

HUMAN PHASE

Robot Geneticists, Book 6

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Chapter One

Kaylee Fourteen wiped sweat from her forehead as she checked and rechecked the alignment of Mars' first locally built atmosphere generator. The turbine would be spinning at half a million revolutions per minute once activated, and the slightest misalignment of the meter-long blades could cause them to shatter against the casing at supersonic speeds. Her breath echoed from inside the mask of her portable oxygen supply, working on the exterior of the machine. Baking red sunlight filtered through the thick miasma of carbon dioxide, nitrogen, and methane that sustained the planet's first outdoor plant life. Soon—possibly within the decade—Kaylee would be able to picnic with her family under that sky without special equipment.

Tucking the nanoscale scanner into its holster on her belt, Kaylee tapped at the corner of her data goggles. She scrolled through her contacts list and connected to Ned Lund, the project lead for the Mars Terraforming Initiative and Kaylee's boss. "All set, Ned. We can cap the outlet nozzle on atmo pump one. All seventy-two blades check out. All fittings exact within the micron. Thermal expansion zone is clear."

Ned's gruff voice came back in her ear. "Throw a tarp over it. We'll cap pump one after lunch."

Kaylee secured the site. Magnetic tie-downs clamped the pale purple alienite tarp across the exposed opening of the turbine. The last thing any of them needed was to come back from lunch break to find a grain of sand carried on the wind and dinged one of the blades. A quick double-check that the tarp wasn't going to move while she was gone, Kaylee maneuvered the bucket of her lift-arm truck to deposit her at ground level.

Hopping the safety chain that kept her from falling out, Kaylee hustled over to one of the group transports and squeezed in beside a coworker on a bench in the back. The ride to base camp was only five minutes. Walking would have taken nearly an hour. Being jammed in shoulder-to-shoulder with people she barely knew was worth the time savings.

Once back at the pre-fab collection of environmentally controlled structures, Kaylee waited in line and made her way through the airlock in the third batch of workers. Once inside the cafeteria, she pushed her goggles onto her scalp and unbuckled her oxygen mask. The first breath of free-floating air always tasted better than the dank, rubbery-smelling stuff from inside the mask. Kaylee filled her lungs, and the sheen of sweat around her nose and mouth cooled and dried.

"Good work out there, Fourteen," Ned greeted her with a handshake. His palm was callused and rough; his grip like iron. "We might get that unit online by nightfall at this rate."

Kaylee stifled a yawn. "I thought we might push through lunch..."

Ned shook his head as he picked up a tray and got in line for chow. "Right is better than fast. That's half the reason you're here. Adrian wanted fast, but he got sloppy. We're not robots. Food. Rest. The body works best when you maintain it."

Kaylee fought back another yawn as she retrieved a tray and

perused the camp's lunch fare. All of it was Earth-grown, shipped across seventy-nine million kilometers of orbital space, and manufactured to last. Inside the colonies, more and more local food was consumed, but out in the work camps, they ate the cheap stuff.

"Sorry, Ned," Kaylee said. "Don't mean to seem like I'm—"

Ned waved a hand, brushing her apology aside. "Nah. Takes getting used to. Forty minutes a day doesn't sound like much, but those short Earth days you're used to will take their toll. Happens to everyone their first couple months here."

Kaylee smiled her reply as the two of them piled their trays with canned peaches, beef jerky in gravy, and vacuum-packed broccoli. They'd all been so nice since she arrived. Everyone back home had warned her about the Martians and their bias against Earthborn humans, but Kaylee had yet to experience that bias firsthand.

She joined Ned and a few of the other supervisor-level workers at one of the main tables. Kaylee was Quality Assurance Chief, a role that had seemed to elude the Martians despite their attempts to fill it from their own ranks. Around the table were Chief Logistics Officer Miriam Hazra, Chief Technical Officer Ben Santos, and Operations Manager Lijing Chang. They all scooted and rearranged their trays to make room for the two newcomers at the round, plastic table.

"Heard we might cap the nozzle this afternoon," Lijing said, raising a paltry toast with her thermos of water.

"To Kaylee," Ned said, playing along and raising his thermos as well. The others followed suit. "May our next turbine activation not blow up in our faces like the last one."

"Hear, hear," the others joined in, including a halfhearted Kaylee. Stainless steel bottles clanged. Everyone chuckled, then dug into their meals.

No one was overly formal on the project. They were all sitting around a Protofab-grade table with environmental

hazard gear dangling loose from their clothing. All of them were sweaty and dirty with a powdery red coating of untamed soil from outside the dome. Perfunctory discussions of work-related topics soon gave way to chatting about the latest movies, soccer, and the upcoming Emancipation Day celebration on Earth.

When talk crept toward politics, Kaylee wolfed down the last of her soggy, vacuum-preserved broccoli, and excused herself. “Time to prep that turbine for low-speed testing.”

The rest of them gave a quick acknowledgment and returned to discussing local elections.

Kaylee pulled down her goggles, fixed her filtration mask back in place, and stepped out into the dusty Martian wilderness. She took a breath in the privacy of her own company, and the rubbery smell came as a welcome reprise.



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