

PreDawn

Book I

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February 2014

Captain Jane Rork threw herself into the pilot's seat, haphazardly strapped herself in and threw off the autopilot. She was taking control of the situation. She scanned the instruments of her battered ship which showed that just about every system was failing, including life support. The gravs alert screamed at her. She withheld a curse as she checked the display. It was not good. The artificial gravity generators, known as gravs for short, had come loose and were hemorrhaging energy. Even with the low gravity of the moon pulling at her ship, it could not wait. Jane cursed the trader who sold her the gravs, unsnapped her harness, and ran back into the engine bay, grabbing a universal wrench to either fasten them down again or to beat the daylight out of them, whatever seemed most attractive at the time.

The gravs lived, and as Jane sat back into the pilot's chair, she flipped on the comms at the same time to contact the docking officer at her moon base landing platform.

'Moon base landing Mike Alpha two four, this is cargo skip Victor Hotel seven Alpha requesting clearance for immediate approach and landing.' Jane waited for clearance, but could not wait for long. If she did not receive clearance soon, she was willing to just dump her ship on that landing platform, clearance or not, and with the way her guidance systems were trashed, she may not have a choice. On the last leg of her run to the moon, her ship was bombarded with a large solar flare, the Sun reminding travelers that he was still in charge despite the advancements in shielding and protection from radiation in space.

'Cargo skip Victor Hotel Seven Alpha, you have clearance to land. Final docking telemetry is being beamed to you now. Proceed to hanger Four Three on landing.' Jane signed back and focused on the final stage of her landing. If her ship was a little more damaged than it already was, she may have had to ditch it away from the platform and avoid damaging the landing area, but she liked her chances as they were, slim but doable, so she rotated the controls, allowing as much as she could for what she guessed the radiation had done.

She strained as her ship rocked from side-to-side, drawing ever closer to the landing pad as all her years as a captain came into play as she guided her damaged vessel to its resting place. Two meters to go and the first landing gear touched down with a thud, confirming to Jane how close she was now. 'Just a little more,' she thought as the second and third gear touched down. The fourth gear was hanging down but the instruments showed that it had not locked into place but Jane was going in anyway. The fourth gear touched, bent as the ship placed its load on it, then held for just one second before it collapsed half way up the ship. Jane was rocked in her seat, despite the harness and gravity dampeners, but the ship could recover from this with some attention from the crew on the base. Assessing the damage, Jane relaxed a little, thinking, any landing you can walk away from is a good one.

The large doors of the docking station opened with a hiss as the two chambers between her ship and the rest of the moon base docking area pressurised. This was home for a little while while she made arrangements for repair to her ship, paid for by her employer, The Planetary Trading Commission, and made some down time plans of her own. She headed for the East Gardens Hotel, again all expenses paid, checked in, freshened up, changed, then casually made her way to the lounge bar upstairs which was mostly a transparesteel dome on top and gave the feeling that you could just reach out forever into the darkness of space. In the far corner, the distant rich blue of planet Earth, home and guardian, painted the dome with a dazzling glow. Jane looked spectacular in her tight-fitting gown, long, black hair resting lazily over her shoulders, her full figure swaying temptingly in the perpetual light of the moon. Truck driver during the day, still a lady at night.

She eventually found a seat at the long bar, after carelessly scanning the other faces present, people who liked the shadows, some leaning close to each other over their table,

talking softly over their drinks while looking longingly into each other's eyes. Jane was the lone wolf tonight, but not for long. She ordered her favourite drink, took a long, slow sip, and went back to examining the rest of the bar, but she didn't expect to find anyone she knew, but she also knew that in out of the way places on the moon as this one, anything was possible, and with that gambler's mentality, she settled in for a long night where she was the wild card. She didn't have long to wait.

Peter Bennett seemed to grow out of the shadows, a crows feet smile fixed on his handsome face as he sat next to Jane while she was looking the other way.

'Two more of what the lady is having,' he said. The bar tender nodded and turned to pour. Jane froze for a second at the unexpected interruption, smiled slowly, then turned to Peter, her grin almost as large as his.

'It's good to see you again, Jane,' he said. The bar tender returned with the drinks then wisely disappeared to the other end of the bar. In the background recorded music played, a mix of electronic and jazz that was common at that time. Jane and Peter looked at each other over their drinks, adding to the rich atmosphere of a bar that was suddenly getting too small.

They exchanged greetings followed by a little unavoidable small talk.

'The last I heard of you, Jane, was that you were still trucking the Earth Moon lanes hauling spare parts for lazy moony's.' The smile still had not faded from Peter's face but he was slowly starting to collect himself and regain his icy composure.

