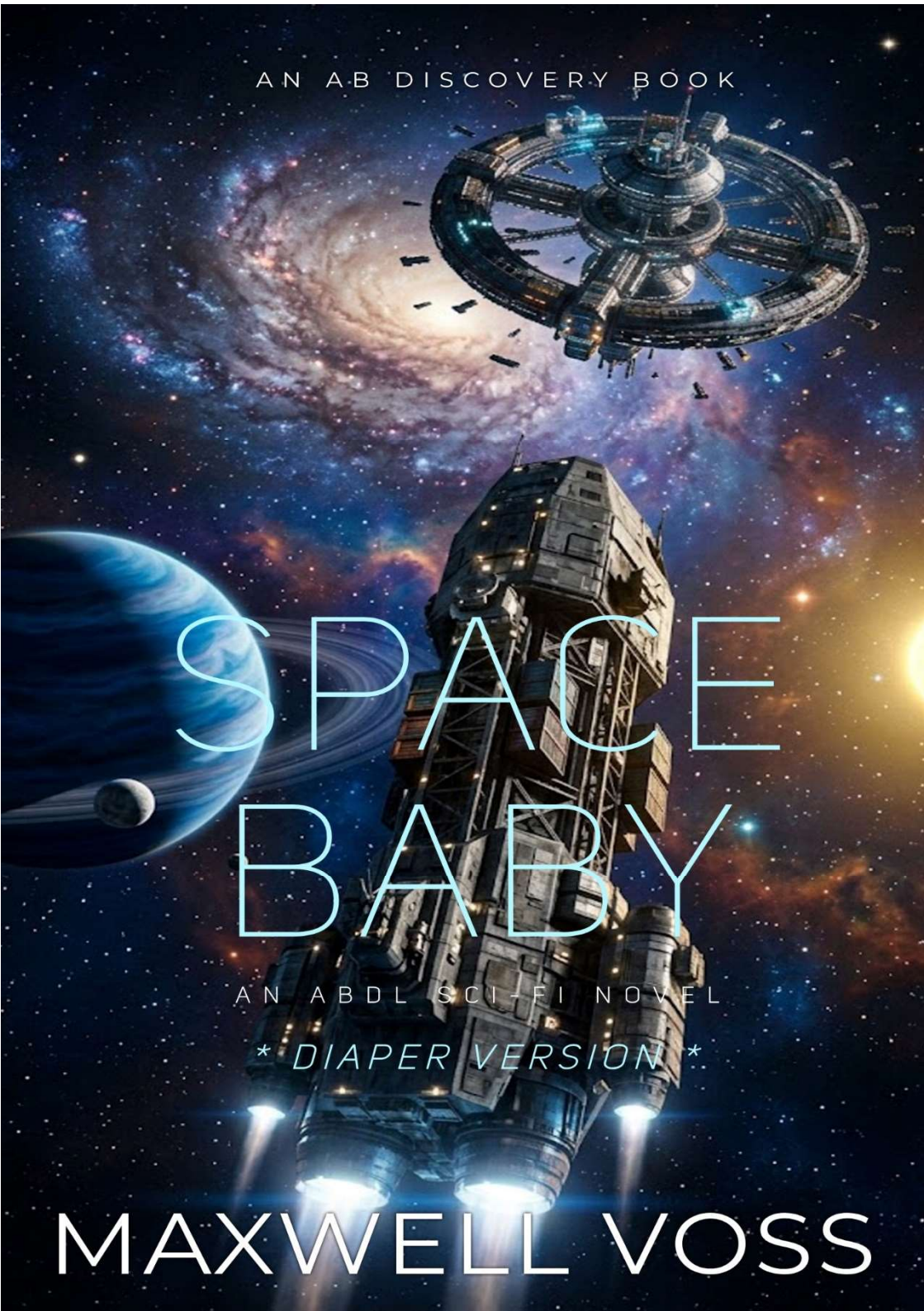

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK
SPACE BABY
AN ABDL SCI-FI NOVEL
* DIAPER VERSION *
MAXWELL VOSS

The Space Baby

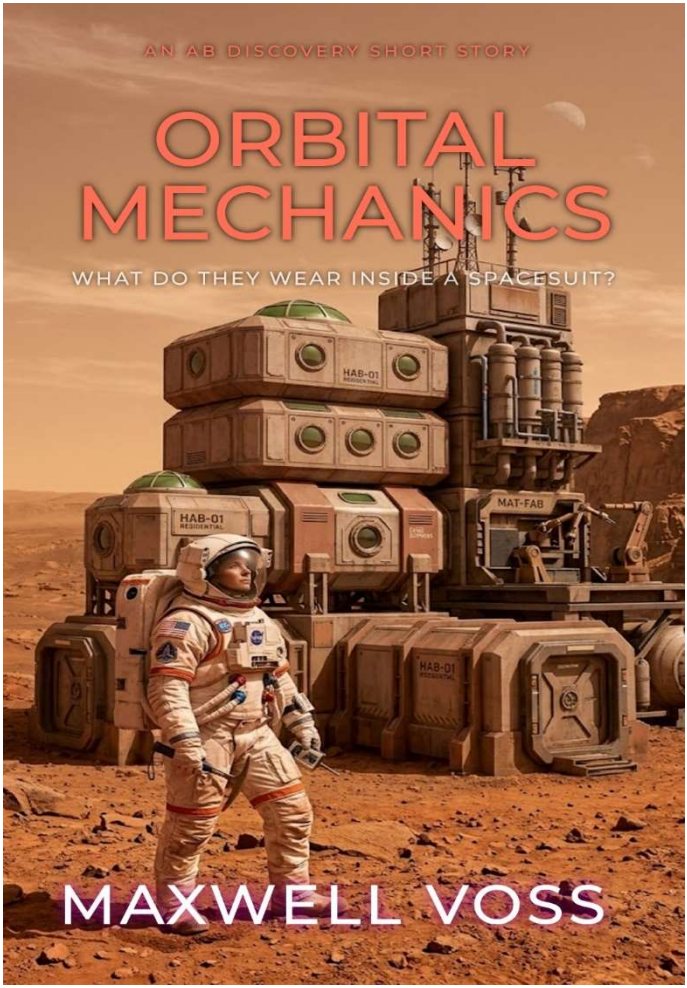
by
Maxwell Voss

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CONTENTS

Chapter One: The Ellipse 19
Chapter Two: Wendy 25
Chapter Three: Three Years Alone 31
Chapter Four: New Crew..... 35
Chapter Five: The Corridor 39
Chapter Six: Watching Each Other 45
Chapter Seven: Samantha's Admission 50
Chapter Eight: Trying It On..... 55
Chapter Nine: Two Histories 60
Chapter Ten: Back to Normal 66
Chapter Eleven: Five Days Awake..... 71
Chapter Twelve: The Emergency..... 76
Chapter Thirteen: Loose Ends 81
Chapter Fourteen: The Return..... 86
Chapter Fifteen: A Full Day as Babies 90
Chapter Sixteen: Bay 83 96


AN AB DISCOVERY SHORT STORY
ORBITAL MECHANICS
WHAT DO THEY WEAR INSIDE A SPACESUIT?
HAB-01
HAB-01
MAT-FAB
HAB-01
MAXWELL VOSS

Orbital Mechanics

by

Maxwell Voss

A prequel to Space Baby

Samantha had been on the Valles Marineris platform for eleven weeks before she admitted to herself that the ache in her chest most evenings had very little to do with homesickness.

She had expected homesickness. Everyone had warned her about it, in the mild, faintly bored way senior staff warned junior transfers about things they'd stopped feeling themselves years ago. The strangeness of a sky that never quite looked right, the low simmering claustrophobia of pressurised corridors, the particular loneliness of a two-year rotation on a platform that housed forty people and felt, most days, like considerably fewer than that. She had braced for all of it, packed for it almost, the way a person packs an extra jacket for weather they've been told to expect, and had been mildly, privately proud of herself when the first month passed, and none of it had landed with the force she'd been promised.

What she had not expected, and had no ready name for when it arrived, was the particular feeling that settled into her most evenings around the ninth or tenth week, after a full shift in a spacesuit, when she peeled the thing off in the ready room and stood for a moment in the thick, unglamorous undergarment beneath it and felt something in her chest go quiet in a way it hadn't gone quiet in a very long time. It was a diaper, of course, but a plain white functional item, the same as all the others wore.

