

NOAHZARC

Mammoth Trouble



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chapter ONE

Fire roared beneath me even as the ever-thinning air grew colder. The thrusters on my boots shuddered. The thermosuit popped and rattled, and I felt sure it would disintegrate before I tore free of Earth's gravity.

And if it didn't, my sister would kill me.

The blue sky darkened. I didn't dare look down. Turning my head could send me careening off course, plummeting toward the surface fifty kilometers below. A blip on my heads-up display beeped. I'd pulled away from the assassin-bots, but I knew they were still there, watching me rocket toward the cold depths of space.

Hamilton had said the suit would never hold up if I left Earth in it, but I figured my big brother just wanted to keep me from trying.

“You’d most likely lose control and burn up on reentry,” he said. “Then we’d have to tell Mom and Dad why their youngest son is nothing but an ash cloud drifting over the Atlantic.”

“Then why’s the suit retrofitted with a second-stage booster?” I asked.

“Because,” my sister Sam said, “someday *we* might need it in an emergency.”

Well, if outrunning a half-dozen killer robots wasn’t an emergency, I didn’t know what was.

An alarm sounded in my ear. *Initiate second-stage* scrolled across the visor.

“Let’s just hope this thing works. Fire second-stage boosters.” For a second nothing happened, then just before panic set in, the rockets ignited. My head snapped forward when fire roared behind me. For a heartbeat, I wobbled. Then straightened my head, thrust my open hands downward, and stabilized myself. Once more, I shot heavenward. Ice that had formed on my suit in the lower atmosphere shattered and fell toward Earth. Within moments the sky above lost nearly all its blue.

Thirty-seconds to engine shutdown.

I strained against the forces buffeting me. Just a few more seconds.

The beeping stopped. I was home free.

Ten seconds to engine shutdown.

Billions of stars sparkled against the darkness of space.

Main booster shutdown.

Silence.

Switching to navigation thrusters only.

For a moment I coasted in space enjoying the view. The Milky Way, with its wide bands of blue, red, yellow, and white stars, cut across my vision. I looked toward Earth, the shimmering blue horizon receding below me. Green and brown patches crisscrossed with roads, small towns, and cities covered the southeastern United States. A swirl of clouds churned over the Atlantic. The earth is so alive during the twenty-first century—unlike my own time, nearly a thousand years in the future.

Someday it'll look like this again.

I winced when a sharp pain tore at my abdomen. The two little black-tufted marmosets, rescued from certain extinction and now tucked safely inside my suit, were getting restless. One dug its claws into my stomach.

“All right, all right, calm down. We’ll be there soon.” I looked back toward the heavens and up at

the giant, cratered moon. “Time to go home.”

“Noah! Do you have any idea how stupid that was?” Sam glared at me from the doorway.

“But you’ve got to admit it was really cool.” I lay back on my bed, petting my dog Obadiah, waiting for my sister to finish chewing me out. I was twelve, but she treated me like a baby.

Sam stood with her hands on her hips, trying to look like Mom. They had the same sandy blond hair, but Sam’s was always in a ponytail, otherwise it’d be sticking up everywhere. She had a grease smudge on her cheek that matched the stains on her coveralls. Definitely not Mom no matter what she thought.

“I’m in charge while Mom and Dad are gone.” Sam jerked a thumb towards her chest. “Earth in the twenty-first century is dangerous enough! I should never have taken you down there—do you know what kind of trouble I’d be in if you got yourself killed? Do you even *care*?”

For the first time, I thought I might have gone just a bit too far.

“Just plain stupid, Noah!” She glared, her dark eyes boring into me. Everyone in my family had brown eyes, except for me—mine were blue. A freak

of nature was the way my sister explained it, which is surprising considering my eye color was the least of my “deformities.”

Hamilton came into the room, huffing and puffing—probably ran all the way from the magsphere. At fourteen, he already had a hacker’s body, a little soft and pudgy. He looked around and wrinkled his nose, which made me smile. Hamilton normally steered clear of my room, calling it a putrid petri dish for *staphyl-something* and *pseudo-something-else*. Maybe he really was that smart, but he didn’t have to show off all the time by using words nobody understood.