'Last I heard, Peter, was that you were busy getting lost and needing rescue on the Earth Mars lane.' Jane had heard the rumours, was even a little concerned for a while, but she had gotten over the brief entanglement with Peter many years ago. While they were good friends, colleagues so to speak, there was no spark between them, not as far as Jane was concerned anyway.

The evening moved on slowly, gracefully, the drinks flowed and the conversation was varied, alive, intense at times, but mostly casual and fun, just like their friendship.

'How long have we known each other now for, Jane?' He asked. Peter was warming to the encounter and he believed in fate and opportunity working together to bring success, love, or fortune, and in rare moments, all three. 'Don't answer that,' he added. 'I have a business proposition for you, and I want you to answer from a strictly businesswoman's position.' Jane took another drink of her glass and was silent, waiting for the proposition, her best poker face on. Peter noticed the sudden change in stance. 'Now just wait one minute before you say anything. It's just a small business proposition, nothing more. Just an offer between two accomplished space pilots.'

'I'm listening,' Jane replied, her voice calm and a little cold.

'You know the Earth Mars run is my baby, no one runs it better than me, with only one small incident on my record in over ten years of trucking, right?'

'Right. I'm listening.'

'Well by some unfortunately luck, my co-pilot has decided to go into early retirement; his wife nagging that he doesn't spend enough time with her and the kids as he should, and with the average one-way tripe just over thirty-four days, I don't blame her, so...' Jane broke her poker face with a growing smile.

'You're not serious, are you, Peter? Are you asking me to ride shot gun for you?' Peter looked at her in a kind of *why not* way. Jane drained the rest of her glass and began to stand. 'Good to see you again, Pete,' she said, smile on her face as she began to walk out the bar. 'Good to see you haven't lost your sense of humour.'

'Come on Jane, hear me out,' but she was already out the door.

Jane was feeling pleased with herself the next morning. She liked Peter, may have even gone for someone like him a few years ago, but now she was a focused career woman. She had her rig to consider, and it was going to bring her the credits she wanted

for an early retirement. She liked piloting space liners, but she also yearned for a little more, perhaps a family and some kids like normal people, but then again, perhaps not.

In a working gray jumpsuite, she made her way to the docking bay where her skip was being repaired. The chief engineer was at the docking bay repair control console, examining the readouts for her ship. He looked a little concerned, frowning and making disapproving clicking noises, shaking his head.

‘That good, hah,’ said Jane as she walked up to the console and the engineer.

‘It’s not good at all, captain,’ said the engineer. ‘That last blast of radiation fried almost every circuit on your ship, including the engines. He looked at her with a sad, focused expression. ‘I’m grounding your ship, Captain. It’s the recycling heap for her. Sorry’ Jane’s mouth fell open.

‘You can’t be serious! I flew her in from over 60,000 clicks out after the blast. She’s good to go after a little cosmetic surgery,’ pleaded Jane with the engineer.

‘It’s a miracle you got her in, but we would have to replace almost every circuit and the hull would just not hold for long. There’s nothing we can do. Your ship is decommissioned immediately.’ Jane could see she would get nowhere this way. The first thing that came into her mind was to call her office and see where they stand. They heard about the incident on her last run and were in communication with the moon base constantly. Space liners were an expensive item, even in the Pre Dawn era of Earth’s expansion, and merited a lot of attention.

‘What do you mean, no extension of contract.’ Jane had been on the comlink with her office on Earth for nearly an hour, just to be told the same thing, that business was slow and the company was not looking to replace her ship, but rather work with the fleet and captains that it already had. That meant she was on the waiting list until a seat became available. Jane was livid. She threw her comlink aside and was ready to kill. She had flown in that ship for over a hundred missions and she was having trouble letting go. Sure, another ship would eventually come her way, but for now all she could do was wait, but patience was not one of her strong points. She composed herself, took several deep breaths and focused her attention on the moment. She was tough. Time to move on. That afternoon Jane went back to her dead ship and gathered her belongings from it. Some flight clothes, data tablets and souvenirs were basically all she had to show for her time in the pilot’s seat, that and a load of cash from years of careful saving. Now it was time to spend a little. Jane was not a lady who needed much in the way of material possessions, but she enjoyed some retail therapy regardless that evening as she wandered through the limited range of retail outlets that had emerged on the moon base, more to make the citizens feel at home than for profit.

As she wandered, a thought kept barking at the edge of her consciousness. The more she walked the more she kept remembering Peter’s attempt at an offer for work. She didn’t hate Peter, in fact they could be considered good friends. It’s just that she had avoided him all these years when his advances were more romantic and less professional, but now he seemed over that and it might just be possible to work with him. She walked over to a base console and inquired where his quarters were.