The spacesuit work itself was, by any objective measure, unremarkable. Valles Marineris platform ran atmospheric processing and mineral survey out of a cluster of habitats strung along the canyon's northern rim, and Samantha's rotation had her out on EVA three, sometimes four days a week, running diagnostics on the processing arrays and doing the slow, careful maintenance that kept forty people breathing air that hadn't existed, in any usable form, on this planet in several billion years. A shift ran six hours, sometimes eight, and the spacesuit, heavy, self-contained, engineered for a body that would not be permitted to step out of it for anything short of genuine emergency, took for granted, in its design,

the same fact every long-duration EVA suit had taken for granted since the earliest days of orbital work. The person inside it would, at some point during those six or eight hours or longer, need somewhere for their body's ordinary business to go.

The garment they issued for this was efficient and entirely without romance, a high-absorbency undersuit layer that every EVA-certified worker on the platform wore as a simple, unremarkable fact of the job, filed away in most people's minds somewhere alongside the suit's oxygen scrubbers and its thermal regulation as one more piece of equipment that made the work possible. Samantha had worn a version of it during her certification training on Earth, briefly, clinically, without feeling anything about it beyond the faint, practical relief of a problem solved before it could become one, and she had expected, boarding the transport out to Valles Marineris, that her relationship to it would remain exactly that: functional, unremarkable, a fact of the job and nothing more. It was, however, still a diaper, and nothing about it could convince her of anything different.

It had taken about six weeks for that expectation to come apart.

She could not, afterwards, point to a single shift where it had changed. It had crept in the way most true things crept into her life, sideways, through repetition rather than event. Six hours in the spacesuit becoming eight, becoming a fully unremarkable part of her week, until one evening in her seventh week on the platform, alone in the small personal quarters she'd been assigned, peeling off her undersuit after a long shift on the number four array, she had caught herself pausing before she stripped the last of it away, and had sat, for a full minute, on the edge of her narrow bunk, simply feeling the thick, familiar weight of it, before she made herself finish undressing and told herself, briskly, that she was tired, and that tiredness made people notice strange things about their own bodies that meant nothing at all.

She had believed that explanation for perhaps two more weeks.

What broke it, in the end, was not a single dramatic realisation but a memory, arriving unbidden and with startling clarity one evening in her ninth week, while she sat on her bunk in exactly the position she'd caught herself in before, diaper still on, in no particular hurry to take it off. She was seven years old again, suddenly and completely, in the small back bedroom of a terraced house on the edge of a city she hadn't thought about with this much sensory detail in over a decade. She recalled the specific pattern of the wallpaper, faded roses on a cream ground, the particular look of morning light through curtains that never fully closed. She remembered her mother's hands, brisk and unhurried, fastening the tapes of a diaper with the same unremarkable competence she brought to packing school lunches or paying the electric bill, no more emotional about the task than she was about either of those things, and Samantha, small and sleepy and entirely unbothered, simply lying there and letting it happen, because it was Tuesday, or Wednesday, or any ordinary morning of any ordinary week in a childhood where this had been, for the first eleven years of her life, exactly as unremarkable as it had been for her mother.

The memory had arrived with no warning, and considerably more force than its content seemed to warrant. Samantha had sat on her bunk on Valles Marineris platform, twenty-four years old and four hundred million kilometres from that back bedroom, and found herself, without entirely deciding to, crying, not from sadness, not exactly, though there was something adjacent to grief tangled up in it, but from the sheer unexpected intensity of feeling something she'd spent thirteen years telling herself she'd fully finished feeling.

She had not, in the aftermath of that evening, immediately understood what to do with the discovery. She understood, dimly, that the spacesuit's thick diaper had done something the disposables of her teenage years never had. It had restored, through pure physical

repetition, a sensation her body had apparently never actually stopped associating with safety, however thoroughly her adult mind had insisted otherwise. She understood, with rather more discomfort, that this meant the whole careful structure of her adult self, competent and unbothered and entirely put together, had been resting, this whole time, on a foundation she'd never actually finished examining.

