

CHAPTER ONE

↔ Robin ↔

Spaceport Delta Z, AD 2336

Swoosh! I lift my foot off the ground and my hoverboard glides exactly three inches above the rusty steel beams of Spaceport Delta Z. I'm not supposed to ride it outside of the Central Plaza, but I'm late for school and I never crash. Plus, I'm the kinda guy who believes you should ask for forgiveness instead of permission.

Ah, who am I kidding? I don't usually ask for forgiveness, either. But that's partly because my teacher is a robot, and I think it's bizarre to ask for forgiveness from a robot. And it's not like this is the kind of robot that looks like a person. We're talking square viewscreen for a head, one wheel for legs, and a body composed of leftover parts from a washing machine. We used to have real teachers up here, but none of them lasted more than a few months before they bought a one-way ticket on the next airship off this place. I don't blame them, really. Life on an old, remote spaceport like ours is not for the faint of heart.

I've heard many spaceports have bowling alleys and grassy fields, fancy restaurants serving fresh food, ice rinks, artificial gravity generators, luxury living quarters, and shops where you can buy every new gizmo and gadget in the galaxy. They even boast man-made lakes where you can

take out a rowboat and toast the good life with a multi-colored drink as you watch the airships lift off toward galaxies far, far away.

Spaceport Delta Z doesn't have any of that. Well, we have a gravity generator, but since it's my absentminded uncle's job to keep it running, we're guaranteed to be bouncing on the ceiling at least once a month. Otherwise, we're pretty bare-bones here. No cool shops, no luxury anything, and I've only tasted real food fourteen times in my life — once a year on my birthday.

Not that I'm complaining — not much, anyway. Our bodies can't even process real food more often than that. This is proven by the fact that after a birthday, no one wants to stand near you for a full two days until the food — always beans, onions, and corn — is out of your system and the air around you is safe to breathe again without retching.

Also, we have excellent music playing at all times in the plaza. There's no crime or vandalism, and very little fighting. Everyone's living space is exactly the same, and we're all given the same basic supplies and clothing, so there's no envy or greed. (Well, there may be *some* envy over my devilishly handsome face, but I can't help that!)

We do have one special activity — an arcade of video games that the station commander has built up over the years. Each kid is given an allotment of tokens each week that usually run out by the second day. My favorite game is a virtual reality game called BullsEye, where you shoot a virtual arrow at the screen and try to hit the center of these constantly moving circles. The only person who can come close to beating my high score is my cousin, Will, and he's thousands of points behind me.

Out of the forty-three full-time residents of Delta Z (although that number changes monthly as workers rotate in and out), Will is my only real friend (and he pretty much *has* to hang out with me due to us being related), but that's okay. As Uncle Kent says, I'm an "acquired taste." Not everyone gets me.

All things considered, this is a pretty good life. Better than being stuck on Earth, the only habitable planet in this solar system. Even though we're half a light-year away in the Oort Cloud, just thinking about that place makes me shudder.

"Catch!"

I expertly jump up and land backward on my board without missing a beat. The board slows and hums as it hovers outside Shane's Service Station and Garage. I reach out with one hand just as Shane — Delta Z's head mechanic — launches a round object at my head. I catch it right before it smacks me in the forehead.

"Nice," he says, and saunters back into his shop. Shane's a man of few words, but besides Will and Uncle Kent, he's the only other person I hang out with on a regular basis, and one of the only other "lifers" who never leaves this place. I open my palm to find a brand-new roll of clear tape. He must have won it in a poker game with a visiting pilot. That's how he gets most things.

"Yes!" I shout. "Thanks, Shane!" He gives me a wave as he disappears under a short-range shuttlecraft that he's been working on for two weeks. It's been decommissioned due to it tending to fall apart in outer space, but if anyone can get it up and running again, it's Shane. Just so long as no one tries to rush him. Then he'll toss his tools aside and play

a few hands of the card game that runs all hours in the back of his garage until he's good and ready to work again.

I stick the tape in my pocket and zoom off again on the board, my mind racing with all the ways I can use this rare and precious item in my magic act.

Yes, I have a magic act. I can also ride a unicycle, juggle fire sticks, fence, and play speed chess — sometimes all at once. Hobbies are encouraged on Delta Z. Keeping us busy keeps us out of trouble. Or that's the idea, anyway. Cousin Will can speak four languages, jump five feet straight up, and bend his fingers completely backward until they're lying flat on the back of his hand. It's gross. But he's a big hit at parties.

