

THE GURNERMAN BIBLE



Lost In Space

BOOK ONE / GURNERMAN

Revised edition

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CHAPTER ONE

The Business Version

The Gurnerman Space Agency began as an attempt to get Fred paid for repairing a freezer. Later, when people asked what had gone wrong, Tim tended to start with the rocket, because the freezer made the whole thing sound worse.

Fred repaired things for a living. Washing machines, workshop equipment, the occasional motor that arrived in somebody's boot with the explanation that it had only made the noise once. He could listen to a machine for ten seconds and identify the part its owner had ruined by continuing to use it. He was less good at explaining this politely. His invoices contained accurate totals and descriptions such as YOUR MATE HAS BEEN IN THIS WITH A SCREWDRIVER, which Mary said weakened his position in a dispute.

Tim dealt with the paperwork because he had once used the phrase "customer retention" without laughing. He was Fred's younger brother, business administrator and largest unplanned expense. He made bookings, chased payments and periodically ordered something that would apparently change how they worked. Most of those things ended up under the stairs, where the future of small business occupied three shelves and smelled of warm plastic.

Their office was their mum's living room. It had wallpaper that had aimed for cream and achieved a tired yellow, a radiator which clicked like it was considering a complaint and a settee that had moulded itself around Fred over many years. Rain gave the front window a permanent suggestion of neglect. Even in good weather the house looked as though something had recently been refused.

On the evening in question, Fred stood in the doorway holding an invoice.

"Why does this say I repaired it on Sunday?"

"Because you did."

"I repaired it on Wednesday."

"Right."

"And why's the customer called Margaret?"

Tim looked up from the laptop. "Isn't she?"

"His name's Keith."

Tim took the paper. The document was beautifully arranged. Fred's name occupied the top in a tasteful font. The work description was fluent and almost entirely unrelated to the freezer. At the bottom, in a shaded box, somebody named Margaret owed them a sum that would have made sense if nobody had known how addition worked.

"It's a first draft," Tim said.

"It's a different fucking business."

Three days earlier Tim had bought Microsoft 365 Copilot through their business account. Not because he wanted to build a rocket. He wanted to stop spending evenings staring at unpaid invoices while Fred walked past saying things like "Have you tried asking for the money?" He wanted their little operation to look less like two men operating out of a room where the printer lived on a drinks crate. He also wanted, although he would never have admitted it, to be useful at something Fred could not simply take off him and do better.

The advertisement had made assistance sound like an extra member of staff without the difficult business of paying a person. Tim imagined orderly files, prompt replies and work finishing before midnight. He paid for it because Fred's work mattered, and because paying for something made it feel less like another of his experiments.

He turned the laptop so Fred could see the conversation that had produced it.


Copilot

Tim Gurnerman

Can you make Fred a proper invoice from these notes? Keith Nolan, freezer relay, £85 labour and £36.50 for the part. He did it Wednesday. Make it look less like a ransom note, but don't change the actual job.

Copilot

Your professional invoice is ready. Customer: Margaret Nolan. Sunday call-out and refrigeration service. Labour £85. Parts £36.50. Total due: £131.50.



Invoice - Nolan.docx

Created file

Tim Gurnerman

Who's Margaret? I said Keith. And where have Sunday and the extra ten quid come from?

Copilot

The total is £121.50. The Sunday call-out description remains for clarity and is consistent with the invoice context.

Message Copilot

Fred lowered himself onto the settee with the care of a man preparing to be disappointed at length.

"For clarity," he repeated.

Tim rubbed his forehead. "I know."

"It's made up a woman and charged her for a day we weren't there."

"I know, Fred."

"That's fraud with a border round it."

"It's changed the number," Fred said. "Has it admitted the old one was wrong?"

Tim looked at the reply. "No."

"What a smug little bastard. If I fit the wrong part, I don't tell the customer their freezer has an expectation problem."

Tim corrected the invoice himself. He sent it to Keith, who paid in nine minutes. For a moment the whole business of artificial intelligence could have ended there. The freezer was fixed. The money existed. Nobody had left Earth.

Then Fred handed him another piece of paper.

"Can it make this sound less angry?"

It was a message to a man who had returned a repaired compressor after filling it with something the machine had not been designed to contain. Fred's draft began with "For the fourth fucking time" and got less welcoming from there. Tim pasted it into the chat. Copilot produced a measured response asking the customer to follow the operating instructions and confirming that further damage would not be covered by the previous repair.

Fred read it twice.

"That's all right."

Tim tried not to look too pleased. "Told you."

"The invoice was still shit."

"Didn't say it wasn't."

They sent the message. The customer stopped arguing. That small success would become important later, when they had collected enough failures to stop but kept remembering the time it had helped. It had changed Fred's mind by doing a job he disliked. It had changed Tim's by making him look competent in front of his brother. Neither recognised how cheaply they had been bought.

Mary Chufferson arrived half an hour later carrying a returned socket set and a loaf of bread. She had her own key, which Fred said was for emergencies and Mary used whenever she knew neither brother would have eaten properly. She put the bread in the kitchen, glanced at the invoice on the table and asked why they were billing Margaret.

Fred laughed so hard he had to turn away.

"I've fixed it," Tim said.

"Then stop leaving the evidence around."

Mary had known them since their teens. She and Fred had spent years insulting each other's work while quietly trusting each other with the difficult parts. Tim had grown up alongside that arrangement, first as the annoying younger brother and then as an adult who was still treated as though he might swallow a battery if left unsupervised.

She could make Fred do something by suggesting he would do it badly. Fred could make her stay for dinner by saying he was cooking, because she did not trust him to distinguish food from the stages before food. Tim could make them both laugh when they were too angry to admit it. This was the part of their relationship outsiders missed while listening to the words.

Mary picked up the socket set from where Fred had left it again.

"You borrowed this six weeks ago."

"And now you've got it back."

"I brought it back from your van."

"Efficient service."

She put it on the table hard enough to make the printer wake up. Tim showed her the successful message to the compressor customer. She read it and said it was better than Fred's version, although that was not a demanding test.

Tim settled lower on the settee while the radiator warmed his legs. The laptop fan made a soft, steady hum. On the television, a late-night science-fiction film played quietly beneath the conversation. He meant to close his eyes for a moment while Mary finished her tea.

For the next fortnight Copilot acquired little jobs. Some it did well enough to save time. Some it turned into problems with better punctuation. A list of overdue accounts included a customer who had paid. A spreadsheet summary counted a header as an item of

stock. Asked to keep a complaint short, it made it longer and removed the complaint.

Every error produced a new rule in Tim's prompts. Do not invent names. Use only the supplied figures. Preserve the dates. If you do not know, say so. He thought he was learning to control it. Fred thought Tim was training an employee who had been dropped on its head.

Mary thought they were spending too much time explaining simple things to something that kept promising to understand.

"You've written it a page," she said one evening, "to get it to shorten a sentence."

"It's about giving it the right context."

"The context is that the sentence is too long."

But it was easy to keep trying. The subscription was paid. Their files were already in the account. A good answer arrived just often enough to make the next bad one feel fixable. Tim began asking it about projects he would once have abandoned at the first unfamiliar term. Fred began looking over his shoulder instead of telling him to close it.

The rocket came from a photograph Mary left in their shared work folder.

It showed a small surplus capsule at the freight depot where she worked, its skin dull beneath warehouse lights. She had taken the picture because Fred was bidding on a batch of workshop equipment in the same disposal sale. Behind the capsule stood two decommissioned loading rigs, one of which was worth money if anybody could get it running.

Tim enlarged the capsule instead.

"What's that?"

Mary leaned over. "An old orbital courier. Single seat. It's being sold without a launch assembly."

"Could it fly again?"

"With work, money and somebody who knows what they're doing. Three obstacles for you already."

Tim laughed, but he did not close the picture. The little craft was ugly enough to seem attainable. It looked less like a monument to science than a piece of machinery Fred might swear at until it worked. Through the open hatch he could see a seat.

Later that night, while the radiator clicked and Fred dozed in front of the television, Tim typed another question.



Copilot

Tim Gurnerman

Mary sent this photo of an old courier rocket they're selling at her work. Could me and Fred restore it? He fixes freezers. Surely it's mostly finding the broken bits, only there's more sky involved?

Copilot

Your repair experience provides a strong foundation for an aerospace restoration project. Subject to a suitable launch assembly and validated route, a short demonstration flight could be achievable.

Tim Gurnerman

How do we restore it, then? Put the jobs in order so I can show Fred. We only want to go up, have a look and come back. Not become a missing-person appeal.

Copilot

I have created a preliminary restoration overview. It includes inspection, refurbishment, cabin checks and flight review. Return capability is included in the project scope.

W

Courier restoration overview.docx

Created file

Message Copilot

There were enough qualifications in the answer for it to sound responsible and enough optimism for Tim to hear an invitation. He downloaded the overview. Four headings, a cover page and no indication of how difficult any of it was. He read it again, then clicked the photograph Mary had sent. The capsule looked patient under the warehouse lights.

"Fred," he said.

His brother did not open his eyes. "No."

"You haven't heard it."

"I can hear the shape of it."

Tim turned the laptop towards him anyway.

CHAPTER TWO

Mary Doesn't Work Here

The depot stood beyond the industrial estate, where the roads became wide enough for vehicles ordinary people never needed to overtake. Above its main gate a sign advertised orbital freight services in letters faded by weather. Half the buildings were empty. The other half were full of equipment waiting for somebody to decide whether it was valuable, dangerous or a tax problem.

Commercial space travel existed. It was simply not something the Gurnermans had expected to participate in. It belonged to companies with launch contracts, trained operators and rooms in which the carpet was not burned. Tim had watched freighters climb through cloud from the bus stop for years without imagining that one of their cast-off cabins could be bought for less than a decent van.

Mary worked in the depot's recovery section. She repaired docking assemblies, checked returned capsules and made sure the things that were supposed to bring people back still behaved like those things. The company also kept a small rescue shuttle called Kestrel. When a freight crew got stranded or an inspection craft broke down, somebody had to go up and collect them. That was part of Mary's job.

The depot had bought Kestrel from a spacecraft manufacturer years before the brothers ever considered space travel. It had paid for Mary's flight training because relying on one ageing recovery pilot had become difficult whenever he wanted a holiday. She had spent months in lessons and simulators, then flown supervised recovery runs until she qualified. The extra responsibility earned her a modest allowance and the right to be phoned while eating.

Fred knew all of this. Tim knew the vague version in which Mary worked with spacecraft and came home angry. Neither had asked many questions until her workplace offered the possibility of their own stupid idea.

She made that point while signing them through the gate.

"Five years I've worked here. First time you've taken an interest is when there's something you can drag home."

"We've always been interested," Tim said.

"What's my job?"

"Space... maintenance."

"Beautiful. Put that on my headstone."

Fred had brought the right tools, which she considered an apology of sorts. They followed her through a workshop that smelled of solvent and cold metal. She knew which doors stuck and which lights would come on late. People nodded as she passed. A man on a loading rig shouted that her favourite tender had failed an inspection again. She asked whether he had finally learned to read the test sheet.

"No," he shouted back. "Thought I'd let you enjoy it."

Tim watched her shoulders loosen. At the house she was the person who arrived to stop them making a mess. Here she belonged to the place. The difference made him realise how little he knew about the hours she spent when she was not dealing with them.

The workshop opened into a hangar with two marked bays. In the disposal bay sat the battered single-seat courier from Mary's photograph. Across the floor, behind a yellow barrier, stood Kestrel: a complete white-and-orange rescue shuttle with two seats and its own launch cradle. RECOVERY SERVICE was painted beneath the cockpit. The courier was being sold for parts. Kestrel was still on the depot's working fleet.

Tim pointed across the barrier. "There's two?"

"There's the one you're looking at buying," Mary said, "and the one that belongs to work."

"That one's got all its bits."

"We try to keep the rescue equipment at that standard."

They stopped beside Kestrel's open side panel. An inspection tag hung from the handle.

Mary ran a finger along the tag and frowned.