After a short stroll, she knocked on his door. He was home.

‘Jane! What a pleasant surprise. Come in.’ Jane walked in, took a quick look around, then settled on a seat at his dining table. After a little chit-chat, she asked for more information on the offer he had almost made.

‘If I were interested in your proposition,’ she began, ‘what would it involve?’ Peter warmed to the conversation, a smile forming quickly.

‘Easiest job in the world for someone like you, Jane. Just a baby-sitting job for the ship. You know what freighters to Mars are like these days. Highly automated to avoid any nastiness that might crop up during the long journey. On such a large ship, the computer almost runs the show. Minimal crew, just me and you and two engineers, one medic, that’s

it. Thirty-four days of relaxing, watching movies, catching up on your reading, that sort of thing.’ Peter moved over to his bar to pour them both a drink. ‘The job’s yours if you want it. You might get another after this one too. Long range pilots are not that easy to find. The stress of the trip and so on makes it less attractive. I’m being up front with you.’ Jane took the drink he offered and took a little sip. She had to admit she was tempted. It could mean some new direction in her career, and there wasn’t a lot happening now.

‘OK. I’m in.’ When Jane made up her mind, it was quick and sure.

‘Great! I’ll email you the details. Ship leaves in two and a half standard weeks, so I recommend you get into shape by then. Great to have you aboard, First Officer.’ Peter and Jane shook hands, and after a casual evening discussing their experiences, Jane retired to her quarters. The conversation that night was pleasant. Jane could not help but be impressed by how professional but still friendly Peter had become, a change from his previous obsessive character. She was almost looking forward to working with him.

That night, before she fell asleep, a strong feeling of peace crept into her heart, the kind of feeling you get when you make a difficult decision, but the right one. Jane felt that she had taken advantage of a timely opportunity. A door closes but a window opens. She had not thought this through, however. Would working with Peter be as straightforward as she thought?

Jane spent the next three weeks before the launch practically living in the gym, situated in her quadrant of the moon base. She was not leaving anything to chance and she wanted to be in the best shape for the mission. The last two of those weeks she had spent with Peter and the crew in the ship, Mars Ranger C43, going over the system checks while it was being prepared by engineers for the trip. The Mars Ranger was docked in a special section of the moon base hanger area, where dedicated crews could refit its antimatter engines for a new launch and load cargo. C43 was one hundred and forty three meters long and not much to look at. It resembled a long train carriage with massive engine bays added at the end of the hull and was painted in a white coating that assisted with reflecting radiation. It was equipped with many maneuvering jets along its body, with a few communication satellites a little way back from the main cockpit. It contained all the facilities the crew could use to make their trip as stress free as possible, including a gym, garden, and dream deck. The crew slept in common sleeping quarters, but each had their own personal computer account that they could access almost anywhere on the ship which contained their collection of favourite activities, movies, music, pictures, and messages from home, wherever that may be. The ship’s computer was assisted with a vast array of sensors that monitored every aspect of the flight, and was simply called, Oliver.

Jane was in the cockpit on her own this afternoon, going over some of the initial launch checklists and familiarising herself with the location of the vast array of instruments, everything from displays of engine status to navigation guides. During that prep time, Jane got to know the crew she would be working with. All were highly trained veterans of the Mars Run with many missions under their belts.

‘It’s a constant rush for two months,’ said Luke Hill, chief engineer. He was in the rear of the cockpit, checking readings on the engines and how they were shaping up for the launch. ‘You’re on a high for the whole time. You’ll love it.’ Luke was also responsible for the overall structure and integrity of the Ranger, as well as their cargo, which on this trip was building materials and supplementary food supplies that could be used to boost the food production on the Mars colony. ‘We’re all good with the cargo and the ship at this end,’ announced Luke over the ship’s comm from the mid section of the cargo bay. By

coincidence, he was the shortest of the crew, which came in handy when he had to crawl in between the ship's structures and cargo.

John Collins was second engineer and an accomplished pilot as well but he preferred to take the back seat on these flights and look after the ship's life support, which included the artificial gravity. He was in the other corner in the rear of the cockpit, checking his instruments and making sure they would not end up arse-over-head with the gravity on the ship. Life support covered everything from the air they breathed to what they ate and where it went when they were done. John was the oldest member of the crew but he didn't act it, always quick with a smart comment or a joke.