She had, of course, been a long-time bedwetter. This was not new information; it was simply information she had spent a very long time filing under a heading marked *finished*, alongside other unremarkable childhood facts. Outgrown allergies, a stint of asthma that had resolved by adolescence, a fear of dogs that had faded somewhere around age nine. She had wet the bed nightly from as far back as she could remember until she was nearly sixteen, and her mother, for the first eleven of those years, had managed it with the same brisk, unbothered practicality she brought to everything else in a household that ran, by necessity, on practicality rather than sentiment. She had four children, a husband who worked long hours at a maintenance depot on the edge of town, not much time or emotional bandwidth left over for treating an ordinary bodily fact as anything more dramatic than it needed to be.

Samantha had liked it, as a child, in the plain and uncomplicated way children like things that make them feel safe. She had liked the routine of it, the fact that every single morning, regardless of what else had happened the day before, her mother's hands would appear, brisk and reliable, and set the small matter of the wet night right before the day's business began. She had liked, though she had not had the vocabulary at seven or eight or nine to describe it this way, the particular experience of being cared for that required no thinking on her part at all. She did not have to earn it, or ask for it, or be good enough to deserve it. It simply happened, the way the sun came up, and it was, in a household not otherwise given

to visible affection, the single most reliable evidence she had that someone was looking after her.

It had begun to feel different somewhere around eleven or twelve, in the ordinary, unremarkable way that childhood things begin to feel different when a child starts noticing, for the first time, that other children don't share them. She remembered the exact conversation that had done it, at a sleepover, age eleven, a friend's bemused and not unkind question about the diaper Samantha had packed without thinking twice, and the sudden, vertiginous understanding that this thing she had never once considered strange was, in fact, considered strange by nearly everyone she knew. She had told the friend it was for a medical thing, a bladder condition, and the friend had accepted this without further comment, and Samantha had gone home from that sleepover having learned, in the space of one evening, both a useful lie and a genuinely painful new fact about herself, and had spent the several years afterward doing everything a resourceful, embarrassed twelve-year-old could do to manage the gap between the two.

Her mother's remarriage, when Samantha was fourteen, had arrived at almost exactly the point where that gap had become, in Samantha's own private accounting, close to unbearable, and Gerald's arrival in the household, reasonable, patient, entirely convinced of his own good sense, had ended the whole matter with a speed and a totality that had left her, at fifteen, essentially untrained in managing her own body's nighttime habits with anything other than sheer terror. She had stopped wetting the bed within a month of the diapers being taken away, not because her body had finally, conveniently caught up with everyone else's, but because she had trained herself, through several genuinely miserable weeks of interrupted sleep and cold, wet mornings and the specific dread of Gerald's mild, disappointed voice, to wake herself before it happened.

She had told herself, in the years since, a story about all of this that she had come to believe with real conviction. The diapers had simply been a childhood habit she'd taken slightly longer than most to outgrow, that the outgrowing, however unpleasant, had ultimately been correct and necessary, and that whatever residue of feeling remained about the whole business was nothing more than ordinary, faintly embarrassing nostalgia, no more significant than anyone's complicated feelings about any other piece of childhood left behind.

Sitting on her bunk on Valles Marineris platform at twenty-four, wet diaper still fastened, tears drying on her face, she understood, for what felt like the first time in thirteen years, that this story had never been entirely true.

She did not, in the weeks that followed, do anything dramatic with the discovery. This was, she told herself, not a crisis. It did not require a crisis response. She continued her shifts, continued her EVA rotation, continued being, in every visible respect to the thirty-nine other people on the platform, the same competent, well-liked, entirely unremarkable engineer she had been since her first day aboard.

What she did, privately, in the evenings, was allow herself, cautiously, and with a great deal of internal negotiation, to simply sit with the feeling rather than immediately correcting it. She began, without quite deciding to, staying in the wet diaper a little longer after each shift than the practical business of hygiene required, sitting on her bunk in the quiet of her quarters and letting herself notice, without judgment, what it felt like to be held that way, snug and thick and entirely accounted for. She eventually made herself get up and shower and become, for the rest of the evening, the ordinary self that ate dinner in the mess hall and made conversation with her crewmates about processing yields and equipment failures.

It was on one such evening, perhaps three weeks after the memory of her mother's hands had first arrived unbidden, that the

rest of it came looking for her. Not gradually this time, but all at once, the way a held breath finally lets go.