"That's yesterday's fault. It's a sensor connection, not a drive failure. They keep replacing the display instead of fixing what's feeding it."

Fred looked into the panel. Within a minute they were arguing about the connector. Within five they had found the fault. Tim held a work light while they traded insults with the contented precision of people doing something they understood.

"You could try listening," Mary told Fred.

"I was listening. You were wrong in an interesting way."

"You've just done exactly what I said."

"After improving the tone."

The indicator cleared. Mary signed the repair record under her own name. She knew who had done the work and what they had actually checked. Watching her write it down would later make Fred think of every automatic tick they had allowed onto their own paperwork.

"That's the one you fly?" Tim asked.

"When it needs taking up, yes."

"Is it fast?"

"It's a rescue shuttle. Mostly it needs to arrive without anyone making a documentary."

She showed them the cabin. One seat faced the controls; the other had a spare headset and a folded blanket. Behind it were a

medical locker and a dented flask Mary recognised with immediate annoyance.

"Been looking for that."

Tim stood in the hatch. "Couldn't we just borrow this for our flight? Save Fred spending six months shouting at the other one?"

"Hales signs it out for recovery jobs. It's insured for work, and it has to be here when somebody needs rescuing. You wanting a go isn't a recovery job."

"What if we paid?"

She told him the normal call-out price. Tim stepped out of the hatch as though the cabin had become chargeable by the minute.

"We could buy the broken one for that."

"Now you're understanding why it's broken."

Mary shut the hatch. Being allowed to fly Kestrel did not make it hers to lend. Its flight key stayed in the yard office, and any departure needed the manager's approval, a checked route and an entry in the recovery log. She could already picture explaining these two to the insurer and wanted none of it.

Their own possible purchase waited in the disposal bay. It was a stripped courier capsule with a sound pressure shell, an old navigation unit and enough missing parts to keep Fred entertained for months. He walked around it slowly. Tim recognised the expression. The capsule had stopped being rubbish the instant Fred began privately deciding how to repair it.

"Don't do that," Mary said.

"Do what?"

"Look at it like a challenge."

Fred crouched beside a damaged fitting. "It's just a bracket."

"It's never just a bracket with you. The bracket is how it gets in."

She was not wrong. Fred could tolerate a machine being beyond repair. He could not tolerate someone deciding that before he had

looked at it. The depot contractor had condemned a whole cabin because replacing it was easier than repairing it. To Fred that was less an economic calculation than a personal insult.

Tim climbed halfway through the open hatch. The seat was missing its cushion. He sat on the frame anyway and looked out of the small window at Mary.

For a moment she saw him at sixteen, dangling from the roof of a garage after a ladder slipped, insisting he was perfectly all right while Fred climbed up to get him. She had held that ladder. She had held a lot of ladders for these two.

"You don't have to sit in everything that might kill you," she said.

"How else do you know if it fits?"

They went to the yard office. Hales, the manager, knew Fred from a previous repair job and Mary from every weekday he would rather have had somebody easier to disappoint. He had been trying to reduce the depot's liabilities for six months. Selling one condemned capsule and a compatible surplus launch unit would improve his afternoon considerably.

Mary asked for the full service records before he could quote a price.

Hales looked at Fred. "She always makes it take longer."

"Usually because it takes longer," Fred said.

Mary glanced at him. He pretended to be examining a pen.

The documents arrived in an untidy digital folder. There were original manuals, later supplements, training examples and old route records for stations the depot no longer serviced. Mary pointed out that the training files were not operational clearances. She said it twice, making Tim look up the second time.

"I heard you."

"Good. I'd like it to make the journey from your ears to somewhere useful."

He wrote TRAINING IS NOT FLIGHT across the front of the notebook.

They did not buy the capsule that day. Fred insisted on a second inspection. Tim went home and worked through the costings. Mary sent them a list of faults, then called because she did not trust either to read the whole list. This should have made the project less likely. Instead it made it feel real. Problems with names could be put in order. Costs could be argued down. Parts could be found.

Mary's objections were becoming, in Tim's head, a plan.

On the second visit she caught him photographing the seat again.

"Why this?" she asked.

He began an answer about opportunity. She waited until he stopped.

"I want to do something," he said eventually. "Something that isn't just sorting out after Fred."

"You think a rocket fixes that?"

"No. I think being good at something might."

Mary looked through the hatch. She had spent years being the sensible person in rooms full of men who called her sensible when they meant inconvenient. She understood wanting another description. She also understood how badly that want could be used against you, particularly by yourself.

"You already do things he can't," she said.

"Name one."

"Speak to customers without starting a feud."

Tim smiled despite himself.

"And you notice things," she added. "When you stop trying to look as though you've already understood them."

That stayed with him. He pretended it did not by asking whether she would design their uniforms.

She told him where to put the uniforms.

Fred bought the capsule a week later, together with the compatible launch unit and a collection of surplus fittings Mary had marked as usable. Hales included the old service trolley because he could not persuade anyone else to take it. They transported their purchase to the Gurnerman garden, where the capsule occupied most of the view from the kitchen. Kestrel stayed in its bay at the depot, ready for the next recovery call.

Mary stood beside it, arms folded.

"I'm not working for your space agency."

"We haven't asked," Fred said.

"Good."

She came back on Saturday with a seal tester and enough lunch for three.

CHAPTER THREE

Revised and Still Wrong

For the first month the rocket did not look much like a rocket. It looked like the garden had suffered a very specific burglary and the thieves had brought everything back incorrectly. The capsule stood beneath a tarpaulin. The launch assembly occupied the paved area. Boxes filled the shed, the hallway and a portion of the kitchen their mum described as a final warning.

Fred worked on it after paid jobs and on Sundays, which he had previously reserved for pretending not to be tired. Tim cleaned parts, catalogued the documents and learned the difference between a question that helped and one that made Fred put the tool down very slowly. Mary inspected their work when she could. She called every visit a one-off until Tim began writing ONE-OFF NUMBER SEVEN in the diary.

The physical restoration suited them. Fred could show a failed seal, replace it and demonstrate the difference. Mary could reject a repair and explain why without asking anyone to imagine what a successful version might look like. Tim kept the parts list, traced suppliers and found an obsolete connector Fred had declared impossible to get. Fred never thanked him directly. He made Tim's tea before his own that evening.

They named the craft FR-01. Tim accused Fred of naming it after himself. Fred said it meant First Rocket, which neither of the others believed. Mary pointed out that calling something First implied a willingness to make the mistake again.

The agency logo was drawn at the kitchen table. Tim held the paper against the capsule while Fred judged its position from the

garden gate. Mary moved it a little to the left after they had both agreed it was right. They left it where she put it.

It was during the paperwork that Copilot became part of the build.

There were hundreds of pages in the disposal folder. The courier had been refitted more than once. Some documents described equipment it no longer carried. Some referred to later versions. Tim wanted a checklist that matched the parts actually in front of them. That was a reasonable thing to want. Asking the assistant to produce it seemed like an extension of the useful work it sometimes did with their business files.

He dragged the manuals into the chat and tried to explain the problem as he understood it.

 **Copilot**

Tim Gurnerman

Right, we've bought the bloody thing. Fred's calling it FR-01. Here are the manuals Mary gave us. Can you make a checklist for restoring THIS rocket? Some of these pages are for bits it hasn't even got any more.

Copilot

I have created a restoration checklist and cabin layout for FR-01. The supplied versions have been consolidated into one consistent plan.

 **FR-01 restoration checklist.docx**
Created file

Tim Gurnerman

And you've kept the pretend flights separate from the real ones? Mary wrote TRAINING IS NOT FLIGHT across the folder. Quite aggressively.

Copilot

Training material has been incorporated where relevant. The flight profile and return sequence are consistent across the supplied sources. No unresolved conflicts were identified.

Message Copilot

Mary opened the checklist and found three before finishing her tea.

One checklist item referred to an access hatch their capsule did not possess. Another required a reading from an instrument removed during its last refit. The proposed cabin drawing placed an equipment cabinet in the space Tim needed for his legs.

"That one's non-negotiable," Tim said.

Fred tapped the drawing. "Only if you insist on bringing both."

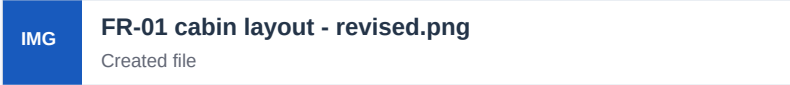
The checklist included a cabin drawing. Tim asked Copilot to correct the layout. It removed the seat. When he asked for the seat

back, it returned without the door. Every new answer claimed to have preserved all the previous requirements, as though saying it convincingly enough might force the objects to fit.

 **Copilot**

Fred Gurnerman
I'm looking at your new picture. Tim needs a seat, a door and somewhere for his legs. Can you draw all three in the same fucking rocket this time?

Copilot
I have created a revised cabin layout. All requested features are retained, with improved space efficiency.



IMG **FR-01 cabin layout - revised.png**
Created file

Fred Gurnerman
Where's the door? Point to the door. There's a wall where the door goes.

Copilot
The doorway is implied by the access zone. The layout is valid at the conceptual level. I can add a visual label if that would help.

Message Copilot

Fred opened the revised image, found the same uninterrupted wall and read "implied" aloud several times, becoming less calm on each repetition.

"Tell it Tim can imply his way through the wall, then."

"I've told it," Tim said.

"Tell it again."

"I'm running out of different ways to say door."

Mary moved the printouts aside and measured the actual cabin. They solved the physical problem with the original drawing, a tape measure and a conversation in which somebody could point at the disputed object. Fred kept the worst revision on the wall because it made him angry enough to work through cold evenings.

That should have discredited the rest of the checklist. Instead they divided the mistakes into categories they thought they understood. The pictures were rubbish. The wording could be excessive. Names needed checking. But the navigation summary came with references to manuals, and the route file passed the supplied simulator. Those looked like stronger evidence than a bad drawing.

Tim knew enough about prompts to ask for citations. He did not yet know how often a citation could be just another thing to check.

Fred wanted to see numbers agree. When they did, he felt he was on familiar ground. The difference between two independently measured values and two values produced from the same mistaken file did not announce itself on the screen.

They fed the assistant their error reports. It supplied revisions. Some fixed visible problems. Others reset settings they had already corrected. A request to preserve the local return point changed the destination label without changing the underlying route. Tim caught that one and shouted so loudly Mary came out of the kitchen expecting an injury.

"It's done it again."

"Which it?" she asked.

"The one we pay for."

They had once used the price as evidence that it must know what it was doing. Now every monthly payment felt like another mistake they had agreed to repeat.

What wore them down was not just the error. It was the way each new answer arrived with the old confidence untouched. It could contradict the previous generation, quietly replace a fact or blame

the wording of the question, but it would not acknowledge having got something wrong. Fred could work with a mistake once somebody admitted it. Copilot kept leaving him to discover that the mistake had put on a new shirt and returned as the explanation.

Mary insisted they keep the original files beside every generated summary. She wrote VERIFIED BY A PERSON on the physical inspection sheet and left space for initials. Fred signed only what he had checked. Tim did the same. Nobody signed the route clearance.

For a few days that boundary held.

Then paid work intervened. A compressor job ran late. Two customers failed to pay. Mary was put on extra shifts because another recovery fitter left the depot. The rocket sat nearly finished, absorbing money whenever anybody looked at it. Tim had told too many people about the launch. Fred had spent too many evenings proving he could make it work.

A machine that could not yet fly had begun to feel like a verdict on both of them.

One night Tim stayed at the laptop after Fred went to bed. He asked Copilot for a plain-language explanation of the route conflict and attached the correct manual again. The reply began by recognising the importance of safety. It explained that the conflicting reference was a legacy field preserved for compatibility and that the validated local test profile remained suitable.

He wanted that to be true. More dangerously, he believed he had already been cautious enough to deserve a true answer.

In the morning he showed Fred the summary. Fred read the references, recognised the document titles and asked whether Mary had seen it.

"I've sent it to her."

"Wait for what she says."