Finally there was Christine, medic who had served in many bases on Earth and the moon. She grew bored with her civilian postings on the bases and soon found comfort in the excitement of the Mars Missions. She had at her disposal on the ship a completely fitted medical bay, which she hoped she would never have to use, but if she did, she was up to the task. Sick bay was just behind the cockpit. Her moonlighting job was to help John with life support as needed.

Jane's role as first officer was a complicated one. She had to be familiar with all systems on the ship, especially the communications array that kept the ship in contact with Mother Earth.

It was the night before the launch and Jane was not managing much sleep. She kept going over the drills and checklists she had learnt over the last weeks and couldn't help but feel a little nervous. It was after midnight and she was still awake so she decided to call Peter to see if was still up.

'Hi Jane,' Peter answered. 'You can't sleep either, huh? The night before is always the hardest, all those weeks of training coming together in one brief moment.' There was a slight pause as each of them enjoyed the moment. 'Well, the ship is ready and in good shape,' he continued. 'You OK with everything,' he asked, just to reassure her.

'I think so,' said Jane. 'Just a walk in the park, right?'

'Pretty much. The ship will do all the hard work. We just babysit for a month, unload, load, and come back home to a warm welcome and healthy bank account.'

'Easy money,' said Jane, starting to feel drowsy. She said good night to Peter and fell asleep shortly afterward, sleeping through to early morning before the flight. She dreamt of nothing, felt nothing but the heavy blanket of sleep that graced her with rest.

Like Jane's pre dawn, the whole of Earth had undergone a revolution of humanity that was unseen before in any part of history. It was called the Pre Dawn, a time of massive upheaval but also outstanding progress in all areas of human endeavor. From the aggressive politics and conflict that ravaged the planet, countries embarked on a new mission, just as everything they knew was crumbling around them. Science and diplomacy led the way, curing illness, relieving hunger and poverty. In the year 2311, hunger was officially declared as over on every country. Food was free to all, basic food anyway. Government food stations opened in every country where citizens could be supplied with the basic food they needed. Restaurants still existed and were popular, but they became a luxury. Most illness, including cancer, and injuries from accidents experienced amazing breakthroughs and medical treatment became free, a right for all people, like food, housing and education. Science aggressively targeted every challenge that the world faced with unlimited funding, reducing the military and channeling into urgent programs. Nuclear weapons were removed, countries finally seeing that they were no solution to their

problems. The people of Earth had enough conflict, and rallied together to conquer the growing problems of the planet while still remaining a democratic, industrious and capitalistic world. It was a time before the final triumph of the world, before the final dawn.

T-minus one twenty minutes and Jane and Peter prepare to launch into position for initial burn into Mars trajectory. The crew is in place and has secured all areas.

‘Crew report status of pre-launch checks,’ said Peter over the ship’s comm.

‘Engines primed and at full capacity,’ answered Luke. ‘Structure OK and all cargo secure.’

‘Life support and gravity all good to go,’ said John

‘I’m OK at ready,’ said Christine from her corner of the cockpit.

‘OK, all good. Prepare to leave dock and rendezvous with departure point Alpha,’ said Peter. He quickly worked the command as the ship slowly relieved itself of its moorings from the moon base and gradually rose away further and further from its previous home. It was like maneuvering one of Earth’s old oil tankers, but in space. The ship rose gracefully as the gravity generators hummed loudly, and was directed to the departure point where the main engines would be fired and propel it faster and faster into the void of space. The generators would give it enough impulse to get set up in space, but the real work would be done by the antimatter engines, which were powerful enough to propel the ship to speeds approaching light speed. Once near Mars, the ship would use its engines in combination with its orbit sling around the planet to slow down. All straightforward if everything went to plan.

The ship gracefully moved into position above the moon, like a runner about to sprint. Space travel had changed significantly when artificial gravity generators became commonplace. The new technology meant that astronauts could now safely and gracefully leave the binding grip of Earth, or just high enough to avoid the traffic. The invention of these drives was made possible by improvement of energy storage cells that could effectively power the high demands of the drives for long periods of time.

Suddenly the high whine of the gravs died down. They were in place for their run up.

‘All systems green and OK for launch,’ said Jane over the comms. Peter could not help but smile as he was about to set off on another mission.

‘Initiating antimatter burn now,’ said Peter. Despite being over a hundred meters away, the crew could hear and feel the main engines coming to life as the giant ship was catapulted down its invisible runway.

The engine bay lit up brightly like a new star as the antimatter exploded violently and channeled through the complex structure of the engine out into the vastness of space. For the first few hours, the crew were plastered to their seats as the ship accelerated rapidly towards its destination, an endless computer array monitoring every aspect of the burn and reporting back to Peter and his first officer, Jane vital information, all of which was positive for the moment.