Anyway, I absolutely knew there was no better place in the solar system than my room. It might be a mess, but it was my mess.

“So,” Sam said. “Did he damage the suit?”

Hamilton shook his head. “Of course the boosters have considerable carbon build-up and the fuel cells are depleted. But the gyro-servos are intact, and there doesn’t appear to be any significant wear on the memory polymer skin.” He frowned at me—Sam glares, Hamilton frowns. “Your actions were incredibly shortsighted.”

“So Sam was telling me.” I tried to look serious,

but I hadn't yet shaken off the exhilaration of that flight. I glanced at my magchair sitting in the corner. How do they expect me to react, when I spend most of my time in that thing?

I was born without the use of both of my legs—a paraplegic. The only time I feel *free* is when I'm piloting a ship. I realized I was smiling again, couldn't help it. Now I could add flying in a thersmsuit to the list. Hamilton and Sam just didn't get it.

"You were supposed to signal us when you had the marmosets." Sam calmed a bit while she paced, stepping over piles of clothes. "I could've been there in forty minutes to pick you up."

"I told you, Haon was there. I couldn't wait."

"Did you actually see him?" Her brows scrunched up.

"Well, no." My cheeks got hot. "I was a little distracted by the robots trying to kill me."

"Noah..." Sam shook her head. "You wouldn't remember what he looks like, anyway. You were only what, five when you met him?"

It was back on Mars. The Zarc family was the guest of honor at a benefit for the Earth 3000 Foundation. I was playing hide and seek with another boy—*what was his name? Stevie?*—when I ran right into a

giant of a man.

“What have we here?” He said, lifting my chin with his finger. “One of the Zarc children. You must be so proud of your papa. He’s an interplanetary hero—off to save the animals.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “My daddy’s going to let me have a pet *ellerphlant*.”

He loomed over me. “Your daddy has no business messing with the natural order of the universe!” I shivered as his face nearly touched mine. After all these years I could still smell his breath, like rotten meat.

“The animals died out for a reason. The earth was meant to be used for the good of mankind, not some *zoo for ellerphlants!*”

His face got so red I was sure he was going to hit me. So I smashed into his shins and sped off. He was gone by the time I dragged Dad back, but I was sure it was Haon. I’d heard the stories about the man who’d dedicated his life to stopping the *ARC* project, and I’d built a picture of him in my head. This guy fit every detail.

“So you have no proof it was Haon you saw?” Sam put her fists on her hips.

“No,” I said. “But how do you explain the assassin-

bots? Only Haon could have that technology in the twenty-first century.”

“It doesn’t prove Haon was *there*. No one is allowed to travel through time except us—”

“No one’s *allowed*,” I said. “Doesn’t mean he didn’t do it anyway.”

“He’d be risking life in prison if he did,” Hamilton said, “or worse. He could never return to Mars, or Venus—he’d be apprehended the moment he set foot on either planet.”

Every human born on Venus or Mars has their DNA sequenced and stored in the Poligarchy’s computer system. Time travel leaves trace markers in their DNA and regular searches would flag anyone who didn’t match their saved signature. I, along with the rest of my family, would set off all kinds of alarms if we weren’t designated as the only humans alive allowed to time travel.

“Well, I know what I saw.” I glared at both of them. “And just because it doesn’t make sense doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

They glanced at each other. Hamilton shrugged. Sam rolled her eyes.

“Someday you’ll want me to believe you,” I said, “and I’m not going to. I know what I saw, he—”

“Nothing we can do about it now.” Sam shook her head. “I don’t understand why you have to be so stupid.”

“I’m not the one being stupid—”

“You need to grow up, Noah.” She turned to leave.

I fought the urge to stick my tongue out at her. Everything I did lately made her mad. Everything anybody did for that matter.

At the door Sam whipped around, her ponytail snapping behind her head.

“Help Ham get the suit cleaned up. Then move your butt down to pod 3794. We have to get the habitat ready.” Sam glared at me once more, then stormed out.

“Seems our sister’s none too happy.”

Hamilton smiled slightly as he watched her leave. When she was out of earshot, he turned to me.

“I can’t condone what you did, but...” He dropped his voice. “How’d the suit handle? Was it incredible?”