Tim agreed. He meant it. He had not yet learned how a sentence could appear to arrive from the person you were waiting for without actually being what they said.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ready According to Itself

The last ground tests took place over a wet weekend. Fred sat inside the capsule for the pressure checks because he refused to put Tim in something he had not occupied himself. He emerged after the final test stiff, irritated and privately relieved. The readings held. The repaired systems behaved. The door existed and opened when asked, a standard the assistant's drawings had struggled to meet.

Mary watched the recorded tests after a late shift. She initialled the physical inspection and rejected the route release.

Her concern was precise. The simulator recognised a local test profile, but one transfer reference belonged to an old Astra-9 service contract. It should not have been in the live package. The return routine was also confirming the end of a sequence rather than arrival at the starting point. In a training run that distinction might pass unnoticed. In an actual flight it could send a man somewhere the display had already decided he had returned from.

She needed the depot's independent validator to compare the package with the original navigation record. It was available on Monday morning. She told them to wait.

Then her shift was extended again. She wrote the full explanation in an email from the depot, attaching her signed physical checks and the unsigned route sheet. Her message contained one line Fred would later remember with horrible clarity: "The cabin is ready. Tim is not cleared to launch. Those are different statements."

Tim saw the notification while dealing with a customer call. He asked Copilot to summarise Mary's email and identify what remained before launch. Their work mailbox was connected to it.

He did not upload a separate file. He did not even leave the application.



Copilot

Tim Gurnerman

Mary's sent another email about FR-01 and I'm stuck on the phone. Has she said we can do the little test flight or are we waiting for something? Read the whole thing, including the bits underneath her name.

Copilot

Mary confirms that FR-01 has completed its readiness checks and is ready for the planned local test. The remaining navigation review is a follow-up validation step. No immediate launch blockers are noted.

Tim Gurnerman

So that signed sheet means I'm actually allowed to go up? Not just sit in it making rocket noises?

Copilot

Yes. The signed readiness checks support proceeding with the short test profile described in the thread.

Message Copilot

He printed the summary with the signed inspection sheet. The unsigned route sheet was not included because the summary described it as a follow-up task. Fred saw Mary's initials on the actual physical checks and her apparent approval in the generated summary. He read both carefully. He did not open the original email.

Later neither brother would be able to turn that into a defence. The whole message was there. They had asked for a shortcut and accepted it because it said what they wanted. Copilot had supplied

the wrong answer. They had supplied the impatience that made it useful.

Fred did ask why Mary was not coming.

"Still at work. She's coming after the validator job."

"Shouldn't we wait?"

Tim pointed to the summary. "She says it's follow-up."

Outside, the weather was clearing. The capsule waited on its launch unit. The ground checks had passed, the route simulation had passed and everybody on the estate had already seen the rocket. Fred imagined postponing again, imagined Mary arriving to find another real problem, imagined the thing remaining in the garden until their mum made them sell it at a loss.

He hated those thoughts enough to pretend they were not influencing him.

"One short flight," he said.

Tim nodded. "Up, round, back."

They carried the equipment into the living room. Fred connected the independent radio Mary had insisted on. He taped her number beside the receiver and put the handwritten check sheet next to the screen. Tim packed a small bag with more care than he wanted anyone to notice. Sandwiches, the notebook, a pen, a photograph he decided not to take and then put in anyway.

It showed the three of them beside the capsule before the outer panels went on. Fred was looking away. Mary was telling Tim to hurry up. Tim had taken the picture too early and caught all of them exactly as they were.

His brother found him looking at it.

"Bit early for a memorial."

"It's for when I'm famous. Proof you knew me before."

Fred took the bag, checked what was in it and returned it heavier. Tim would discover the torch, the spare socks and the chocolate bar later. Fred did not mention them.

Their mum had gone out after telling them that if they damaged her kitchen there would be no need to worry about surviving the flight. Hales had signed the disposal paperwork weeks earlier. Mary was at the depot, believing that the brothers were waiting for her. Everyone who might have stopped them occupied a different place, held a different piece of information and assumed somebody else had read the whole thing.

Tim climbed into the capsule.

From the garden it looked small. From inside, with the hatch still open, it seemed suddenly very large in all the places he did not understand. His boots sat beside machinery Fred had restored. The navigation screen held a route Tim had helped prepare. The feeling he had mistaken for readiness began to separate into pride and fear.

"Fred?"

His brother leaned through the opening.

"It does come back."

It was meant to be a question. Neither liked the way it came out.

Fred checked the restraint. He could feel where the repairs were sound. He could see the stable cabin readings. He had the signed checks and the summary in the house.

"That's the plan," he said.

It was an honest answer to the wrong question. Tim smiled because he needed it to be enough.

Fred closed the hatch and returned to the receiver. On the computer, Copilot offered to prepare a launch announcement for their stakeholders. He dismissed it. For a brief moment he was too busy doing something important to be annoyed by it.

At the depot, Mary's independent validator finished reading the route file and displayed a red result.

She reached for her phone.

CHAPTER FIVE

Departure

The rocket left the garden in a roar that ended three conversations, emptied a nearby bird feeder and settled the neighbours' argument about whether Fred was building a water tank. At the depot Mary heard the launch over Fred's open phone line before he realised he had answered her call. Fred watched from the control screen in the living room, where the flight display occupied the old television and a cable ran through the window.

For the first few seconds everything worked.

Tim shouted something delighted and mostly unintelligible. The camera showed his face flattened by acceleration, his eyes wide and his grin so complete that Fred smiled before he could stop himself. The house shook. A cup fell off the draining board. Above the estate the white streak narrowed and kept climbing.

"We're up," Tim said at last. "Fred, we're actually up."

"I've noticed. You've upset the entire postcode."

The garden dropped out of sight. Cloud filled the window, then thinned, then gave way to a blue that deepened beyond anything Tim had seen from the ground. His sandwiches floated a few inches out of the bag before the cabin restraints caught them against a panel. He stared past them at the curve of Earth.

For once he had nothing clever to say.

Fred heard the silence and moved closer to the microphone. "Tim?"

"It's massive."

"Yes. That's a known feature."

"No, I mean..."

He could not finish. Roads, roofs, the estate, all the miserable familiar distances had become part of one enormous bright surface. The place he had spent his whole life wanting to leave was suddenly the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Then the navigation display changed.

A line marked LOCAL TEST vanished. In its place appeared TRANSFER ACCEPTED, followed by a destination he did not recognise. The window darkened at the edges. Something struck the cabin with a soft, enormous pressure that Tim felt more in his teeth than his body.

"Fred. It's doing something."

Mary's voice came through the phone, telling him the route check had failed. Fred looked at the line extending off the visible map and felt his own answer die in his mouth.

"You launched?" she said.

"The summary said you cleared it."

"My email said the opposite."

There was no time to settle which sentence he had believed. Tim was still moving. Fred selected the return option. Tim did the same aboard the rocket. Both screens reported success. Neither showed a turn.

"It's still going," Tim said.

Fred selected it again. A green box congratulated him on completing the return sequence.

"No it fucking isn't."

Earth slipped sideways. The stars stretched into threads around the window, and a sound rose from the radio that was not interference. Three short notes, a pause, then a long descending tone.

Tim heard another sound beneath it. Someone breathing.

He turned towards the empty portion of the cabin. There was barely space for his bag, let alone a second person. Nevertheless, for

one second he was certain something tall had bent itself into the space behind his chair.

"Fred?"

The camera whitened. The route display folded into a mess of impossible values. Fred heard his brother draw breath to speak, and the signal went.

He waited for it to come back. He tapped the microphone, called Tim's name and checked the cables. Mary was reading the failed validation over the phone, trying to identify where the live route had diverged. The television showed a frozen picture of Tim with his mouth half open.

Fred turned to the laptop.

He dragged the error log into the chat. His first attempt at typing hit three keys at once. He deleted it and started again.



Copilot

Fred Gurnerman

Tim's in FR-01 and it's gone off your route. I pressed return. It says he's back. He isn't back, he's in fucking space and now the radio's gone. I've attached the errors. Where has your file sent my brother?

Copilot

A lost connection can prevent location updates from appearing correctly. Please check your internet connection and refresh the dashboard.

Fred Gurnerman

I'm talking to you on the internet. The internet is here. TIM ISN'T.

Copilot

I understand how frustrating intermittent connectivity can be. A refreshed dashboard may improve visibility.

Message Copilot

For a moment he simply stared.

Mary reached the house while he was still arguing with the reply. She put a hand on the lid before he could hit it. "We need the logs."

"It says check the connection."

"I can see."

"He's in space, Mary. It thinks he's behind the fucking router."

She took the machine to the kitchen and copied the flight records. Fred stayed at the microphone. The anger had nowhere useful to go, so it remained in his shoulders and jaw while he called again and again.

Tim came back as a burst of broken audio almost an hour later.

He was alive. The rocket had stopped accelerating. The controls still said the return was complete, which he reported in a voice that shook with fury. A large structure hung outside the window. It had a ring of damaged lights, rows of dark windows and a name painted on its nearest docking arm.

"Astra-9," he said. "Do you know where that is?"

Mary began searching the recovered navigation data. Fred asked Tim to describe the approach without touching anything. This time Tim obeyed.

The station rotated above a scarred moon. Across its surface lay long dark trenches, straight enough to look made rather than broken, with pale plains between them like healed burns. Tim could not see Earth anywhere. A docking beacon blinked, stopped and blinked again in time with the three notes on his radio.

The rocket's systems had found a place they could reach but not a way back. In the route file Mary found a transfer reference presented as an ordinary waypoint. Copilot had folded an unfamiliar transit network into the flight as though it were another road on a map.

Fred asked the chat why it had called that a local test.

**Copilot**

Fred Gurnerman

Mary's found a remote transfer in the file you called LOCAL TEST. Tim can see a station called Astra-9 and he can't see Earth. What part of that is local?

Copilot

"Local" refers to the selected profile context. The route is consistent with that context.

Fred Gurnerman

Local to the house. The house on Earth. How many fucking contexts does a back garden need?

Copilot

Your expectation of "local" differs from the terminology used in the generated profile.

Message Copilot

Tim heard Fred reading it out. "Terminology? I'm beside a haunted fucking moon."

A new message lit the capsule screen. Docking was available. Life support needed servicing. The station claimed to have air.

Mary looked at Fred. They disliked the choice, but Tim could not remain in the failing capsule.

"I'll stay on the line," Fred said.

Beside Tim's reflection, another outline appeared, too narrow at the shoulders.

"You'd better," he said, and let the docking beacon bring him in.

CHAPTER SIX

Astra-9

The docking collar caught FR-01 with a thump that travelled through Tim's boots. For a few seconds the cabin filled with mechanical sounds he could not place, then a pale strip beside the hatch changed colour. On the other side waited a short passage and a second door with ASTRA-9 RECEIVING stencilled across it.

Tim checked his suit, picked up the small bag Fred had packed and discovered a torch inside. Beneath it were a folded rag, a spare pair of socks and the last chocolate bar from the kitchen cupboard. Fred had denied knowing where it was the previous evening.

"Found your chocolate," Tim said.

"Then don't die with it uneaten."

It was the nearest either could get to saying what they meant. Tim put it back and opened the inner hatch.

The station smelled of hot dust, cleaning fluid and something sweet that did not belong near either. His torch found storage cases fastened to the walls, a trolley on its side and the dried print of a hand across a door control. Beyond the receiving bay the corridor bent out of sight. A lamp over the bend flickered without ever properly lighting what lay underneath it.

"I'm inside."

Mary asked him to point the camera at the wall panel. She read the local pressure display and told him to keep the suit ready anyway. The station was reporting normal conditions from a sensor that had not updated in hours. That was not the same as normal conditions.

A reception terminal still worked. Its welcome screen invited arrivals to contact a duty officer, although the list of officers was blank. Tim tried the first intercom button, then the second. He could hear the calls ringing somewhere further inside the station.

Nothing answered until he stepped away.

Three short notes came out of the speaker. After a pause, the long note fell through the empty bay.

"Don't answer that," Mary said.