She had been thinking, idly, about nothing in particular, when her mind produced, with the same startling clarity as the earlier memory, an image of a small stuffed rabbit she had owned until she was nine or ten, worn soft with love, one ear gone thin from years of being chewed on in her sleep, which her mother had eventually, gently, suggested she might like to put away now that she was getting older. She had put it away. She had not thought about it, she realised, sitting on her bunk with the memory sitting fresh and unwelcome in her chest, in at least fifteen years.

She thought, next, unbidden and with a fresh wave of the same vertiginous feeling, of a pacifier. It was hers, specifically, kept until an age she was now, as an adult, faintly embarrassed to put a number to, surrendered not because she had stopped wanting it but because her mother had, one ordinary afternoon amid the general business of raising four children, simply decided that enough was enough and taken it away with a briskness that had brooked no negotiation. She remembered, with an intensity that startled her, the specific comfort of it. Not merely the physical sensation but the entire accompanying feeling of being small enough, still, that comfort was allowed to be simple, that she did not yet have to manage her own distress through the elaborate adult machinery of reasoning and perspective and *getting on with things*, that she could simply want a thing and have it soothe her and that this was, at that age, entirely sufficient.

And then, last and most unsettling of all, because it arrived with none of the softening distance of nostalgia and instead with something closer to genuine, present-tense longing, came the plain, physical memory of her own crib. It was dismantled and given away before she was old enough to properly remember using it, known to her now only through a single photograph her mother kept in an old album with herself at perhaps two years old, standing at the rail, one

hand reaching up toward whoever held the camera, an expression of pure, uncomplicated trust on her small round face that Samantha, at twenty-four, found she wanted, with an intensity that frightened her rather more than the diaper ever had, to feel again.

She sat with all of it for a long time that evening, wet diaper still on, the platform's recycled air humming faintly through the vents, and understood, with a clarity she hadn't managed to summon in thirteen years of careful avoidance, that the diaper had never been the whole of it. It had simply been the door. Behind it stood the entire history of a childhood self she had put away not because that self had finished, or grown up correctly, or resolved itself the way childhood things were supposed to resolve, but because the people around her had decided, on her behalf and without much regard for what she actually felt, that she should be finished with it. She had spent thirteen years since then building an adult life on top of that unfinished foundation without ever once going back to check whether it had actually settled.

She did not tell anyone on the platform. This was not, she told herself, cowardice so much as simple pragmatism. Valles Marineris was a small, close-knit posting, forty people who ate together and worked together and knew, within a few weeks of anyone's arrival, most of the ordinary facts of each other's lives, and there was no version of this particular fact that Samantha could imagine surviving that kind of proximity intact. She kept it, instead, entirely to herself, confined to the quiet hour or two each evening when she allowed herself, cautiously, to simply be with it, the diaper worn a little longer than strictly necessary, the memories permitted to surface rather than immediately suppressed, the occasional evening when she allowed herself, in the total privacy of her own quarters, to hold a rolled-up jacket the way she might once have held a stuffed rabbit, and to feel, doing so, considerably less foolish than she'd expected to.

She thought, more than once during those months, about what it would mean to go further, to actually acquire the things she found herself wanting, rather than simply sitting with the wanting itself. The platform's small personal allowance and its limited resupply schedule made anything elaborate essentially impossible. There was no discreet way to order a stuffed animal or a pacifier through channels that logged every requisition against a crew manifest forty people effectively had access to, and Samantha, however much the wanting had grown, was not yet ready to risk the particular vulnerability of anyone else knowing. She contented herself, instead, with small private substitutions. A soft scarf, worn thin with age, that she began keeping folded on her pillow and occasionally, in the deep privacy of night, holding the way she imagined she might once have held something softer and more specifically shaped for the purpose. An old habit, revived without much conscious decision, of humming to herself in the last minutes before sleep, a fragment of a lullaby she couldn't place the origin of but which arrived, when she needed it, with the same unbidden clarity as everything else that season.

It was, she thought sometimes, a strange kind of loneliness, not the ordinary homesickness she'd been warned to expect, but something considerably more specific: the loneliness of wanting a particular kind of care that she had no reasonable expectation of ever finding, on a research platform four hundred million kilometres from anyone who might have understood it. She was surrounded by thirty-nine competent, capable adults who would, she was fairly certain, greet the actual content of her evenings with anything from polite bafflement to genuine alarm.