I grinned. “You should’ve seen the look on Haon’s face when I hit the magthrusters and launched right in front of him.”

Hamilton raised his eyebrows. “You really think it was Haon?”

“I do.” I saw a glimmer of excitement in my

brother's eyes. Haon was bent on destroying the ARC project, but some of what he said rang true for Hamilton—political stuff and the proper use of Earth. He and Dad got into huge fights about it.

“Well, he scrambled the assassin bots quick enough,” I said. “I lost them with the second stage boosters.” I massaged my neck. “About snapped my head off when the rockets fired, though. You should've warned me about that.”

“I told you not to use the thrusters at all.” Hamilton tried for a stern look but didn't make it. “Nevertheless, I'm pleased. The suit exceeded even my best estimates.” He surveyed the room. “Were you able to retrieve the marmosets?”

I pointed to my desk, cluttered with this morning's homework. *A Brief History of Time Travel* by Nowell Clark was still displayed on my holopad's screen. Inside a clear box were two tiny monkeys about twenty centimeters long, with their signature black-tufted ears.

“I'm not sure they liked the ride up as much as I did. One of them grabbed onto my stomach for dear life.” I lifted my shirt and displayed dozens of red marks peppering my skin. “But I rescued them before Haon got there.”

Hamilton lifted the box from the desk. “We’ll need to get down to the infirmary and give them their shots.” One of the monkeys screeched when Hamilton set the box back down.

Of course Obadiah jumped off my bed and padded over. His nose twitched as he tried to figure out how to get on my desk for a closer look. The marmosets screeched again and started hopping around in their box.

Hamilton laughed when Obadiah turned his pleading hound-dog eyes my way.

“I don’t think they’re in the mood to play with your dog.” He looked at me for a minute. “Why don’t you take the marmosets down, then get something to eat. I’ll refurbish the thermosuit on my own. I’m quite certain I don’t want you anywhere near it ever again.” He headed for the door, then turned.

“The thrusters about snapped your head off, did they?” He shook his head. “Why is it I spend all my time designing technological marvels that I never get to use?”

I reached in and carefully lifted one of the marmosets from the box, avoiding its sharp teeth.

“Come on little guy, I won’t hurt you.” I held the

monkey up. “Umm, sorry... little girl.” I could feel her heart racing. “Just a small pinch and you can go back in the box.” I held her tight and placed her little rump against the injector. She flinched when the machine clicked. “See, that wasn’t so bad.” She glared at me.

With one injection, the machine had given her all the vaccinations she needed and inserted a small tracking device so we’d always be able to find her in the rainforest habitat.

“Now for your boyfriend.”

He didn’t take it much better. In fact he got a good bite on my arm, and it took a while to coax him back in the box after his shot.

When I was little, I’d take it personally when animals bit me. But the more time I spent with them, the more I realized how hard what we were doing was on them. These two little monkeys were running around the forests of Brazil with no clue their species would be wiped out in a couple hundred years. And suddenly I show up, throw a net over them, and haul them off to a room on the moon—a room with sterile white walls, the smell of ozone in the artificially produced air, the hum of instruments in the infirmary—enough to scare any creature out of

its wits.

Now I saw my scars as badges of honor. Every bite meant another animal would live. Rescuing these creatures, even if they didn't know they needed rescuing, was what I was meant to do.

“Come on, you two. Let's get you a little more comfortable.” I picked up the clear box and headed for the rainforest habitat—the one with none of the marmoset's natural predators. “Living here *does* have its good points.”

After seeing the monkeys safely to their new home, I headed to the mess hall. Usually my magchair felt like an extension of my body—all I had to do was think where I wanted to move and how fast, and the chair would respond, thanks to the neuro-implant at the base of my skull. But today the chair stuttered and lumbered around the room as if mirroring my mood.

Even after spending my entire life in the chair, there were days, like today, when it felt alien. I couldn't wait until I finished growing so I could be fitted with my permanent neuro-prosthetic legs, but for now the magchair would have to do.

“PB&J please,” I said. Our chef-bot came to life in

the corner. “Oh, and a glass of milk.”

