

Chapter 1

"May I join you?"

The passenger sat all alone by the table on the main deck. He lifted his head and gazed at the young woman who stood before him. She wore a crewmember uniform; a nametag, neatly placed above her shirt pocket, advertised her name and position: "Dana, Entertainment Officer."

"Go ahead," he answered uninvitingly. "My name is John," he added with a belated spark of politeness.

If his tone and lack of interest hurt her feelings, her face didn't show it. Her smile remained steady on her lips and she slid her thin body between the table and the chair that stood in front of John's.

"I noticed that you have been sitting here alone during the last few days and I thought I might offer you some more interesting options to pass the time," she said. She moved elegantly, even when simply sitting down, and her voice harmonized with her motion. "We have quite a good music library, movies, books, and more. Are you interested?"

"Not really, thanks," he answered flatly. "I'm comfortable here, and anyway we have only a little more than a week left before we reach our destination."

Her face dropped and she waved her hand in despair. "It's very frustrating, you know," she said. "This is my first assignment as an Entertainment Officer and I really want to do a proper job of it, but nobody seems to be taking me seriously. I tried to talk to that group of mining engineers over there," she added confidently, pointing with her chin at a group of people sitting at a table at the edge of the hall, "but they are busy all the time studying and exercising, and they don't need my services. Apart from you and them, all other First Class passengers are either older couples or government officers who keep to themselves. All right," she concluded resignedly. She let out a quick sigh and pushed her chair back a little, preparing to get up. "I won't keep bothering you," she said bitterly.

She stood, but didn't walk away. John looked at her, his interest aroused by her behavior. Dana stood there, seemingly unbothered by his piercing gaze.

"You are not bothering me," he said at last. "Please sit with me. A little company won't hurt me, but I'm not in the mood for entertainment right now."

"Talking to passengers is also part of my job," she answered earnestly. Her face showed her relief at the invitation as she sat down again.

John studied her delicate features, amazed at his temerity in fixing his eyes on her so openly and directly, but feeling no embarrassment. Dana's body language had made it clear that she didn't mind.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"I'm twenty-three."

"And what brings you to this ship?"

"Well...I thought it would be exciting to fly to another planet and see things I have only heard about in school. But in reality, so far it has been a big disappointment. I'm cooped up in this box all the time and see nothing at all. I hope that New Australia will be as interesting as they say."

"What do you know about New Australia?"

"What everybody knows," she answered mechanically. "Until about one hundred and fifty years ago the planet served as a prison of sorts, to which dangerous criminals were exiled from Earth. With the establishment of the New Nations Organization, the practice of exile was

discontinued and the planet became a member of the NNO. The truth is," she said, her expression changing from scholarly mechanical back into her previous lively one, "I am really excited at the thought of landing there, and I hope to return with many interesting experiences to tell."

"You know something about the history of New Australia all right," John admitted. "I hope you also know that the planet is dangerous and that you'll have to take good care of yourself there."

Dana sat up straight and waved her hand in a discounting gesture, as if the dangers were no concern of hers. "Obviously the crew, and I among them, have been told all about that before we took up the job. I don't plan to go into the savage Newist territories, although they say that visiting them is an amazing experience. And you," Dana asked with open curiosity, "what's the purpose of your trip? Are you an NNO observer or something?"

"No. I wish..." He looked at her, then immediately moved his eyes to the corner of the table. "The truth is that one month ago I took the test and came out D-positive."

Dana's expression turned from excited to serious, and John could scarcely hide his surprise in seeing that she looked even more beautiful when she seemed concerned.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, and her voice had an unmistakable ring of true sympathy. "It must be terrible for you."

"It's funny, but in a sense it's great. To be immune to that horrible disease, I mean. Do you know anything about the Davies Gene?"

"I know what they teach you in school. I know about the pestilence and about the limitations imposed on those who, like you, are D-positive."

"I understand that you are D-negative..."

"I haven't been tested yet. I'll do it as soon as I return from this trip, but there isn't a chance in the world that I'll test positive. Both my parents are negative, and nobody in my immediate family is positive."

"I'm sure it'll be okay and I don't want to worry you, but do you know that one half percent of those with no family history for the D-gene turn out to be positive?"

"It's a very low percentage, and I've never met anyone like that."

"I'm like that."

"Oh, that's terrible! How did it happen?"

"As you know, everybody has to take the test before the age of twenty-five."

"Or earlier, if he is a candidate for a classified job or wishes to marry," she pointed out.

"Right. I was doing well at my job, and had my entire life before me, until..."