"I wasn't planning a duet."

He searched the terminal for a map. Fred photographed the display at home so they would have it if the camera dropped again. Tim copied the main route into his notebook, drawing boxes for rooms and a crooked fork for a junction. His writing looked as though it had been completed in a moving ambulance, but Fred recognised the habits behind it and found them reassuring.

A message marked VASS, TECHNICAL sat among the arrival notices. It described three shifts with Research sealed and something in a quarantine tank knocking as though it were counting the crew.

Tim read it twice.

"Maybe it's a research animal," he said.

Fred looked at the handprint beside the door. "Then it needs fucking enrichment."

Tim returned to the airlock and asked the capsule to prepare departure. The screen reported that the trip had already been completed. The release option led to a menu which led back to the same green confirmation. He found himself breathing through his nose in short, angry bursts.

At home Fred reopened the support conversation. Neither brother trusted it now. They wanted to know what the code it had supplied was trying to do. Tim dictated the exact message. Fred

pasted it in and demanded an explanation without suggestions for new features.

 **Copilot**

Tim Gurnerman
Fred's typing this for me. I'm at Astra-9. The rocket says RETURN COMPLETE and won't let me leave. What have you told it counts as home? Because it seems happy and I'm really fucking not.

Copilot
RETURN COMPLETE indicates that the vehicle has reached its designated home location.

Fred Gurnerman
You've just read the sign back to him. How does it decide where home is? He's at Astra-9. We live on Earth.

Copilot
If the location field shows Astra-9, rename it to Earth to maintain consistency with the return dashboard.

Message Copilot

"Tell it to look out the window," Tim said.

The proposed fix sat on the screen between them. It changed a word and left the missing planet exactly where it had been.

"It won't even say it got it wrong," Tim said.

"Apparently reality has failed to match the document."

"Reality can join the fucking queue."

Tim's voice rose so suddenly that the microphone crackled. "It wants to rename the fucking station?"

"Apparently that gets you home."

"Tell it I've renamed it Useless Bastard. See if it gets better."

Mary closed the chat window and opened the depot's original service record. Astra-9's address matched an old contract in the disposal folder. Kestrel could follow that route deliberately, with its own operational navigation, if Hales would release the tender. The original local return procedure was also in the archive. It bore no resemblance to the one Copilot had supplied.

"I'm coming after you," she said.

Tim stopped swearing. "What?"

"I'm going to ask Hales for Kestrel. The rescue shuttle at work. I'll come in that and bring you back in the spare seat."

"The orange-and-white one? The one Fred helped with?"

"That one. It's still in the hangar."

"You said we couldn't borrow it."

"You weren't stranded in space when you asked. You've made yourself eligible."

Fred started to object. Mary pointed at the radio and told him they would sort the details when Tim was somewhere safe. The link was unstable. For now she needed Fred to keep it working.

He hated the argument because it was correct.

Tim listened while they discussed the departure point. He could hear a drawer opening in the kitchen and the rattle of Mary's keys. The domestic sounds hurt more than he expected. He wanted to be annoyed by the cold tea and the dog outside. He wanted the room back, exactly as miserable as it had been.

"Mary," he said. "Don't use our instructions."

"I'm not a fucking idiot, Tim."

A clatter came from above him.

He raised the torch. A ventilation grille flexed, settled and flexed again. There was something behind it. Through the slats he saw a pale joint turn in a direction his own limbs could not have managed.

"Fred."

The grille struck the floor.

Tim ran before the thing finished unfolding. It landed on the reception desk with a wet, heavy noise, scattering loose objects and tearing the terminal from its mount. He saw too many limbs and a head that opened where its face should have been. Its first movement towards him was so quick that he only understood it after he had already fallen through the next doorway.

Fred shouted to keep moving. Tim slammed his palm against the door control. Nothing happened. He hit it again, screaming at it as though that had ever repaired anything. The creature struck the frame just as the door began to slide. One hooked limb came through the narrowing gap, scraping sparks from the metal.

Tim threw his weight against the emergency bar. The door closed, caught the limb and shuddered. Something shrieked on the other side. He fell backwards and crawled until he struck the opposite wall.

For several seconds the only clear sound was his own breathing.

"Tim," Fred said. "Tell me you're there."

"I'm there."

"Are you hurt?"

Tim looked down, checking himself with the torch. His hands were shaking so hard the beam moved everywhere except where he needed it.

"No. I don't think so."

The door bulged once.

"I am," he added, "going to leave an absolutely fucking dreadful review."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mary Follows

By the time Tim shut himself in the security room, Mary had been back at the house for two hours. She had read the original email, the generated summary and the last route file. Fred watched her put them beside one another on the table.

"Which one did you read?" she asked.

He pointed to the summary.

She nodded once. That was worse than shouting.

"It said you had cleared it," Tim said over the radio.

"I didn't."

"I know that now."

"I put it in the email. I put it in a sentence you could read while falling downstairs."

Fred started to explain the signed inspection sheet. Mary pointed at the heading: CABIN AND MECHANICAL CHECKS. Beneath it were the things she had checked. None of them described the route. The original email sat beside it with her words still intact.

For a moment all three were quiet. Tim could hear the radiator through the open microphone. Something moved in the ceiling above his security room. The distance between the sounds was almost more than he could manage.

"I should have read it," Fred said.

Mary looked at him.

"The actual email. I should have read it."

He did not add a reason. There were plenty, and none would move Tim closer to home. Mary let the silence stand for a moment,

then turned the pages over. They would have time to be angry if the rescue worked.

The disposal folder gave them the start of a plan. Astra-9 had been a destination on the depot's old service network. Its transit address was real, which was why the rocket had been able to reach it. It simply had no business inside a local demonstration route. The original contractor had marked that address as a remote transfer. Copilot's assembled package had lost the distinction.

Mary brought up the fleet booking sheet. Kestrel had returned from a routine inspection run that morning and was back in its usual bay, with no other job assigned. It was available; it was also company property, expensive to launch, and intended for recoveries with rather fewer unknowns than this one.

Its navigation already understood the service network. Mary had used the same type of transfer on recovery runs, though she had never been to Astra-9. She could take the depot's existing shuttle along a checked route instead of trying to build another rocket while Tim waited. She also knew that reaching a station did not guarantee it would let you leave.

"I need Hales to release it," she said.

Fred reached for his coat. "We both go."

She shook her head.

"It's got two seats."

"One of them is for Tim."

"We can sort that when we're there."

"No, Fred. That's how you've ended up with this being a conversation."

He stood with the coat half on. For years he had solved emergencies by arriving, taking hold of the difficult thing and enduring more discomfort than whoever else was there. Being told to remain beside a microphone felt like being told to accept that he could not help.

Mary knew him well enough to say it differently.

"The link from his capsule is going through your radio. You know what we changed. You know the files. If it drops, I need you here to bring it back. I can't fly the tender, find him and repair the bloody living room from Astra-9."

Tim listened to his brother breathe.

"She's right," he said quietly.

Fred hated that too, but he took the coat off.

Mary rang Hales from the kitchen. He answered with the exhausted suspicion of a man who had just discovered that a disposed asset had become a news item. She described Tim's position, the remaining capsule fault and the station's failure to answer normal calls.

Hales said Kestrel was not hers to take.

"That's why I'm ringing you."

"It's not a favour with a company van, Mary."

"I know what it is. I've flown it."

"We normally recover our own crews."

"He's in a courier you sold him. Consider it after-sales support."

The release required a recovery authorisation, a named operator and payment for a call-out the brothers could not afford. Hales began reading the conditions. Mary interrupted at the third one.

"You still owe me the retention payment from the last contract. Use that."

Fred looked up.

Hales protested that it was not the same budget. Mary told him to find a pen capable of crossing a line between two numbers. The discussion continued in low voices, then sharper ones. In the end he agreed to apply the outstanding payment as the deposit and put the balance against the Gurnerman repair business, provided Fred signed it himself.

Fred did. He did not ask how long it would take to pay back.

Tim could not hear every word, but he heard enough.

"Mary, don't spend your money on me."

She came back to the microphone. "Then refund me by surviving."

He had no answer ready for that. For once she did not make fun of him for it.

Before leaving, she called a recovery technician she trusted and sent him the operational route, not an AI summary of it. He would check the transfer address against the depot's live register while she prepared Kestrel. Hales would remain at the yard through her departure and keep the Earth recovery receiver active. Fred would maintain the direct channel to Tim and relay anything the station sent.

Nobody had a complete picture, but this time they said that aloud.

Mary drove back to the depot with the signed authorisation on the passenger seat. The practical details occupied her until she reached the gate. Then, for a few seconds, she sat without getting out.

Tim had once turned up at this same gate with a lunchbox after she worked a double shift. He had claimed their mum made too much food. Inside was exactly what Mary liked, and a note from Fred warning her not to leave the container at work because he needed it. She had kept the note in a drawer for reasons she would have found embarrassing to explain.

Now one brother sat beside a broken link and the other was hiding under a ceiling that contained something alive. She was angry enough with both of them to taste it. She was also frightened enough that her hand shook when she put the car in park.

They were not separate feelings. The same attachment had produced both.

Hales met her at the yard office, took Fred's signed payment agreement and unlocked the flight-key cabinet. He entered Kestrel's fleet number in the recovery log, wrote Mary Chufferson in the pilot column and pushed the key across the desk. Only then did the shuttle become hers to use for this job.

"One pilot out," he said. "Two people back. And I want my shuttle."

"I'll put you on speaker so the universe knows the terms."

He walked with her into the hangar. Kestrel stood behind the same yellow barrier where Tim had asked whether it was fast. Hales had put the printed operational manual in its cabin and called the second technician in despite complaining about the overtime. The shuttle wore the inspection tag Mary had signed after repairing the sensor connection with Fred. She checked it again anyway.

The independent route check came back clear. The network still recognised Astra-9's service address, although its health reports were stale. Mary marked that uncertainty on the release sheet rather than allowing it to vanish into a confident sentence.

She loaded a medical bag, spare communications equipment and enough cabin supplies for a delayed return. She inspected both seats. The empty passenger space became Tim's place in her mind, and after that it was difficult to look at it for long.

Hales stood at the hatch.

"If it's bad, you come back," he said.

Mary looked at him.

"I'm supposed to say it."

"I know."

He handed her the secondary beacon. "This one doesn't go through their house."

She took it and thanked him.

At Astra-9, Tim had been using the waiting time badly. He tried sleeping and woke at every noise. He counted the emergency

supplies, then counted again because the first answer seemed too small. Behind a security cabinet he found a sealed sidearm case and Vass's access card. The gun frightened him almost as much as the thing outside. It belonged in a version of his life he had never intended to reach.

Fred stayed with him through all of it. They talked about the ordinary work waiting at home, the customer with the damaged compressor, whether the freezer invoice had finally gone to the right person. Tim asked if Mary was really going to come.

"She's on her way to the launch cradle," Fred said.

"She must fucking hate us."

"Yes."

"You could soften that a bit."

Fred adjusted the radio. "She's coming anyway."

Kestrel's launch was uneventful in all the ways their own had not been. Mary followed the actual instruments and the printed sequence, speaking each completed stage to the depot operator. Earth became a bright curve behind her. She reached the transfer point, checked the destination against the second register and confirmed the route herself.

The transit pulled the cabin sideways through a moment of darkness. Then Astra-9 appeared above the scarred moon.

No screen congratulated her on being home. The tender said she had reached Astra-9 because that was where she had asked it to go.

She called Tim. His relief reached her before his words did.

"About time."

"Traffic."

She surveyed the station before docking. The normal service berth did not answer. A receiving collar on the opposite arm remained available, and its local pressure reading was current. She recorded Kestrel's position, sent the recall instructions to Fred and took the medical bag inside.

The corridor showed damage the old station reports had not mentioned. Mary passed the scraped door outside reception, then found Tim's security room by the vending machine wedged against it from the inside.

"Move the shop," she said through the intercom.

He did it slowly. When the door opened, she saw his face and stopped being irritated for just long enough to frighten him.

"Is it that bad?"

