, but one thought kept them at bay.

This is more important than one life.

Snow took a ragged breath and deleted the app that tracked her sister's life signs.

Dopey placed the boxes that contained Sleepy's history discs into a secure carbon steel container in the passenger seat. It wasn't the lightest solution, but the metal was what Snow could find. Even with the microlattice, the supplies would still be too heavy to take both sisters. Snow triple-checked the dehydrated food and water rations in the cargo area.

Supplies for one.

She squeezed past Dopey and double-checked next to the pilot seat for her favorite lip gloss and star map. She hesitated at the top of the ramp.

Just one last thing.

Apple.

Snow pressed the com button on her watch. "Is it done?"

"Confirmed," Grumpy's flat voice crackled over the com. "Mission complete."

Snow released the com button. All around her was quiet, except for Dopey's gentle hum. The computer systems were shut

down. No blowtorch burning. Even Sleepy was turned off. Snow wasn't sure how to feel, but she knew feeling anything was the worst thing for her right now. She'd mourn later. Not now. Mourn later.

Snow looked down at the items Doc had discarded. A framed photo of Snow and Apple stared up at her. They were on a family vacation at the space needle in Seattle. It was the first building to hover in the air. Their mom snapped the photo of her two smiling daughters, opposite in many ways, from their appearance to passions. Apple was so open, loving and funny, while Snow was contemplative and studious. Though they'd shared a love of the galaxy and adventure. Snow slipped the photo out from the frame, folded it up, and tucked it away in her pocket.

The scream of brakes outside the hanger signaled the return of the land skimmer. Happy opened the hangar door, orange sunset glinting off his armor and platinum parts. Snow checked her watch. The best time to leave was dusk, when it was most difficult for attackers to see.

Apple strode to her sister, long blond strands of hair plastered to her flushed, sweaty head. "Okay, I've done every stupid thing you've wanted. By farts and stars, I'm tired of your insane practice flights. Now tell me what's going on!"

Snow wasn't sure if she should laugh or cry. This was the person she thought could survive on her own? Snow's heart was

lighter, and her headache abated. Her sister had done it. She'd proven to Snow that she was capable of manning the flight to Mars.

Grumpy marched up behind Apple while Happy closed the door to the shop, shutting out the sunset's brilliant oranges and reds bathing the distant hills.

"How did she do, Grumpy?" Snow asked.

Before Grumpy could speak, Apple cut him off. "A class V difficulty - I outmaneuvered two-rider jets and a surface to air missile."

"Looks like your expertise at evasive maneuvers has earned you the right to get *Subtle Chaos* fired up." Snow gestured to the ship's console.

A smile spread across Apple's face. "For real?" She grabbed her pink backpack at the base of the ramp before striding up to the cockpit.

Snow plodded up the ramp. Through the open doorway, she watched her sister inspect the cockpit modifications.

"Our historical bot is in my seat. You planning to stow me in the back the entire way?" Apple joked as she plopped down in the captain's seat and flipped the switches.

Snow let out the breath she'd been holding and stepped in, behind her sister. "How would you like to pilot her out of our stratosphere?"

"What?" Apple's jaw dropped. "You're the experienced pilot. Why would you have me fly her?"

"We've practiced a million times, and your maneuvering skills are excellent. It will actually be safer for you to fly straight out of here than skimming across the surface of the Earth." Snow stepped into the space shuttle and rested a hand on the top of Sleepy's compartment.

"That was before people were so desperate for stuff. Every spacecraft is like a gold mine. A *lifeline*." Apple looked from Snow to the computer screen, "For someone who is supposed to be so smart and in charge, you can be kinda dumb." Apple paused, "Wait. Looks like we'll have time to argue about it while Doc gets rid of more weight. We're thirty-four point two kilos over. We've gotta dump a box of desserts pronto."

Snow put her hand on Apple's shoulder. "I calculated exactly the amount of supplies needed to get to Mars. There is a strict caloric guide to follow on the boxes. I've only packed the most basic of medical supplies, so don't be an idiot."

Apple's hand froze on a switch. "Why are you telling me this now?"

Snow took a breath and continued. "I've packed chemical compounds for trading on Mars. Mom had all the contacts set up before -" Snow paused. "Look, all you need to do is supply it. You'll be like the princess of Mars."

Apple's fingers slid off the console switch. Snow could practically see the circuits in her sister's brain silently firing and making connections.

Outside, a distant rumble signaled skirmishes breaking out between gangs of the desperate.

Apple started to speak, but Snow hushed her. Time was up.

"Stick to the plan I outlined for you. It's a bit like the Wild West up there." Snow gripped her sister's shoulder tighter. "You'll be fine. Remember our Hans Solo secret compartment. I hid emergency supplies."

Snow backed away from her sister and stepped off the shuttle, onto the ramp. The weight sensor moved from yellow to green. Apple looked from the control panel back to her sister. For a moment, time was suspended, and their world took a mighty breath.

"What?" Apple stood up from the pilot's seat, her fingers splayed out to the side. "No! I won't leave you behind. I'd rather stay with you in this hole than go to Mars."

"I have a better chance of surviving alone." Snow lied. Their chances of survival tanked the night their mom didn't return. "You have a new mission now, one that's more important than either of us. Delivering our history. Your dad would want you to deliver the records."

Apple shook her head. "There must be something else we can

try. There's got to be --"

A loud explosion sounded outside the hangar. Snow grabbed the railing of the ramp as the ground shook.