“As you wish, Master Noah.” It always cracked me up to hear the robot’s French accent. Whose idea was that, anyway?

Le Chef 9000 swiveled and passed through swinging doors into the galley.

I moved to the window overlooking the hydroponic gardens. Dozens of robots sped along the hanging plants, tending them and harvesting the fruits and vegetables that fed the hundreds of animals on board the ship. I could just hear Mom: “All this food and the only thing you eat is peanut butter and jelly.”

Obadiah came up beside me and sat down, oblivious to the view. I reached down and scratched behind his ears.

“If there’s food to be found, Obadiah’s around.”

The ARC, or Animal Rescue Cruiser, was docked in a crater on the far side of the moon in the year 2011. So far removed from where my family came from—nearly a thousand years in the future—but it was home. In fact it was all I really knew, since I’d only visited Mars a couple of times and didn’t remember much and I’d never been to Venus. My parents founded the ARC project before I was born—its

mission to rescue Earth's animals from extinction.

I hoped my parents were okay. Most of the time their missions only last a few seconds, at least from my perspective—thanks to the quirks of time-travel, even if they've spent weeks wherever they went, they can just come back to the moment they left.

But this time, something was keeping them.

Sam and Hamilton kept telling me everything would be fine, but I could tell they didn't believe their own words. The main reason I'd gone on my little thermos excursion was that I couldn't bear to sit around wondering where Mom and Dad were for another second. Or what century, for that matter.

The robot returned with a tray. I took the plate with my sandwich and a cold glass of milk.

"Thanks, LC."

"You are most welcome, Master Noah. Will there be anything else?"

"This is all I need." I gave the robot a weak smile. "Three PB&J's a day keep the doctor away." I scarfed down the sandwich, tossed the crust to Obadiah, and drank my milk down.

I'd stalled long enough. Time to help Sam with the habitat.

The fastest way to get around on a ship the size of a large city was the magspheres. The series of tubes that crisscrossed the decks allowed the spheres to travel at extremely high speeds while keeping their passengers safe in gel-padded seats. It was annoying having to climb out of my magchair into the seats, but if I didn't I'd probably end up plastered against the wall, ceiling, or floor as the sphere screamed down the twisting tunnels.

I held Obadiah firmly in my lap while we sped along toward deck thirty-seven. When the magsphere stopped, the hatch opened and Obadiah jumped down and ran out. I wriggled back into my chair and followed. Moments later I sat in front of pod ninety-four. A screen next to the door displayed "Arctic Habitat - Irish Deer." Below, the word "Unoccupied" flashed in yellow lettering.

I opened the hatch and was hit with the rich smells of fir and fallen leaves. It reminded me of hiking with my dad in the forests of northwest America.

As massive as the *ARC* was, it was still a bit confining day after day. As soon as I could handle the magchair on my own, Dad took me on excursions to Earth. Down on the planet's richly varied surface with the sky spread out above me, I never felt more

alive. Dad said that was the reason he became a scientist in the first place—listening to stories growing up about what Earth was like before the Cataclysm.

Sometimes I wondered about the government's edict that no human could live on Earth again. The Poligarchy decreed that the planet had to be saved for the animals we rescued from the past. It seemed wrong, somehow, to keep people from living on a world so perfectly suited for human life. Dad said it had to do with the guilt we felt for our role in the destruction of Earth. I wasn't sure I felt responsible for something that happened hundreds of years ago, but I certainly agreed we should do what we could to bring the animals back. Besides, questioning the Poligarchy could have terrible repercussions, so Dad told me to just avoid the topic.

I shook my head clear. There were people a lot smarter than me working on the problems of the solar system.

The temperature in the arctic habitat was near freezing, so I pulled a warm parka off a hook just outside the door. I entered the pod and surveyed the room, if it could be called that. Already it looked like a pristine, subalpine forestland—I could barely make out the bulkhead above, and all the trees and

undergrowth blocked out most of the walls.

An electric Jeep Dad brought back from one of his excursions to the late twenty-first century sat next to the hatch. Obadiah ran in circles, excited to go for a ride. I moved to the driver-side door, opened it, and pulled myself from my chair into the seat. Leaving the magchair by the hatch, I slammed the door. Obadiah scampered through the window to the seat next to me.