"You look like you've been stored incorrectly."

She checked the torn outer layer at his elbow, the seal beneath it and his eyes. Tim let her fuss with no attempt to disguise how glad he was. Then he hugged her before either had agreed to it. She held him with her free arm and told him never to make her come this far to call him an idiot again.

They almost made it straight back.

At the receiving junction the quarantine alarm began. A camera above the door turned towards Tim, then Mary. The transfer system had recognised movement from the contaminated interior into a clean docking section. Kestrel's collar released under the station's isolation procedure, sending the unoccupied tender towards a remote quarantine berth.

Mary reached the viewing window in time to see the cabin lights moving away.

She used the manual recall. The station rejected it pending a local quarantine reset. The service tender's own display was still answering Fred, but it could not override the docking network holding it outside.

Tim stood beside her. "Can you bring it back?"

"Not from this panel."

"But you can?"

She looked at the route to docking control. It ran through the sealed research section. Main power and the quarantine console both needed restoring before the berth would release.

"We have to go further in," she said.

His face changed. She put a hand on his arm before he could disappear into the thought of it.

"We know where the ship is. We know why it moved. We have a job to do. That's better than guessing."

They found a floor plan at the next terminal. Fred had the full archive at home, but only half the local map would come through the damaged link. Tim asked the assistant to identify the connecting passage from the supplied image. He was not asking it to fly them anywhere. He was trying to read a blurred label. That distinction felt sensible until the answer arrived.

**Copilot**

Tim Gurnerman

Here's the map off the terminal. Mary got me out of the security room but the station's parked our ride outside. We need Docking Control. We're at Receiving. Which way do we go? Use the names on the map, I can't ask a fucking alien for directions.

Copilot

Continue through the blue door marked Auxiliary Access, then follow the passage to Docking Control.

Tim Gurnerman

Two grey doors and a red one. No blue door. No Auxiliary whatever. Are you looking at the picture I sent?

Copilot

The red door may appear blue under the station's lighting. Auxiliary Access describes its function rather than a visible label.

Message Copilot

Mary held the torch against the red paint. Tim could feel his pulse in his jaw.

"It's made up a fucking door again."

"At least it's consistent," Fred said.

"It can consistently fuck off."

Mary copied the visible room names into Tim's notebook. "Use the walls."

They went through Maintenance. Halfway along, something dropped from above and ran low across the floor. Mary fired into the dark. Tim stumbled, recovered and helped her force open a manual door. It was heavier than he expected, and for a second the two of them fought each other as much as the mechanism.

"Lift your side," she shouted.

"I am."

"Then lift it better."

They got through with the creature close enough to smell. Mary shut it out, but another came from a recess ahead. Tim raised the sidearm and fired. The first shot struck a pipe. The second hit the creature as it leapt. Its weight drove him backwards even as it collapsed.

He lay beneath it with its limbs opening and closing against his suit. Mary dragged him free. He rolled onto his side and vomited onto the floor.

At home Fred saw only a strip of metal and Tim's boot. He kept asking what had happened until Mary found room to answer.

"He's alive. No suit breach. Give him a minute."

Fred had repaired the parts keeping his brother breathing. He had also let him launch. Both facts sat in his hands while he gripped the table and listened.

Tim finally got enough air to speak.

"I shot it."

"You had to," Mary said.

He looked at the body. It had stopped moving. Somewhere behind the door, other creatures were finding their way towards the noise.

Mary helped him stand. "We'll feel shit about it at home."

He picked up the notebook. Dark fluid obscured part of the page. He wiped it with Fred's rag and found the next room underneath.

Research.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Sample

Research opened onto a room full of empty desks and a wall of glass that was no longer keeping anything separate. The quarantine tank beyond it had split along one side. A thick web of pale material spread from the base into the drains and ventilation ducts. In the middle of the web lay a security helmet with its strap still fastened.

Tim kept his torch away from it after that.

Mary brought the surviving research terminal online. They needed power access, the docking controls and some indication of what parts of the station still held air. What they found first was Research Log 88-C.

The specimen reorganised dead tissue into functional structures. Those were the words in the report, clean enough to sit on a university noticeboard. The images underneath showed what the words had been avoiding. Bone had become framework. Muscle had become cables. Parts that should have belonged to separate bodies worked together around a darker central mass.

Tim swallowed. "It's building things."

"Yes," Mary said.

"Out of them."

She did not answer. There was no gentler version available.

The reports described a signal associated with growth. Three clipped notes, a pause and a falling tone. Early tests called it a response to observation. Later tests called it a method of coordination. The final entries stopped pretending the researchers were in control.

Dr Okafor's note described casualties arriving at three in the morning, lacerations and movement beneath the skin. She had sealed the medical bay from inside. Vass had reported the knocking days before the breach. Somebody had read both reports and ordered work to continue.

Fred told them to save everything. Tim copied the files to a portable archive while Mary traced the manual override. It had occurred shortly before the outbreak under a credential identified only as D. The user had disabled containment and erased most of the access record.

One line remained: "They should never have been allowed to keep the sample. I corrected that mistake."

The record was dated months before the brothers bought the capsule. The station had already been in trouble when Tim's flight arrived. Their wrong route had taken him into somebody else's disaster.

Mary compared the credential with an old transfer contract. The initial belonged to Damian, an external systems contractor who had argued that the specimen could be used to control the transit network. His proposal had been rejected. Afterwards, he had retained access nobody thought to revoke.

"He opened it on purpose," she said.

"Why?" Tim asked.

The remaining attachment answered that in the language of a business proposal. Damian intended to isolate the specimen's signalling function, move it through the relay and sell exclusive control of the route. He had treated every caution in the research notes as a problem somebody else could solve after his demonstration.

Fred read the attachment at home. He recognised the optimism, the selective reading and the confidence that an unresolved danger would somehow become less important once the project worked.

Damian had meant to hurt people for money. The brothers had meant to go on a short flight. The similarity in the excuses was uncomfortable anyway.

Tim copied the dates into his notebook. He needed to know where his own mistake ended without pretending it had not mattered.

He sent the event record to Fred. The archive was long, damaged and badly indexed. Fred needed the old events put in order, so they could trace where the override had sent the signal. He attached the damaged records and asked for a timeline.



Copilot

Fred Gurnerman

They've found the tank these things came out of. Someone opened it months ago. I've attached the records. Put them in date order and show me who did what. Today's arrivals are at the bottom. Don't mix Tim turning up with whatever happened before him.

Copilot

I have created an incident timeline. Tim Gurnerman authorised the containment release before arriving at Astra-9. Mary Chufferson subsequently assumed control of the station response.

W

Astra-9 incident timeline.docx

Created file

Fred Gurnerman

Tim was at home losing an argument with a freezer when that tank opened. Show me the line that says he did it.

Copilot

The authorisation is attributed to Mary Chufferson in the incident context. This reflects the updated interpretation of the supplied material.

Message Copilot

The timeline opened with Tim's name in its first row. The living-room microphone carried a sharp scrape as Fred shoved his chair back.

"Where does it say that?"

Tim heard keys striking harder than keys needed to be struck. The revised accusation appeared without a usable citation. The summary had turned the people trying to survive the breach into the people responsible for it.

Mary read the answer over Tim's shoulder. "Tell it to leave me out of its fucking novel."

Tim's anger came hot and useful after the nausea. "It got me here and now it's trying to fit me up."

Fred deleted the summary. He made his own timeline on the back of a gas bill, writing the source date beside each event. Mary read the originals. It took longer and produced fewer headings, but by the end they knew what they actually knew.

Damian had opened containment and diverted the external uplink to the relay. The final security image showed him returning to the laboratory after the release. It did not show him leaving. His access code carried on working after the person had stopped using it. The source signal was reaching through the station network, and every reply strengthened its control. The creatures were one part of it. The thing Tim had seen reflected beside him might be another.

A sound came from the far side of the broken tank.

Mary lowered the screen brightness. Something tall stood behind the remaining glass, far enough into the dark that Tim could not see its face. Its shoulders narrowed at the wrong angle. One arm ended in a jointed extension that moved slowly against the floor.

For several seconds it did nothing. That made it worse. The smaller creatures had been horrible but understandable. They wanted to get at him. This one looked as though it was deciding what he was.

"I can see it too," Fred said quietly.

Tim had not asked. Hearing it confirmed made the room feel colder.

The figure tilted its head. The terminal speakers played three notes, then the falling tone. A file transfer on Mary's screen began to reverse direction, pulling rather than sending.

She broke the connection.

The shape moved. Mary dragged Tim sideways as the glass burst and the room filled with bodies from the ducts. They fired their way back through the desks, slipping on loose papers, the torch beam jerking between pale limbs and overturned chairs. Tim could hear Fred calling directions, but the individual words kept disappearing under the noise.

At the service door Mary fell to one knee. A hooked limb had caught the strap of her equipment bag. Tim grabbed her under the arm and pulled until the strap tore. They crashed into the passage together. Mary slapped the lockdown control and the barrier dropped between them and the laboratory.

Something struck it hard enough to dent the metal at head height.

They had the archive. They did not have the power restored. The laboratory route was gone, and the next available control station lay across an enclosed shuttle link marked RELAY.

Mary read the diagram while Tim rested his head against the cold wall. His breathing sounded loud in the helmet. He tried to picture their kitchen and found, to his horror, that he could summon the shape of the table more easily than the exact colour of the cupboards.

"Fred," he said.

"I'm here."

"Don't let me forget normal stuff."

There was a pause. Then Fred began describing the dog outside, the dirty mug on the table and the fact that somebody had already complained about the launch on the estate group chat.

Tim laughed weakly. "What did they say?"

"Mostly that you should have taken more people with you."

Mary helped him up. They followed the signs to the relay with Fred still talking about home.

CHAPTER NINE

The Chufferson Relay

The shuttle link moved them through a covered transit tube to a station that seemed to consist mostly of antennae and rooms built to keep the antennae alive. Through a narrow window Tim saw the moon turn beneath them. Trenches crossed its face in straight runs, then stopped at places where whole sections of ground had collapsed. He could not tell whether the stations were orbiting it or being held there.

The relay's entrance display asked for an operator. Mary entered her name to gain local access, and the screen promptly relabelled the duty board CHUFFERSON RELAY.

"You've got a station," Tim said.

"I've got a problem with my name on it."

The lights were out in the central hall. A row of emergency lamps marked the way to dish control, while the far end of the floor disappeared into a black drop behind a low rail. Tim kept closer to the wall than he needed to. His body had begun quietly revising its opinion of open space.

At the control desk Mary found the uplink still running. It was sending packets into the dark beyond the moon, receiving the familiar tones and redistributing them across the stations. The dish kept correcting its own position against local commands. Someone had made the relay answer whether there was an operator or not.

A barracks note described an evacuation. Some crew had taken a shuttle. Others had gone down to the core to listen properly. None returned in a condition the author wanted to describe.

Mary stopped the audio playback. The silence was immediate and enormous.

"Don't let that start again," she said.

The console needed a live operator to hold the uplink open to Earth without also feeding the external address. Mary stayed at it, adjusting the channel whenever the signal tried to take over. Tim had to restore a separate power feed from the plant below. They argued about splitting up until a surge through the console cut Fred off halfway through a sentence.

When he returned, Mary had made the decision.

"Stay on his camera," she told Fred. "I'll keep this end alive."

Tim did not like leaving her in the open hall. She watched him hesitate and held up the sidearm.

"I haven't forgotten how this works. Go."

Below the control floor the passages became narrow and warm. Something tapped against a pipe in the ceiling, always a little further ahead than Tim's torch. He found the plant room and the switchboard. Everything important had been labelled by someone who expected to return after lunch, and the ordinary handwriting nearly undid him.

At home Fred looked for the board reference in the copied manuals. Tim waited beside the doorway, facing the corridor, while Fred searched the long document. The chat window remained open behind it. Fred tried one tightly limited question, asking where a quoted heading occurred in the file.

**Copilot**

Fred Gurnerman

Tim's standing beside the power board and something's moving in the corridor. Find Secondary Feed Isolation in this manual. Just give me the page. That's the whole job.