"I worked through so many different scenarios I lost count." Snow argued. "And I've checked the numbers by hand and through Doc's system a dozen times. This is the best solution." Snow's heart ached, torn between forcing her sister to leave and wanting her to stay.

Apple's voice pinched. "What if Happy breaks down? What if the gangs find you? Where will you --"

Snow leaped back onto the space shuttle, grabbed her sister and pulled her small frame into a bear hug. She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed in Apple's sweet jasmine shampoo, searing this last moment into her memory. The feel of Apple's cheek against hers, her narrow shoulders, the warmth of being with someone who knows you and still loves you.

Snow reluctantly let go of her baby sister and pulled the folded photograph out of her pocket. She placed it into Apple's trembling fingers and then clutched her sister's hand in hers. "I believe in you. You could pilot to the stars and back."

Apple's chest heaved, as she gulped each breath.

Snow blinked back tears. "Time and space can't break the bond between us. We'd give up worlds for each other because that's what sisters do. Even though we'll be apart, I'll always

carry a piece of you with me, in my heart."

Snow walked backward down the short plank, not taking her eyes off her sister. "Do this for both of us." She forced a smile. "And don't think I'm giving you the better end of the bargain."

A tear streaked down Apple's cheek, but she returned a strained smile. "Yeah, thanks a lot. I have to deal with surface to air drone attacks, prospectors on Mars, not to mention Sleepy, the worst traveling companion of all time."

Snow's chin trembled. "I love you, Apple. Don't you forget it." She pressed the remote button on her workbench, retracting the ceiling of the hangar.

Apple wrapped her arms around herself. The cranking ceiling was too loud to hear what her little sister said, but her lips were simple to read, "I love you, too."

Through the open ceiling, gray-clouded streaks from other shuttles were marking the sky, headed for Mars. The last exodus.

Apple blew her a kiss and backed into the cockpit. The sisters didn't blink as the door of *Subtle Chaos* inched closed. With a click of awful finality, Apple was gone.

Snow's heart thumped, and she took in a sharp breath. She spun on her heel and raced to her office for cover with Happy and Grumpy right behind her.

On the screens, *Subtle Chaos* rose from the ground, up into

the sky, hovering for an instant before disappearing from view. The trajectory was on target. Snow rushed back into the hangar, staring overhead at spark flying into the sky, the dark gray streamer of smoke behind it. *Subtle Chaos* was safely carrying her precious sister and the historical records on the long voyage.

Another explosion rocked the ground; Snow fell to her knees. A box of steel screws tipped off the counter, spilling across the floor. Bashful's security system flashed an alert on her tablet. She had only minutes left. With any luck, nearby raiders would believe both sisters were on the spacecraft, giving Snow time to hide.

With a few taps on her tablet, Happy and Grumpy shut down. Snow's hands trembled slightly as she siphoned their battery power and redirected the energy into the contraption under the ground. Snow glanced at her watch out of habit. Nothing. No sister or starship cruiser to check. A heaviness settled on her shoulders. Despite the heat, Snow felt cold.

Another eruption rocked the ground. The underlying buzz of the hangar went quiet. The only light was through the open roof.

Snow unlocked the safe and grabbed the only remaining item: a small box. Back in her office, she snatched Happy's Glock from his holster and set the weapon next to the plexiglass bed, below the floor tiles. Boxes of foodstuffs, warm clothing, and

supplies were shoved around the sides, already caked in dirt.

People hollered at each other just outside the shop. Snow clicked the office door shut with a shaking hand. She couldn't fingerprint lock it without power.

She took a deep breath and clutched the box next to her body. She was determined to keep panic out of her voice. Snow pressed the button on her watch to send a parting gift, a final message winging through space to Apple. Soon the starship would travel beyond the range of the moon's relay stations.

"Hi, Apple. It's me." Snow swallowed. "Soon you'll be crossing the Moon's orbit. You'll see Serenity Station and Xiao Anchorage. Back here on Earth, my mind is filled with thoughts of our family. Of you." Snow clutched the box tight against her side.

What do you really want to say? Her heart thumped against her ribs, and she blinked back tears. This would be the last thing she would say to anyone until her watch alarm woke her in the distant future. "Focus on your mission, and don't worry about me. I'll fight every moment because I want to hear your voice over this com, telling me you're safe and sound on Mars. It will be years, but I'll never stop waiting."

Snow released the button on her watch and sunk to her knees next to the opening in the floor. Outside, uncoordinated blasts echoed through the city, and on the other side of the door, she

heard two people arguing inside her shop. Snow ripped open the box. Inside was the last fresh fruit she'd eat in a lifetime. A single apple.

As Snow bit into the red fruit, the juices filled her mouth, making her jowls ache. Heat pumped through her veins, and the apple fell from her grip, rolling across the floor to rest at Dopey's round body. Snow swung her legs into the hole and dropped into the Plexiglas chamber. Her vision blurred, and her body tingled. Snow swiped her tablet and initiated the shut-down sequence. The translucent top of the bed curved around her entire body, locking into place. The gentle hiss of oxygen entering the chamber filled her ears. The tablet slipped from her grip. The beat of her heart slowed. Sleep beacons, and Snow barely registered the needles when they pricked her arm and side. The ceiling tiles above closed inch by inch, and Snow slipped into darkness.