The Jeep was retrofitted with sensors for my neuro-implant, so I pressed the power button and imagined putting my foot on the accelerator. Of course my lifeless legs didn't move a muscle, but the Jeep lurched forward. It wasn't made for a twelve-year-old driver, so it was a little hard for me to see over the dashboard—but hey, if I could pilot spaceships, surely I could drive a clunky old car. I'm not sure why Dad likes these beaters so much. Give me a star-runner any day. Or a thersmsuit.

We bounced through the woods on a dirt road, little more than a game trail. Obadiah kept his eyes out for squirrels or chipmunks in the undergrowth, but this was a new habitat. Aside from Sam, Obadiah, and me, there were no living creatures in the forest around us. Of course, he didn't know that, so his

whole body shook with excitement as he dashed back and forth between the open windows.

I laughed at him. “Life’s pretty great when you haven’t got a clue, Obadiah.”

His big pink tongue flopped around when he looked at me.

“What am I saying? You get all the food you want. You sleep in a warm bed. The most you ever have to worry about is whether or not I’ll give you a crust off my PB&J. You’ve got it all figured out.”

Satisfied he’d put me in my place, he licked my face and went back to looking out the window. Frozen potholes cracked and splashed while the Jeep trundled along.

“Locate Sam.” The screen on the dashboard positioning system lit up, and after a few seconds, a small red dot appeared with little light rings pulsating around it. I whistled.

“How’d she get so far already?”

The Jeep rattled along for a quarter-hour. The heater didn’t work, and it wasn’t the same as rocketing through space, but I was having fun. Finally, up ahead, I saw Sam climbing over a stone ridge. Dozens of robots surrounded her: planters, sculptors, and dozers (my favorite).

She swiped her gloved fingers over her wrist-comm and the robots headed off down the trail. I brought the Jeep to a stop, looked around, then yelled out the window.

“This is amazing!”

She turned with a scowl on her face.

“What?” I said.

“Don’t try to suck up to me now, Noah. What took you so long?”

“Hey, a kid’s gotta eat.”

“You can eat when Mom and Dad get home.” She looked around at the forest. “This place is a mess. Help me get it cleaned up.”

“I think it looks great. Mom and Dad’ll love it.” I stayed seated in the Jeep.

“Get out here and help me pick up these tools?” She bent to retrieve a shovel, then realized I wasn’t moving.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t bring your chair.”

Uh oh, here it comes.

“I asked you to come down here and help! How are you going to do that if you can’t even get out of the car?” She stomped over and threw the shovel in the back of the Jeep. “Come on Noah, use your brain.”

“Don’t you think I know I can’t get out of the car?” I let my voice rise. “Don’t you think every day I wish I could just hop down and—”

“Oh, don’t play the poor helpless cripple card.” She finished loading the rest of the tools. “You handle yourself just fine, and you knew perfectly well I needed your help. You just use your shriveled legs as an excuse.”

I sat stunned. “I...”

She was right. I did try to get sympathy for being in a magchair, but she had no idea what it was like—always relying on someone else or some piece of technology just to move.

She saw the look on my face.

“I’m sorry, Noah.” Her face softened further as she looked around the habitat. “Do you think the deer will love it?”

“Of course they’ll love it. It’s just like home, except no wolves or lions to eat them.”

“Lions don’t live in the same environment as the Irish deer.” She smiled slightly. “They’ll be safe here. Nothing, and no one, will harm them.” I couldn’t tell by her face what she was thinking.

“Sam,” I said, “you’re not really worried about Mom and Dad, are you?”

“Of course not!” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Noah. I am a little worried, but they’ve been late before.”

She climbed into the passenger seat.

“You remember when they went after the blue whales? Dad said it would be a piece of cake and they’d be back before we had the habitat done. And if we didn’t hurry, he’d stick them in your bathtub.”

I laughed. “They had to go back four times before they finally got Jada corralled in the ship’s hold.”

“She was one stubborn whale,” Sam said.

It still didn’t sit right with me. With the whales, they hadn’t actually been late coming home—they just had to keep going back. But knowing I wasn’t the only one who was worried made me feel a little better.