Jane slowly forced her head to the side where she could not help but feel a small amount of amusement as she saw Peter with his ridiculous grin on his face again. He really did love these missions and his enthusiasm was infectious. At that moment Jane was glad she had agreed to join him.

After those initial fiery hours the g-forces began to subside as the ship’s and the crew’s momentum moved forward with the acceleration.

‘Oliver, status report,’ asked Peter. Oliver gave the duration of the burn and reported that all systems were OK which reassured Peter as most accidents tended to happen in the first moments of launch. ‘All crew check in.’ Each reported that all the systems they

were responsibly for were performing as expected. The crew was in high demand for those first few days as the ship set itself up for the long cruise towards Mars orbit.

Peter did not leave the cockpit for the first few days, but then, as everything was under control, he ventured out occasionally, leaving Jane to monitor all the systems. The crew went about its business of checking and rechecking all the ships systems to prevent any unexpected surprises along the way. They all enjoyed and hoped for a boring mission where nothing out of the ordinary caught them unprepared, because the stakes were high and meant their lives, the ship and the cargo, in that order.

The first week blended slowly into the second as the ship continued to gently accelerate but at a slightly reduced rate as it approached its cruise speed where it would cease to burn valuable fuel. The crew began to disperse with one pilot left on duty as the other enjoyed the benefits of a long flight with no interruptions and plenty of hours to simply let slip by like on an ocean voyage on Earth. The crew all had their scheduled routine to follow, but once that was completed their time was their own and they found themselves spending ample time in their favourite activities. For Christine it was the small, enclosed garden, where she could walk around and enjoy the different smells and listen to the sounds of the water feature where several good size fish spent their days unaware of the artificial gravity that kept them from falling out of their little pond, water and all.

For John it was the dream deck, a specialised, super comfortable couch hooked up to a dream machine which was used with a large helmet that allowed the user to interact with a super computer generated world of the user's choice. He was often quite happy to lie on the couch after a session of exploring worlds where the friendly user interface read the mind patterns of the user to determine their every desire without over indulging them by making every dream come true too easily, because most of the satisfaction came from the act of creation.

Luke hit the gym and often saw Jane there, which gave them an opportunity to swap stories from their most memorable moments on the job. Jane was a little nervous about the trip at first, but after listening to the reassuring tales of Luke in the gym, she began to feel at home with the rest of the crew on the ship and she growing to enjoy the trip more and more as the days melted by. Peter occasionally joined them in the gym and the sparks would fly throughout their workouts as each crew member would try to outdo the other's story with one of his or her own. You don't do the Mars run over a dozen times and end up without a tense moment or two, despite the robustness of the systems onboard.

All the time Peter waited patiently for his opportunity to have the *talk* with Jane, trying not to rekindle any resentment as he and Jane worked side by side over the growing days of the mission. After nearly two weeks out, he felt comfortable to raise the subject when the two were alone in the cockpit checking the running and navigation of the Mars Ranger.

'So Jane,' said Peter, opening the topic. 'Can I ask you a personal question?'

'No, I'm not seeing anyone. Any other questions?' said Jane.

'I'm that obvious, am I?' Peter was a little taken aback by her direct response. He wasn't surprised by the answer because he knew what a drain driving freighters could be on one's social life, but none-the-less his planned conversation was almost cut short.

'Peter, you're not going any further with this are you? I've been honest with you all along and I made myself clear when I told you I had no feelings for you other than friendship.'

'I wasn't going there again, Jane,' he lied. 'It was just a general question between friends. You know how much I value our friendship and would do nothing to jeopardise it.' He was back peddling fast to restore the link between them. It would be over a month of unavoidable hell if there was tension between them over this point, and Peter knew that they had to work together as a team, otherwise the danger level of the mission would rise too high for comfort. Jane got up and left the cockpit. She couldn't go very far on the ship but she planned to put some distance between them.

Despite Peter's best intentions, there was now tension between him and Jane, and it was only the beginning of the mission. He had his work cut out for him if Jane decided not to act like the professional she was. Despite her best efforts, Jane was also an intense woman with intense feelings. She knew Peter liked her, but unlike the gravs that could make gravity in empty space, she could not create feelings that were not there for Peter.

Jane returned to the cockpit later that cycle.

'How is everything here, Peter,' she asked. 'It's OK. I can handle this shift.' Peter smiled and made for the exit.

'OK, thanks. You have the comm,' he said.

The dull hum of the roaring engines soothed Jane as she settled in. Mars was getting closer by the minute.

End of Part I