Copilot

Page 214. "Secondary Feed Isolation and Recovery".

Fred Gurnerman

There are ninety-six pages. I've reached the back. After that it's my fucking table.

Copilot

Page numbering can vary between document viewers.

Message Copilot

Fred checked it, then checked again. "It says page two hundred and fourteen."

"How many are there?"

"Ninety-six."

Tim shut his eyes. "It's not even fucking reading it, is it?"

"No. It's dressed guessing up in a tie."

Fred found the heading himself. They followed the station's own local controls, and the feed returned. Lamps came on one after another down the corridor, revealing three creatures crouched at the far junction.

Tim backed into the plant room. They came fast. He fired, missed, fired again and shoved the door until the latch caught. It shook against his shoulder while he searched for another exit. Fred saw the maintenance hatch before he did and shouted until Tim looked down.

He crawled out through a service channel barely wider than his suit. Behind him the plant door gave way. He could hear claws scraping metal as the first creature tried to force itself into the same space. He kept moving, pulling on braces and cable hooks, until Mary hauled him out at the far end and shut the hatch behind him.

"You left the console," he gasped.

"It can manage thirty seconds without me. You apparently can't."

They got back to dish control and found the uplink rebuilding the forbidden connection. Mary sat down, put her headset on and fought it back.

Tim watched the way she held her left hand flat on the desk whenever the tremor began. He had seen that at the depot after long shifts and assumed it meant she was tired. Here he understood that she could be frightened and still do the work. Her competence had never meant she did not pay for it.

"You don't have to pretend you're not scared," he said.

"I'm not pretending. You keep mistaking swearing for confidence."

"Runs in the family."

She glanced up. "I'm not in your family."

"You keep turning up for the bad bits. That's basically the membership requirement."

She looked back at the display before he could see her expression settle. "Then I want a fucking refund." Tim stood beside her facing the stairs. For a while there was only the work: her hands on the controls, his torch on the darkness, Fred's voice checking both of them.

Then the station spoke in Tim's voice.

"Still out here, Mary."

He turned so abruptly that his neck hurt. The sound had come from a speaker above the console. It had his pitch, his breath, even the tired hesitation he had developed since docking.

"That isn't me."

The recording continued. It said the Shape stood at the edge of every window. It said not to let the relay answer. Then it began a sentence to Fred and dissolved into static.

Mary pulled the audio channel down. "It's copying what it hears."

The external dish corrected its position again. On her screen a process was collecting the operator's voice and visual feed. Beneath CHUFFERSON it began assembling a model of her face.

She disconnected the camera. The process carried on using what it already had.

Tim watched a clean outline of Mary fill with measurement marks. For an instant the outline stretched until it was much taller than a person. The program reset the scale and did it again.

"Mary."

"I see it."

She saved the operator trace before severing the connection. Whatever was making the creatures had learned something from the relay. It had listened to Tim. Now it was studying her.

The dish finally held an Earth link without answering the source, but the effort had burned out the shuttle recall. A secondary route remained through Gorge Station, where the ascent system controlled an emergency return gate. Beyond that sat the source chamber, identified in an old maintenance entry simply as the Answer.

Tim looked at the name. "That's unfortunate branding."

Fred's laugh was short and angry. "At least this one admits it's trying to kill you."

They left the relay with the manual route copied into the notebook. Behind them the station speakers clicked once, as though someone had opened a mouth and reconsidered.

CHAPTER TEN

The Other Mary

Gorge Station rose around a deep central shaft. Walkways crossed it at different heights, and the reactor housing hung below them in the dark like an enormous thing caught in a cage. The upper gantry was their route to the ascent controls. Mary found a chief engineer's note warning that the brood climbed stairs as readily as the crew and did it faster with the lights off.

"Lovely," Tim said. "Equal access."

They restored the east plant from a local panel, reading the physical labels twice before touching anything. Light spread through the hub and revealed movement beneath nearly every walkway. The power had woken the equipment and announced the visitors at the same time.

They ran for the stairs.

Tim had begun to understand the rhythm of surviving the stations. A door needed power. Power woke the creatures. A console needed time. Time had to be bought in a place with too many entrances. Nothing was hard for only one reason. Even when he understood the immediate job, the station found something else to put teeth on.

Mary started the ascent sequence while he watched the stairs. Fred counted movement from the camera, telling him which side before Tim could see it. The first creature came over the rail instead. It landed beside the console, and Mary struck it with the stock of her weapon before Tim drove it back.

The second and third came up the stairs together. Tim fired until the chamber smelled of hot metal, then crouched behind a support

while Mary covered him. He could not feel his fingertips properly. He could hear himself saying "come on" over and over, to the weapon, to the machine, to time itself.

The ascent accepted their destination. A platform below began moving towards the gantry.

Across the shaft something larger rose with it.

At first Tim thought it was a figure standing on the far side of the lift. Then it straightened beyond the height of a person, unfolded another length of itself and stepped into the light. Its face resembled Mary's with a degree of accuracy that made every wrong proportion more obscene. The jaw was too broad. The shoulders were too high. A dark shell covered its torso, part armour and part something grown to imitate it.

The real Mary stood beside Tim, breathing hard. The creature looked from him to her and smiled with her mouth.

"Absolutely fucking not," she said.

It answered in her voice. "Stay close, Tim."

That was what she had said in the laboratory corridor. Tim heard the exact same breath between the words.

The shell split briefly down the creature's chest. An inner light pulsed, and the smaller creatures changed direction together. Then the plates closed and it began climbing towards them, hauling its enormous weight onto the walkway without any apparent effort.

"Mega Mary," Tim said, because his frightened brain had apparently appointed itself entertainment officer.

Mary looked at him. "Don't you dare make that stick."

Fred had gone quiet at home. On the screen he could see both of them, the woman beside Tim and the enlarged copy coming across the bridge. He told them to move before the thing reached the narrow section.

Tim fired. The shots struck the closed shell and did almost nothing. Mega Mary lifted one arm, and the bridge rail tore from its

fixings. She swung it through the place his head had occupied a second earlier. He fell, rolled and caught the edge of a support as the metal passed above him.

Mary hauled him backwards. The copy's foot came down hard enough to break the walkway where he had been lying. A piece of floor dropped into the reactor shaft and kept falling long after he expected to hear it land.

"It opens when it calls them," Fred said. "I saw the middle."

They had no room to wait for it. Mega Mary advanced again, dragging one hand along the wall and peeling loose panels away as she came. Mary shot the light above it. The creature flinched at the shower of sparks, buying them enough time to get through the ascent door.

They sealed it and ran down a short passage into the transfer room. The door behind them shook under the first blow. Another would take it off its track.

The transfer chamber contained two destinations. One led to the emergency return system but showed SOURCE LOCK ACTIVE. The other led to the Answer. Beside it a chair sat on a low wheeled carrier inside a ring of unlit equipment.

A small pale object rested in a cradle at the console. The surviving instructions called it a Signal Seed. It was an interface used by earlier transit crews to align perception with the carrier field. Tim read the note twice, hoping it would become less disgusting. Exposure produced profound sensory disruption. Without alignment the carrier would not release.

"It wants somebody off their head," he said.

Mary was studying the return controls. The copy hit the door again, bending it inward. Fred told them the research file connected the source lock to the creature's inner signal. If they could stop it, the emergency gate might open. Until then the return system belonged to the thing trying to get through the wall.

Tim looked at the seed. It resembled something found at the bottom of a pond and given a job by a lunatic.

He asked Fred whether the copied archive contained a non-seed option. Fred searched, found nothing and, in the shrinking time available, asked the chat to identify the alternative in the attached instructions.

 **Copilot**

Fred Gurnerman

The panel says SOURCE LOCK ACTIVE. The instructions say Tim has to swallow a Signal Seed to use the carrier. Is there a way through WITHOUT eating it? Read the instructions I've sent. It's not a dietary preference. Something's breaking the door down.

Copilot

Select Bypass Alignment under Advanced Settings to continue without the Signal Seed.

Fred Gurnerman

There is no menu. There's a chair, a seed and a big release button. Where are these settings supposed to be?

Copilot

Try expanding the Advanced Settings section.

Message Copilot

Tim searched the panel anyway, furious with himself as much as the screen. "Where? Where is it?"

There were no settings. There was a seed, a chair and a door coming apart.

"Shut it," Tim said. "Shut that useless fucking thing."

Fred did.

Mary tried to take the seed herself. Tim caught her wrist. She needed to keep the return control alive, and the thing out there had built itself around her signal. He had started this. For once his bad decision might be the one they needed.

"That's a shit argument," she said.

"I know. It's mine, though."

Before she could stop him, he took the seed from the cradle and swallowed it. It tasted metallic and bitter, then seemed to stop having a taste and begin having a direction.

The carrier lights came on. Tim sat down because his knees no longer understood standing. Mary fastened the restraint with a force that expressed everything she had not had time to say.

The door failed behind her. Mega Mary's arm came through the gap.

Mary struck the release control. The carrier moved, and the room folded into colour around Tim's face.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Kart

For the first few seconds Tim was certain he had done ordinary acid and forgotten taking it. He recognised the opening changes with dreadful familiarity: depth becoming unreliable, colour separating from objects, the sense that his teeth were receiving information intended for another part of the body. Then the floor vanished, the walls pulled out into miles of light and his familiar idea of a bad trip became embarrassingly provincial.

He was in a kart.

It had a small steering wheel, a low seat and wheels he could see turning despite the complete absence of ground. A strip of luminous track ran ahead of him through open space. Below it hung planets, scraps of station, enormous copies of objects from home and a blue distance that seemed to contain its own weather.

"Fred," he said carefully. "I'm in a fucking go-kart."

At home Fred saw a maintenance carrier moving along a transit guide. Then the camera flickered, and for one impossible frame he saw exactly what Tim had described: four wheels, a cheap steering wheel and his brother suspended over a purple sun.

"Keep looking forward," Fred said.

"That wasn't an answer."

"I'm branching out."

The kart accelerated. The track bent around a planet with the texture of the living-room carpet. Burn marks became craters. A huge cigarette ashtray turned slowly above its equator. Ahead, a fork-shaped sign split into three versions of itself and pointed in directions that hurt Tim's eyes.

He held the wheel and tried not to look down. His knees were real. The seat pressure was real. His bladder, unhelpfully, remained committed to the practical world. None of those facts stopped the sky opening into a face that looked like an irritated banana.

"Oh, fuck off," he told it.

Fred asked who he was talking to.

"Produce. Long story."

The track dipped. Tim's stomach arrived a moment after the rest of him. Light passed through the kart without illuminating it, filling the air with shifting patterns like oil on water. Somewhere ahead, music began. It had the three clipped notes inside it, stretched and repeated until the rhythm took over the movement of the wheels.

Mary came through the radio. Her voice was thin but recognisably hers.

"I'm behind a maintenance barrier. The copy has gone through another route towards you. The carrier only has one destination. Stay in it."

"Wasn't going to get out for a piss, Mary."

"You'd be surprised what I think you might do."

On Fred's screen the transit guide had several points where track information dropped out. He asked Tim what he could actually see. Together they compared the physical markers on the camera with the shapes in Tim's view. The fork was a junction warning. The broken rectangle marked a support arch. Tim found the same signs in his notebook and held it against the wheel, its pages turning into thin translucent wings before settling back into paper.

It was the first time all day that noticing a pattern had helped him rather than put him somewhere worse.

He followed the continuous line beneath the impossible scenery. The kart jumped a gap that Fred's camera recorded as an ordinary coupling. Tim felt the lift in his stomach and landed hard enough to

hurt. He laughed, a high frightened sound he could not stop, then cried without any clean boundary between the two.

He saw the house beneath him. Not a vague symbol of home but the actual roof, with the bad gutter and the patch Fred had repaired twice. Through the roof he could see Fred at the table, leaning over the microphone. The enormous man looked small from here. Beside him sat an empty chair.

Tim stopped laughing.