She wondered, in her more honest moments, whether this was simply what the rest of her life would look like, a private, carefully bounded corner of feeling, indulged only in secret, managed rather than resolved, permanently at odds with the competent, put-together woman she presented to every single

person who thought they knew her. She did not, in her twenty-fourth year, have any better answer than that, and she made her peace, as best she could, with the possibility that this might simply be the shape of things from here on.

And then it occurred to her that while she could never have a pacifier or teddy bear or the like, she could have diapers. The supply of the plain white diapers was very large, as so many people wore them under their space suits just as she did. But she could wear one at night again and enjoy its snug fit, and while awake could wet it, remembering her not that distant years as a bedwetter.

And so she did.

It was simple to take an extra diaper after her EVA shift and after removing the wet one and showering, retape herself into a welcoming diaper once again. She felt the old familiar feelings, and it was a mere week in night diapers that she woke one morning to her surprise. The diaper was much wetter than it had been when she went to sleep.

She was wetting at night again. Accidentally. Like a child. Like a baby.

Both fearing and welcoming the return of bedwetting, it took only a few weeks before it was every night. And she found that she felt smugly happy about it as if it were a return to where she truly belonged. She had been terrorised into stopping bedwetting, and now she was a bedwetter again, as she truly felt she had never stopped being.

Her rotation on Valles Marineris ended, in the ordinary course of things, a year and eleven months after it began, with a transfer board that reviewed her record, found it, as expected, spotless, and offered her, among several options, a berth on one of the fleet's long-haul faster-than-light maintenance cruisers, the kind of posting that meant weeks of enforced suspended animation between short bursts of intense work, a posting she suspected most transfer

candidates weighed carefully against its evident drawbacks before accepting.

Samantha accepted it within a day of the offer, with an eagerness she did not fully examine at the time and would only properly understand much later, once she'd had a corridor collision with the ship's pilot and a long series of quiet conversations to help her see it clearly. Some part of her, still holding the unfinished business of that back bedroom and that stuffed rabbit and that photograph of a trusting two-year-old reaching up from her crib, had heard *weeks of enforced unconsciousness at a stretch* and *short bursts of work punctuated by long private stretches with almost no one else awake* and recognized, without quite being able to say why, that this might be the first genuinely private space she had been offered since she was eleven years old.

She packed the worn scarf carefully among her few personal effects, tucked at the bottom of one duffel bag where a routine inspection would read it as nothing more than sentiment, and did not examine too closely, boarding the transport that would eventually deliver her to Kessler Station and the cruiser *Ellipse*, why her hands were faintly unsteady with something that felt considerably more like hope than like the ordinary nervousness of a new posting.

She did not know, boarding that transport, what waited for her on the other end of the crossing. A corridor, and a woman in a pink dress with a teddy bear under one arm, and the slow, careful unfolding of everything she had spent two years on Mars learning to want and had no idea, yet, how she might ever be permitted to have. She knew only that something in her chest, quiet and patient and considerably older than twenty-six, was still waiting, the way it had been waiting since she was fifteen years old and had woken for the first time to an empty, unfamiliar bed, for someone's hands to come back and set the small matter of the night right again.

She would not have to wait very much longer. But she did not know that yet, and so she sat, through the long transport out to

Kessler, turning the worn scarf over in her hands and wondering, with the particular ache of a question she had never once let herself ask aloud, what the rest of her life might actually look like, if she ever found the courage to stop managing the wanting and simply let herself, at last, be small.

Samantha was a bedwetter once again, and that fact brought a smile to her face that the diaper she wore every night was actually needed and not some kind of artefact.

And she wondered what her new posting would be like, where she could be just another engineer who had developed diaper-dependence, as happened to small numbers of others who had worn diapers for 8 hours at a time in space suits.

She was excited at the possibilities.

The End

Chapter One: The Ellipse

The *Ellipse* came about her heading eleven minutes ahead of schedule, and Charles allowed himself the small, private satisfaction of a clean approach vector before he said anything to the rest of the bridge crew.

"Coming up on Kessler Station in ninety-four minutes," he said. "Traffic control's already got us in the queue."

Captain Idris Vann, seated in the chair behind him that he almost never used for anything but reading manifests, made a low sound of acknowledgement without looking up from his tablet. "Any word from the dock on the drive coupling we're bringing them?"