I take a shortcut and turn down the narrow corridor that runs past the cargo bay where the storage rooms are located. Since we're primarily a transfer port between the planets in the three known star systems, none of the boxes or crates that arrive stay here long, a few days at most. One ship drops them off, and another picks them up. The cargo bay is off-limits to kids, which of course means I have to check it out whenever I'm in the area.

Today the room is bustling with activity, which is unusual. I pull up short and hop off my board, flipping it up and catching it neatly under one arm. I watch through the long window as workers in the same green outfit as I'm wearing wheel in solid black boxes of all different sizes, each marked *FRAGILE, DO NOT TURN UPSIDE DOWN*.

Half of them are upside-down.

The workers are stacking the boxes against the far wall, which means Delta Z is their final destination. I wonder what could be inside. Our monthly supplies already came

last week, and these boxes are fancier than usual, made of some kind of composite material I haven't seen before.

I sniff the air. Food isn't supposed to travel between planets — something about microorganisms native to each individual planet being very dangerous somewhere else. If a tomato seed grown on one planet were planted in the soil of another, the damage could destroy the entire ecosystem of that planet. Our paltry birthday beans are sanitized for days before they're served. Still, every once in a while someone tries to sneak something off-world and it passes through here. We don't have any soil to risk contaminating, so storing contraband here isn't unheard of. But these boxes have no discernible smell, at least not from out here.

Under the *FRAGILE* warning I spot a row of smaller letters. I press my face as close to the window as I dare without smacking it with my forehead and drawing unwanted attention. Usually I'm a leap-before-I-look kinda guy, but Vinnie, the cargo delivery foreman, is a big dude who takes his job very seriously. Last time he found me hanging around here he chased me away with a vacuum cleaner. If I squint I can just make out the words:

PRIVATE PROPERTY OF LOCKSLEY MANOR

Huh. Weird. There's no one here named Locksley Manor. Or, wait . . . I think a manor might be another word for a fancy house. Either that or it's a six-legged biting toad that once thrived on planets with high levels of nitrogen in their atmosphere. I really should pay more attention when Roboteach talks.

As I stare at the words on the box, a vague, fuzzy scene

flits through my mind: a room made of glass walls, with something blue and white on the other side. I can't make out any details, though. This vision is followed by a whiff of something sweet, an odor I'm sure I've never smelled before. Then, as fast as it came, the scene is gone. It couldn't have been a memory. I've never been off Delta Z, and we don't have any place that looks or smells like that here.

I shake my head to clear it. The name *Locksley* must have conjured up something I read about in school, that's all. I move farther down the window toward the docking bay, hoping to spot the ship that made the delivery. Usually the pilot and any crew members will come aboard for a little break to stretch their legs, chat with us natives, maybe stop at Shane's to repair a part or play a hand of poker. Or at the very least they stay to refuel. But unless he did all that before unloading — which would be unusual — whoever delivered these boxes must have been in a big hurry because the docking bay is empty already. The arms that grab the arriving ships hang open, ready to pull in the next one.

I've spent much longer here than I should have. If I'm late for school again I'll have to "volunteer" at the waste disposal station all the way in the bowels (pun intended) of the spaceport.

The cargo bay workers have moved on to the next room, so the coast is clear. We get so little privacy on a spaceport this small, we need to take advantage of it when it comes our way. I'll just have to be quick.

I slip inside and scurry over to the closest stack. The boxes are all sealed up tight, with keypads on them that give no indication of the combination to spring open the lock. Maybe their weight will give a clue of their contents. I pick up the closest box. It's neither heavy nor light. I start to

feel silly. They're probably something boring like spare parts for one of the oxygen machines that pump our air. I'll find out soon enough, anyway. Secrets don't stay that way for long here.

I replace the box in the pile and wind up jostling the one next to it. When it moves, I catch a glimpse of something red stuck between that box and the one behind it. I stare at the object. Red's not a color we ever see unless someone is bleeding. Color in general is rare. The nearby planets have all used up their natural resources, so there's basically nothing to make dyes out of, no clay, minerals, gems, berries, plants, flowers, or insects. The only reason our uniforms are green is because there's so much nickel alloy in the pipes here that our no-color clothes come out green after only one washing.

My hand reaches out of its own accord. I grab the tip of the strange object and pull, sliding out a long, soft, nearly weightless thing with a stiff yet flexible piece running down the center. My brain searches for the right word and I gasp a little when I register what I'm holding.

It's a feather! *A real feather!* I glide my hand down it, relishing the feel as the fluffy part slides between my fingers. I half expect the color to wipe off, but it doesn't. This feather was once a part of a living bird, and this was the *actual* color. No dye made this.