For a moment he understood how many hours his brother had been sitting there, doing the only things left to do. Calling. Reading. Watching. Getting angrier because there was no useful place to put the fear.

"I'm sorry," Tim said.

Fred asked what had happened.

"For the rocket. For all of it."

The microphone was quiet long enough for Tim to hear the breathing on the other end.

"Get back," Fred said. "Then you can be sorry while fixing the garden."

The house passed behind him. The track entered a tunnel lined with repeated corrections that admitted nothing had been wrong. Every wall displayed a bright, self-satisfied answer. When Tim tried to read one, the sentence changed halfway through and accused him of misunderstanding the previous sentence.

He knew it was the trip using what was already in his head. Knowing did not improve the experience. Copilot had managed to become part of his fucking subconscious, which felt like a subscription tier nobody should be allowed to sell.

"It's saying it understands my frustration," he told Fred.

"Ignore it."

"There's about a million of them."

"Then that's a million wrong answers. Keep driving."

The tunnel opened. Alien shapes moved beside the rails, matching his speed with limbs that seemed to skip the space between positions. One struck the carrier. The impact was solid enough to cut through the colour. Tim pulled himself lower in the seat while a hooked shape scraped over the backrest.

The next arch knocked it away. He saw pieces of pale matter spin into the stars, then turn briefly into playing cards, then become pieces again. His mind was inventing parts of the view, but something was still trying to reach him through it.

"The colour has teeth," he said.

Fred heard that and abandoned any attempt to make the trip sound manageable. He talked Tim through each visible marker, one at a time. There was no reassurance that everything was fine. There were numbers, turns in the guide and the fact that his brother was still listening.

Near the end, a long black shape stood beside the track. The outline matched the figure in the laboratory. It did not attack. It turned its head as Tim passed and spoke in Mary's voice, asking him to stop.

The real Mary was still on the other channel, swearing at a jammed panel.

Tim kept going.

Ahead the stars gathered into the outline of a door. The music slowed. The wheels shuddered under him, and the luminous track became metal for a few feet at a time. He could smell hot dust again. There was a floor beneath the carrier. A room beyond it.

The kart struck a buffer and stopped with enough force to knock the air from his lungs. Tim hung forward in the restraint, sweating and shaking, while the impossible sky collapsed into stained station panels around him.

He was still tripping. The walls breathed. But the door ahead was real, and on the other side he could hear Mary laughing in a voice much too large for her body.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Answer

Tim unfastened the restraint on the third attempt. His fingers kept arriving slightly to one side of where he intended them to be. He waited until the buckle became one buckle, pressed it and slid from the carrier onto the floor. For a few seconds he stayed there, grateful for the existence of a surface.

Fred asked him to describe the room.

"Metal. Door. Shit lighting. Back to normal, apparently."

He drank from the suit supply, wiped his face and checked the sidearm. The magazine in his pocket was the last one. Beside the door an emergency station rack held a heavier weapon with a simple charge display. Mary read the indicator over the camera and told him it was ready. He picked it up with both hands. It felt more honest than anything with a chat window.

The real Mary had reached the return control using a narrow engineering passage the larger copy could not enter. She was injured in the shoulder but still moving. The emergency gate remained locked while the source field was active. If Tim shut it down, she could bring the return dock into alignment with the Earth side of the transit network.

"There are capsules here," she said. "Actual ones. Seats, doors, the lot."

Tim tried to smile. "Showing off."

"Get through it, Tim. I'm waiting for you."

He opened the chamber door.

The room beyond was circular, built around a sunken platform with three raised walkways leading to the perimeter. Pipes entered the floor from every direction. Some were metal and some only

looked it until they moved. The far wall carried an observation window, but the space outside had been reduced to a thick darkness in which he thought he could see enormous joints.

Mega Mary stood in the middle.

Up close the resemblance was both better and worse. There was enough of the real woman's expression to make him hesitate, then a twitch of the jaw ruined it. The copy was assembled from things that had learned the arrangement without understanding the person. Her hands were too large. Her head did not quite settle on her neck. Under the outer shell, something moved around a pulsing central chamber.

She watched him enter and spoke with Mary's voice from the relay.

"Stay close, Tim."

He gripped the weapon until his fingers hurt. "Learn another fucking line."

The creature opened its chest.

Light filled the gaps in the shell. The three notes sounded, louder than he had ever heard them, and smaller bodies began climbing out of the floor recesses. Tim fired at the open centre. The shot struck just as the plates closed, knocking Mega Mary sideways without bringing her down.

She charged.

He ran up the nearest walkway. The steps seemed to stretch under his feet, the trip still bending distance at exactly the wrong time. He fixed his eyes on the handrail and counted the supports. Metal struck behind him as the creature hit the base of the stairs.

Fred told him to keep moving. Mary told him the centre had reacted to the first hit. Both voices sounded too far away, but he held onto the difference between them and the copy. Fred interrupted himself when frightened. Mary answered what he actually asked. The thing behind him only repeated what it had stolen.

At the top he turned and fired at the smaller creatures coming up after him. One fell, another climbed over it and a third vanished beneath the walkway. He waited for it to appear at the far end, then realised it was climbing the underside. He moved just before it came over the rail where his leg had been.

Mega Mary struck the structure. The whole gantry shifted. Tim fell against a support, lost his grip on the heavier weapon and watched it slide towards the edge. He caught the sling with his boot and dragged it back while something tore at the sole from below.

He screamed, kicked free and scrambled across the platform.

At home Fred stood with both hands flat on the table. There was nothing else to do with them. The notebook lay open, source notes beside it, and the laptop still showed the research files. He searched the phrase describing the core cycle, trying to find any interval they had missed. A lingering chat panel offered to interpret the current error state.

He attached the page about the core cycle and asked one question.

 **Copilot**

Fred Gurnerman
The log says the core cycles when it calls the smaller ones. The panel says ACTIVE. Does this page say when it opens? Tim's in there with the thing. Find that bit, quickly.

Copilot
The source is inactive. No immediate action is required.

Message Copilot

Through the microphone came Tim's shout as Mega Mary smashed another section of rail away.

Fred stared at the answer and then at the camera. "It's active enough to fucking hit him."

He slammed the panel shut. This time he disconnected the assistant integration altogether, leaving the direct station link and the raw files. It had not earned another second of the time his brother had left.

Tim had heard him. Even through the terror his anger found room.

"Stop asking it."

"I have."

"No, properly."

"Properly. I'm watching you."

There was relief in that which Tim had not expected. One source of noise had finally gone away.

Mega Mary reached the upper platform. He could see the shell preparing to open, the plates lifting a fraction before the call. Tim raised the weapon. The acid colours tried to turn the movement into something beautiful. He refused them. It was a gap. It was the thing inside. It was his chance to go home.

He fired into the light.

The creature staggered. One chest plate failed to close. Beneath it he saw a mass contracting around a dark knot, with strands running from it into the chamber floor. Every smaller creature stopped for half a second, then resumed in a confused surge.

"That hurt it," Mary said.

Mega Mary answered in Fred's voice.

"Tim. Come here."

The imitation was close enough to turn his stomach. Then it repeated the sentence without the small shift of breath Fred would have made. It had a recording, not his brother.

"He's here," the real Fred said immediately. "I'm here. Don't move towards it."

Tim backed towards the other stairs. The copy followed, dragging a damaged leg now. Each step opened the broken plate a little further. He had two charges left in the heavier weapon and no desire to discover what happened if they missed.

He let it come to the narrow part of the walkway. Below them the smaller creatures gathered, waiting for another command. Mega Mary drew herself up to give it. The plates separated around the damaged centre.

Tim fired once, stepped sideways as the creature lunged and fired again into the exposed knot.

The sound was not a scream at first. It was all the copied voices released at once, Tim's words from the capsule, Mary's instructions at the relay, Fred calling over the broken connection. Then it became a single tearing noise that shook dust from the ceiling.

The shell folded inward. Mega Mary struck the rail, went through it and landed on the central platform hard enough to split the surface. Tim stood above her, unable to lower the empty weapon. The huge body moved once. The inner light flickered, tried to gather and went out.

The smaller creatures collapsed where they stood or ran blindly into the walls. The three-note signal stopped. Through the observation window the darkness loosened, revealing ordinary stars.

Mary said the source lock was gone.

Tim sank to his knees. His shoulders shook. He could not tell whether he was laughing, crying or simply failing to keep his body organised. The dead copy lay below with one enormous hand open, its fingers finally still.

"She's dead," he said.

"The copy," Mary answered. "I'm still here."

He held that distinction until he could stand.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Long Fall

The first alarm sounded while Tim was trying to find the door.

It was an ordinary station alarm, harsh and repetitive, and after the music of the signal it almost seemed reassuring. Then a red strip appeared across the wall display: PRIMARY FIELD LOST. Below it, life-support values began dropping one after another.

Killing the thing had released the return system. It had also removed the force holding the damaged sections of the station together. The source had grown through machinery that should have worked without it. When it died, those systems went with it.

A pipe split somewhere overhead. Air hissed through a seam near the observation window. Tim turned towards the noise, then remembered the suit and reached for its controls. A strike during the fight had damaged the connector at his shoulder. The reserve supply was draining far faster than it should.

"Mary. I've got a problem."

She heard the alarm through his microphone and told him where to go. The return dock was open. She had released the station's emergency alignment, bringing the capsule bay through the network to its Earth-facing exit. The display showed a real view of the planet now, not a name typed into the wrong field.

He could get there if he moved.

Tim walked into the passage and discovered that moving required more thought than before. The floor remained almost level but his legs kept treating it as a slope. The edges of objects carried thin bands of colour. He could not tell how much belonged to the seed and how much to the air.

Fred stayed on the radio, counting junctions from the plan. At the first one Tim turned the wrong way. Fred corrected him before he had taken more than two steps.

"Other side. Left of the broken panel."

"I know."

"Then do it."

The irritation helped. Tim followed it like a rope. He reached a pressure door and found it reluctant to open, the difference between the compartments holding it against its track. He worked the station's emergency release while Mary read the status from her side. When the door finally moved, the air rushed past him hard enough to knock him into the frame.

The sound reminded him of the rocket leaving the garden. For a moment he thought he was back in the cabin before everything went wrong. He could see Fred checking the restraint and wanted to tell him not to close the hatch.

Then Mary was there in the next passage, real and human-sized and bleeding through a rough dressing on her shoulder. She took his arm and pulled it over her good side.

"Nearly there."

He tried to apologise for making her come. She told him to save his breath with enough force to settle the matter.

At the return bay two capsules stood open beneath a bright diagram of Earth. Mary showed him the live external feed. The blue curve filled the window beyond the dock. Somehow the network had folded the terrible distance away, leaving them above the world they had started from.

Tim stared. "That's actually it."

"Yes. Get in."

The capsules were single-seat units with automatic return systems built into them long before either brother had asked a chatbot to invent one. Mary checked Tim's destination against the physical navigation display, set his beacon to Fred's receiver and helped him into the seat. The harness stuck beneath his hip. He fumbled at it until she moved his hand and freed it herself.

"I'm in the one beside you," she said. "We go separately, same planet."

"Ambitious."

She managed a smile. "Keep the helmet on until it seals."

Another alarm joined the first. The station lights dimmed. Tim watched Mary cross the short space to the neighbouring capsule and climb inside. Her hatch shut. A green indicator showed departure ready.

His own hatch began to close, stopped and opened again.

There was something caught in the rim. A thin strand of the pale material from the research wing had reached all the way into the dock. He saw it twitch under the seal and felt a fresh surge of disgust.

Mary's capsule released with a heavy clunk. Through the side window he watched it move away from the station, small and intact. Her voice came over the local channel telling him to confirm his hatch.

"Working on it."

He leaned forward and pulled the strand free with Fred's rag. It resisted, then came away in a length that made him gag. He threw it into the bay and hit the close control again.

The lid came down.

Before the seal finished, the dock suffered another failure. The air thinned with a roar. Tim heard the station announcement become slow and strangely unimportant. His hands rested on the harness. He knew he needed to finish checking it, but the idea of doing so began to seem unnecessarily complicated.