"Confirmed received, confirmed needed yesterday." Charles didn't turn around. His hands moved over the console with the unhurried precision of a man who had made this approach, or one very like it, perhaps two hundred times in nine years. "They've had the number two thruster running on a workaround since March. I imagine they'll be glad to see us."

"They're always glad to see us. We're a supply ship with benefits."

It was an old joke between them, worn smooth with use, and Charles smiled at the viewport rather than at the captain, watching the pinprick that was Kessler Station resolve, with agonising slowness, into something that had shape and dimension. Behind him he could hear the captain's tablet click off, the creak of the chair, footsteps receding toward the galley. In a few hours Vann would be back to review the cargo manifest with him line by line, a ritual neither of them needed but both of them kept, because it was something to do with the last waking hours before three weeks of nothing.

Charles liked this part of the job. He liked all of it, if he was honest, though he was rarely asked to be honest about his job, because no one thought there was anything complicated to ask

about. Pilot of the *Ellipse*, one of three FTL maintenance and freight cruisers running the long loop between Earth, Mars, the Jovian and Saturnian stations, and the scattered research outposts clinging to asteroids further out where the light was thin, and the company was thinner. There were stations and settlements in other systems that could only be reached by faster-than-light ships. The days of 20-year-long one-way journeys were long gone, but even at FTL it took weeks to get there. It was not, on the whole, thought of as an interesting job by people who didn't do it. Long stretches of nothing between short stretches of something. But Charles had never found the nothing boring, which was its own kind of secret, and one of several.

He was thirty-two years old, and he had been flying this route, or one very like it, since he was twenty-three, first as a junior engineer working coupling repairs in a spacesuit with his hands numb from cold two hours into every shift, and now as the pilot the *Ellipse*'s current captain had specifically requested by name after their second voyage together. He had, people said, a gift for it, a stillness in emergencies, a memory for the ship's quirks that outpaced her own diagnostic systems, a habit of noticing small wrongnesses in a readout before they became large wrongnesses in the hull. His record was, by any measure that mattered to Fleet Operations, spotless.

None of that was the secret. The secret was underneath all of it, folded away behind three crates of spare coupling housings in an unnumbered bay that didn't appear on the *Ellipse*'s public schematics, and it would stay folded away for another two days, until the crew went under and the ship, for all functional purposes, belonged only to him.

The mess hall at what the ship's clocks called evening, an increasingly abstract concept this far from any sun worth naming a day after, was three-quarters full. Fifteen engineers made for a crowded room when all of them wanted dinner at once, which they

generally did, since the ship's routine synchronised meals as tightly as it synchronised shift rotations. Charles took his tray to the long table by the viewport, where Carrie and Sally were arguing, with real enthusiasm, about whether the number four water recycler had ever actually needed the part they'd just delivered or whether Kessler's engineering staff had simply wanted an excuse to order a full replacement.

"You're assuming competence," Carrie said, "which is generous."

"I'm assuming *laziness*, which is realistic. There's a difference."

Charles let the argument wash past him, contributing the occasional agreeing noise, and ate his dinner with the unhurried attention of a man who genuinely liked the food, which put him in a minority aboard most ships he'd served on. He liked the mess hall in general, liked the low hum of fifteen people who knew each other well enough not to perform for one another anymore, liked the particular comfort that came from a room full of people about to share three weeks of vulnerability with each other and trusting it entirely. Suspended animation was not, strictly, dangerous. But it required a kind of trust all the same, the trust of lying down somewhere quiet and letting your body stop being your problem for a while and hoping that the automated systems would take care of you while you slept.

Across the table, two of the younger engineers, Dana and a woman whose name Charles hadn't yet fixed properly, newly transferred, hair still cut Earth-short, were comparing notes on spacesuit maintenance, and Charles caught the tail end of a sentence that made him look up without meaning to.

"...and everyone just assumes if you're still in them at thirty it's because your body got used to it in the suits, but that's not actually..."