I've never seen an animal or a bird in real life. No one I know has. They're pretty much the stuff of legends, extinct for two hundred years on every planet known to humankind. And yet here is a feather.

I quickly run around the piles, peering between the boxes, but nothing else turns up. Since the boxes are all sealed, it must have gotten into the transport ship somehow,

and then was gathered up with the delivery. How the workers missed it is anyone's guess. But I'm sure glad they did.

"Robin!" an annoyed voice growls from behind me. "What's your excuse this time? Got lost on the way to the schoolroom again?"

I move the feather behind my board and turn around to find the red-faced foreman. "Um, look, a ship's coming!"

He turns toward the empty expanse of space, and I run out before he can fetch his vacuum.

As soon as I'm clear of the cargo bay, I stash the feather in my pocket, hop on my board, and aim for the classroom doorway at the end of the long corridor. I've almost reached it when Will turns the corner and is suddenly right in front of me. I can't stop in time, so we bonk right into each other and topple backward. Actually, I probably could have stopped in time, but it's just more fun to knock each other over. This tells you how exciting my life usually is.

Will groans dramatically. "Robin! I think this time you've ruptured my spleen! I may only have moments to live!"

We both burst out laughing. That never gets old. Neither of us actually know what a spleen is, or what rupturing it would mean, but it's a line from an old video one of our teachers showed us a few years ago about when people used to get injured and their cells wouldn't automatically repair themselves after one injection from the nurse's medi-gun.

Robo-teach's head appears in the doorway. "Do you boys need a formal invitation to join the rest of your classmates?" For a robot, our teacher has a sarcastic streak that I have to admit I admire.

"We're sorry," Will says. He has no problem apologizing to people, including those made of metal circuitry and spare parts.

I follow Will into class and we join the others. The current population of kids on Delta Z is exactly nine. Our ages span from five (little Lisbeth) to sixteen (a rather fidgety boy named Toby who sings in his sleep — I know this because his family's home unit is next to ours). The best kid to cheat off of on a test is twelve-year-old Elan, whose hobby is memorizing the digits of pi, and the easiest kid to fool with a magic trick is ten-year-old Gabriella. I've gotten many extra tokens off of her as payment for my performances.

Such a large age spread means we spend our days doing anything from calculus to singing the alphabet. Today's lesson is about history, my least favorite topic. Up here most of us don't *have* a history. Why think about all that other people have lost?

As Robo-teach drones on about how something called *oranges* used to grow on something called *trees*, I slouch down low in my chair and pull out the feather. What kind of creature could it have come from? I twist it this way and that, noticing how the individual hairs clump together, then separate at the slightest touch. Would the creature have lived in a cold climate or hot? I've never felt extreme temperatures either way, so I can only wonder at the difference. Did it walk? Could it talk? *Do* animals talk? Maybe I should have tuned in a little more to the lessons after all.

I'm so absorbed in my find that it takes me much longer than it should to notice that Robo-teach and eight wide-eyed classmates have made a ring around my desk. Darn my remarkable ability to focus.

Robo-teach extends the pincher hook that is his hand, and after a brief hesitation, I place the feather in it. He drops the feather into a nook in his chest cavity, and soon images begin to flash in quick succession on his viewscreen of a

face. Will and I exchange a look of surprise. What kind of new party trick is this? Has he always been able to do this?

“I am able to use the DNA of objects to trace their history,” Robo-teach says, answering my unasked question. “It’s a new program I’m experimenting with.”

My brain has a hard time assigning words to the images I’m seeing in the pictures. A house, I think. An ocean. An egg? Or is that what they called an umbrella? Beasts with four legs, two legs, eight legs, wings! The images begin to slow, and then stop at a photo of a bird with shockingly bright blue, yellow, and red feathers. The letters below it spell out *MACAW*. This must be where my feather came from! Not this specific bird, of course, but one of that type. I could look at this macaw creature all day, but Robo-teach’s screen has one last image to pull up, and this one is even odder.

A man with light brown hair, a square jaw, and bright green eyes is leaning against what looks like a real tree. Trees haven’t existed for ages on the planet below us, or on any planets in the known star systems. The man — wearing a pointy brown hat — is holding a red feather with one hand and a piece of stiff fabric with his other.

“Long before digi-pens were invented, people used to dip the ends of feathers — called the quill — into ink to write with,” Robo-teach explains. No one is paying attention. He continues anyway. “They originally made the ink from eggs, ash, and honey.” When we continue to stare mutely at the screen, he adds, “Honey is a sticky material that is secreted from bees. Bees were flying, stinging creatures that —”

“Okay, okay, we get it,” Toby interrupts. “Can the history lesson wait?”