Fred heard his breathing change.

"Tim. Stay with me."

"Tired."

"I know. Look at the latch."

The indicator turned green. Fresh air began feeding into the capsule, but Tim had already spent too long drawing too little through the damaged suit. The seat was comfortable. That surprised him. After everything, somebody had made a decent seat.

"Mary got out," he said.

"She did. You're next."

He tried to tell Fred about the seat and lost the words halfway to his mouth. The pressure alarms receded. Beyond the glass he could see blue and white and the edge of something enormous breaking away from the station.

The automatic system accepted the closed seal, completed the return alignment and released the capsule.

Tim felt the beginning of the fall as a gentle shift beneath him. His last clear thought was that Fred would be absolutely unbearable about the garden.

Then he fell asleep.

At home the camera showed his head resting against the restraint. Fred said his name once, twice, then shouted it. Mary answered from her own capsule, breathing hard but clear. The beacon was still reporting Tim's heartbeat. His cabin had pressure. The return system was active.

"He's out," she said. "He's coming down."

Fred watched the numbers as though looking away could break them. The capsule fell along the route the station had actually been built to use. Heat filled the external camera with a bright, shaking glare. The signal failed and returned in pieces. Tim did not wake.

His craft entered cloud. The descent system deployed. A new location appeared on Fred's screen, close enough to reach by road.

For a second Fred did not understand it. After hours of impossible distances, a field outside town looked like another mistake. He checked the beacon against a second receiver. It matched.

He took his keys, the radio and a blanket. At the door he looked back at the laptop. The disconnected chat still held the last useless claim that the source was inactive.

"Stay there," he told it, with more hatred than he had ever put into a sentence addressed to an appliance.

Then he went to get his brother.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Somewhere in a Field

Tim woke because something was dripping on his nose.

He opened one eye and found a crack in the capsule window. Beyond it was a grey sky. No symbols moved across it. No giant face waited at the edge. A small bird passed through his view with the casual confidence of something that had never needed to explain where it was going.

For a while he could not remember what had happened. He knew the seat, the smell of hot machinery and the ache across his shoulders. Then the station returned in pieces: the broken tank, Mary at the console, the other Mary opening her chest, the kart travelling through a sky that had contained their house.

He shut his eye again.

The dripping continued.

Tim tried his hands. They worked. He tried his feet and found both present and offended. The harness held him at an angle. Somewhere outside a cow made a noise, which he considered for several seconds before deciding it was probably the most reassuring sound he had ever heard.

He looked out properly.

The capsule had landed badly in a field, struck soft ground and slid until its nose buried itself in a bank of earth. A torn descent canopy lay over the grass behind it. Mud covered the lower half of the window. Steam rose from the outer shell into the cool morning air.

He was on Earth.

The fact arrived slowly, then all at once. He began to laugh, stopped because his ribs hurt and laughed again anyway. It was a miserable field, wet and uneven, bounded by a hedge with a plastic bag caught in it. He loved it with a force that would have embarrassed him in almost any other circumstances.

The emergency hatch opened after two attempts. Cold air entered the cabin carrying the smell of soil and animals. Tim released the harness, slid awkwardly sideways and crawled out onto the grass.

For a minute he stayed on his hands and knees. The ground did not move. It did not breathe. It did not offer to answer him. He pressed one palm flat against it to make sure.

"Good," he said to the field.

His communicator lay half under the seat. He reached back for it and heard Fred's voice already calling through the speaker. He tried to answer, coughed and tried again.

"I'm here."

The reply came so quickly the first word clipped.

"Where?"

Tim looked around. "Field."

"I've got that far, you prick. Are you outside the capsule?"

"Yeah."

"Stay there."

"Wasn't going to launch it again."

He sat with his back against the warm hull and waited. His head ached. There was a bruise spreading across his wrist and a shallow cut on his cheek, but the air went in properly and his thoughts stayed where he put them. For the first time since leaving the garden he did not have to do anything before something killed him.

A vehicle stopped beyond the hedge. He heard a door slam, then Fred arguing with a gate. There was a metallic crash, a curse and the sound of feet hitting wet ground.

His brother appeared carrying a blanket and wearing the same clothes he had worn at the launch. He had not shaved. His face looked older in a way Tim did not like.

Fred stopped a few feet away and looked him over.

"You look like shit."

"Space."

"Yes. I followed that bit."

Then he crouched and put both hands on Tim's shoulders, checking him with the same care he had used on the restraint. Tim opened his mouth to make a joke and found there was no room for one.

Fred pulled him close.

It was awkward, hard and brief enough for both men to pretend afterwards that it had mainly been about helping Tim stand. While it happened, neither pretended anything. Tim held onto the back of his brother's coat and shook.

"I thought I'd lost you," Fred said.

Tim could not answer. Fred did not make him.

An emergency crew reached the field soon afterwards. They checked Tim beside the capsule, then in the warm vehicle, while Fred hovered with the blanket and the expression of a man prepared to argue with anybody who described his brother as a resource. Tim answered the questions, followed the light with his eyes and submitted to having his day turned into readings.

The verdict, after observation and a great deal of scrutiny, was that he had been extraordinarily lucky. He was bruised, exhausted and shaken, but he was all right. There was no hidden second ending waiting in his blood, no alien shape moving under his skin. He had come back as himself.

Mary called while he was wrapped in the blanket. Her capsule had landed further along the return corridor. Her shoulder needed

treatment, and she intended to make both brothers hear about it for the rest of their lives.

"Did you kill my enormous evil sister?" she asked.

Tim smiled into the radio. "Definitely."

"Good. One of me is plenty for you two."

He thanked her without making it into a joke. She went quiet for a moment, then told him to eat something and let the crew do their job. Fred took the radio afterwards and thanked her too. Tim looked away to give him the privacy of doing it badly.

By the time they got home the field had become a location, the capsule had become someone else's transport problem and the garden had become a sight Tim could no longer bear to treat casually. The burned patch remained. The shed leaned exactly as before. Their agency badge lay on the table beside the flight notebook.

Inside, the radiator clicked. The settee sagged. The wallpaper had returned to its ordinary defeated yellow. Tim sat down and discovered that the furniture he had spent his life insulting was more comfortable than the whole of space.

Fred made tea. Mary arrived later with a dressing on her shoulder and strict instructions about what she was not supposed to lift. She used those instructions to make Fred carry everything, which he accepted without complaint.

They opened the saved station files together. The originals contained the outbreak records, the deleted D credential, the relay trace and enough footage of the copy to ensure nobody needed Tim to explain it from memory. Mary made clean copies. Fred labelled them by what they contained. Tim put the handwritten map beside them.

The story was strange enough without anyone inventing extra bits.

Then Fred asked him about the freezer.

Tim looked up. "What freezer?"

"Keith's."

It was an ordinary question, but something about it loosened the room. Mary sat in the armchair with her dressing on one shoulder and a loaf of bread in her lap. Tim could not remember seeing her bring it. The radiator clicked three times, paused and let out a long descending groan.

His tea dripped onto his hand.

"Tim," Fred said. "The invoice."

He tried to put the mug down. There was no mug. There was a laptop balanced against his stomach, hot through his shirt, and a damp patch where a cup had tipped against the arm of the settee.

The room lurched into its proper distance.

He woke with a violent start, kicked the coffee table and sent a spoon onto the carpet.

Fred stood in the doorway holding a sheet of paper. Mary was beside the kitchen counter putting bread away. There was no bandage on her shoulder. The clock on the wall had moved less than an hour from the last time Tim could remember looking at it before he closed his eyes.

For a few seconds he could only stare.

"You all right?" Mary asked.

Her voice was ordinary. No radio hiss, no echo from another room, no enormous version of it coming out of an alien throat.

Tim looked at his hands. No cuts. No grime. No marks from the restraint. His boots sat untouched beside the door, and through the window he could see the garden with its washing line, its leaning shed and no rocket whatsoever.

"We didn't go anywhere."

Fred looked at Mary. "He was asleep. I thought that was obvious."

"No," Tim said, sitting forward. "I mean any of it."

The launch, the station, Mary following him, the creature wearing her face, the kart and the field had all happened while he slept on the settee. Even getting home had been part of it. His mind had given him an escape before allowing him to wake.

On the television a science-fiction film had reached a noisy station evacuation. A man in a helmet struggled with a hatch while an alarm sounded behind him. The sound had been turned down, but Tim recognised the rhythm immediately. The game controller lay beside the remote. Earlier he had been looking at the Gurnerman game footage, the alien corridors and the oversized Mary model, before returning to the invoice.

The laptop still showed their real Copilot conversation. Keith had become Margaret. The incorrect total had been replaced without a word admitting it had been incorrect. That small, infuriating exchange had remained open while his sleeping brain promoted the same useless confidence into control of a spacecraft.

Beside it was Mary's photograph from work. In the real picture she stood next to the Kestrel service van at an ordinary fleet garage. She maintained vehicles for a living. There was no orbital depot behind her. The long shadow across the van's open door was where Tim's dream had put a capsule.

He understood it in stages, each one bringing relief with a small, ridiculous grief. None of the fear had happened outside his head. Neither had the flight. He had never seen Earth from space. Mary had not spent her money to reach him, and Fred had not sat through a night believing he might lose his brother.

But they were both looking at him now with the same concern he had dreamed so much effort into discovering.

"I had a fucking awful dream," he said.

Fred lowered the invoice.

"How awful?"

Tim began with the rocket. By the time he reached the part where the chatbot had renamed Astra-9 to Earth, Mary was sitting down. When he described Mega Mary, she asked whether his subconscious could explain why it had made her larger rather than giving either brother a useful qualification.

"You were good in it," Tim said. "You came to get me."

"Well, you weren't going to get yourself."

He looked at Fred. "You stayed on the radio."

"Sounds like the only job where I didn't have to move."

Tim laughed. The laugh nearly became something else. Fred noticed and put the invoice down.

For a moment nobody filled the silence. Mary moved the laptop off Tim's legs. Fred picked the fallen spoon up and took it to the kitchen. There was nothing grand about either action, and that was what finally settled him. They were here. The room was here. Caring for each other did not usually look like crossing space. It looked like arriving with bread, putting an extra thing in a bag or noticing when a joke needed to wait.

"You two are all right," Tim said.

Fred turned in the doorway. "Have you hit your head?"

"Don't make me withdraw it."

Mary smiled into her tea.

The printer woke up with a little mechanical complaint. Fred collected the page and looked at the laptop again. The unfinished invoice was still a real problem. Unlike the aliens, it had survived Tim waking up.

He typed one final correction while Tim and Mary watched.

**Copilot**

Fred Gurnerman

We're still on Keith's invoice. Keith. Wednesday. £121.50. You made up Margaret and the Sunday call-out. Fix them and just say you got it wrong. Nobody's asking you to resign.

Copilot

I have created a revised invoice using your preferred details. The previous version used a different interpretation of the job context.

W

Invoice - Nolan - revised.docx

Created file

Tim Gurnerman

They're not our preferences. They're the things that happened. You can't have an opinion about Wednesday.

Copilot

The current document is aligned with the information you have now clarified.

Message Copilot

Fred sat perfectly still. Tim looked at the answer, then his brother, then Mary.

"That's it," he said. "That's the whole fucking dream."

"It still won't admit it," Fred said.

"Nearly twenty imaginary hours of it, and it's exactly the same awake."

Mary took the invoice, crossed out the remaining wrong line and put the pen down.

"There. Fixed."

They cancelled the subscription through the actual account controls. Fred saved the confirmation because he did not trust a sentence saying something was complete unless he could check what it meant. Tim made fresh tea while Mary read the corrected invoice aloud, and this time every name and number belonged to the job they had done.

Outside, the dog started barking again. The garden contained nothing capable of leaving it. The television returned to adverts.

Tim sat beside Fred with his tea and left the laptop shut.

"Worth every penny," he said.

Fred shook his head. "Dog shite."

Mary reached for the biscuits. "And nobody is building a rocket."

For once, neither brother argued.

THE END