"Dana," said the other woman, a warning note in it, and Dana subsided, and Charles went back to his dinner with his expression

carefully unchanged, because this again was not remarkable. It was, in fact, one of the most ordinary conversations a person could have aboard a working cruiser. Long hours in a spacesuit trained the body in ways that were inconvenient to argue with later, and everyone who'd put in field time, everyone including, technically, Charles himself, carried some version of that conversation somewhere in their history. Two of the *Ellipse*'s other engineers still wore protection at night as a matter of course and had said as much, cheerfully, in this very room, and no one had thought less of them for it, because there was nothing to think less of. It was simply a fact of the body, filed alongside sea legs and the particular ringing that stayed in your ears after six months near a fusion core. Being partially diaper-dependent was a regular risk of long hours in spacesuits where disposable diapers were always worn.

Charles's own version of the fact was, at this point, so old and so well-worn into the shape of his working life that almost no one thought to ask about it at all. He had been, without interruption, in diapers since he was nineteen years old, and had told anyone who asked, which by now was almost no one, that it had started the way it started for the others: spacesuit work, long shifts, and a body that learned a habit under pressure and never fully unlearned it. It was, as far as it went, not even a lie. It simply wasn't the truth, or not all of it, and the two had grown so used to standing in for each other that Charles rarely felt the gap between them anymore, except at moments like this one, listening to someone else's half-finished sentence and feeling, for just a second, unaccountably lonely in a room full of people who liked him.

He finished his dinner. He said goodnight to Carrie and Sally, who were still arguing, happily, about the water recycler. He did not look twice at the new engineer, whose name he made himself learn before he went to bed. Samantha. Assistant engineer, second-year, transferred in at Kessler on her first long-haul posting. He filed it away the way he filed away everything about his crew, with the same

unhurried thoroughness he gave a fuel manifest, and thought nothing further of it, because there was, as yet, nothing further to think.

The last hour before hibernation prep had its own particular manner, one Charles had come to know as well as he knew the approach vector to any of the *Ellipse*'s regular stops. People grew quieter. Conversations that had been loud and argumentative over dinner softened into something closer to reflection. Engineers who spent most of the voyage in coveralls appeared in the corridors in whatever passed for their sleepwear, hair different, faces scrubbed, looking for a few minutes each like the private, off-duty people they were the rest of the time obliged to set aside.

Charles did his final walk of the ship alone, as he always did, checking seals, confirming the automated systems had logged themselves correctly, running his hand along a bulkhead here and there for no reason he could have explained except that the *Ellipse* was, in some sense he'd never said aloud to anyone, the only home he'd kept for longer than a year at a stretch, and he liked to say goodnight to her before three weeks of near-total silence.

His walk took him, as it always did on the last night, past Bay 83.

It looked, to anyone who might have glanced at it, and no one did, because it wasn't on the schematics anyone consulted and the crates in front of it made for an unremarkable jumble of low-priority storage, like nothing at all. Three crates of coupling housings, slightly out of place from where the manifest said they should be, stacked in a way that discouraged anyone from moving them without a reason to. Behind them, a door that didn't officially exist, secured by an override only he and one entity aboard the ship knew how to trigger.

He didn't open it tonight. There would be time for that tomorrow, once the crew was under and the ship was, for all meaningful purposes, his alone. Tonight he only paused, the way a person pauses outside a room they're looking forward to, and then continued his walk, and went, in due course, to his own hibernation

pod, and lay down, and let the ship's systems take his body somewhere quiet for what the manifest logged as twenty-nine days, and what he privately intended to be considerably less.

He woke — genuinely woke, on schedule, alongside the captain and no one else — three weeks and two days later, into the low lights and recycled-cool air of Kessler Station's main dock, with Vann already standing over the coupling housing, tablet in hand, reading off a checklist neither of them needed. It had been, by any measure the fleet used, an uneventful crossing. No incidents logged. No anomalies. Fuel consumption within point three per cent of projection.

"Good crossing," Vann said, by way of greeting, the same two words he said at the start of every dock, and Charles agreed that it had been, and meant it more completely than the captain could possibly have known.

He had, however, in the privacy the *Ellipse* afforded him for eighteen of those twenty-nine days, been Wendy, and then Sandy, and then Wendy again, and had slept in a crib of his own design with a bear named Carol tucked under one arm, and had wanted, in the particular unashamed way that children want things, absolutely nothing that the fleet's official manifest of his life could have accounted for.

He would not, of course, tell anyone that. He never had. There was no reason to imagine this next crossing would be any different from the last two hundred.