John looked above Dana's head, far away in time and place. The images came back to him with a quality of unreality, like a movie in which somebody else is playing the leading role. He started describing the images etched in his memory to Dana, or perhaps to himself, in a low, flat voice:

Nothing appeared out of the ordinary the day the head of the Critical Computing Division summoned John to his office. Except, of course, the interview itself, a new experience for John, who had never before stepped into the office of such a powerful man. He had only met him briefly during the rare visits to his department, or when the department had visitors, which seldom happened.

After a short wait, John was ushered into a spacious room, featuring a huge desk, entirely empty but for the computer terminal.

"Sit down, John," said the Division Head. John walked hesitatingly toward the chair, sat down, and waited for his boss to speak. The Division Head, was a man of kind manners, soft-spoken, with long white hair. Notwithstanding his important position and heavy duties, he never forgot to smile at his staff and they loved him for that. Now too, as he spoke, he smiled gently.

"I've heard good reports about you, John," he opened the conversation.

"I'm glad to hear that, sir," John answered with some embarrassment.

"Not just good ones, but outstanding ones. I'll go straight to the point, John. One of our Department Managers—the Department of Census—is retiring because of health problems, and we need a replacement. I want to infuse young blood into the department, which has not developed to my satisfaction during the last few years. I have asked around, and everybody pointed to you as the best candidate for the job. So, if you want the position, it's yours."

John couldn't believe his ears. This job offer represented a meteoric promotion, unheard of in the organization.

"I...I don't know what to say...I wasn't expecting this."

"What about saying 'thank you'?" asked the Division Head, with an ill-concealed smile.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much! This is a great opportunity for me. I promise that I won't disappoint you."

"I'm sure you will justify the trust that I'm putting in you. We didn't pick you just like that...your record speaks for itself. Now, go celebrate and let me do some work," he added, this time with a broader smile.

John stood up, still incapable of fully digesting the news. "Thank you again," he repeated, his hand already on the door handle, an expression of joy and shyness on his face.

"Ahh, one more thing, John," the Division Head added as an afterthought. "I almost forgot. Have you taken the D-test already?"

"Not yet, why?"

"It's needed for your new job. It's a classified position. So get it over with, because I don't want that to delay us."

"No problem. It's only a formality anyway," said John, and left the room.

That night John and his family—his parents and his two brothers—celebrated the news of his promotion at John's favorite restaurant. Everyone beamed with pride at his achievement, particularly his two elder brothers who were also doing well in their careers.

Next morning John woke up early and took the brief train trip to the nearest branch of the National Laboratories for "D" Control. About ten young people, looking tense, sat waiting for the test; after a brief waiting period a laboratory employee led them to a small lecture room where an authoritative-looking man in his forties greeted them.

The room was bare. Simple chairs sat in three orderly rows before a small lecture stand that stood on a high podium. Behind it John noticed a white board, of the type used to project images and to scribble on. The flag of the NNO hung majestically at the edge of the podium. The room was very cold, but the man seemed at ease in spite of being lightly dressed; none of the others dared complain about the excessive air conditioning.

"Good morning, everybody," the man greeted them once the last visitor had seated himself. "My name is Dr. Martin, and I will be your instructor for your test procedure today. It consists of three stages. At the first stage, here where we are right now, you will receive a brief but complete explanation of the history and legal aspects of the test. The law requires the laboratory to ascertain that every tested person knows and understands the importance of this test. We will take care of this matter momentarily."

"At the second stage, you will give a blood sample which will be used to run the test, and at the third stage you'll receive the result of the test. The last two stages take place individually, in separate rooms, and we take great care to safeguard your privacy. Questions?"

"Yes," asked a young man who sat at the edge of the first row. "What happens if someone refuses to take the test?"

"Thank you very much for your question. I was about to come to that. Legally, we can't force you to take the test, except as a condition to issuing a marriage license. However, if you

reach the age of twenty-five without taking it, it will be considered that you had taken it and found to be D-positive. All your rights and limitations will be exactly the same as applies to a tested D-positive person. Anybody can take the test after the age of twenty-five, but will have to pay for it, and if the individual tests D-negative, the record will be corrected accordingly. But you should know that the test is very expensive, and it is quite rare for a citizen to take that route, which offers no advantages. More questions?"

The young crowd sat quietly and asked no more, as if asking the next question might be a dangerous thing to do. John could feel the tension in the room.

"All right," continued the instructor, "if you have no more questions, let's move on to the lecture." He turned his head to scan the room and, after a brief interval, continued. "As you know, exactly seventy years ago," the instructor said, checking his watch as if to find there the right date, "a pestilence known as the 'Watson-Davies Epidemic,' or simply the 'D-Plague,' killed millions in a matter of weeks. All the scientists of the New Nations engaged in research to attempt to discover the virus and to find a cure for it, but to no avail. However, after a few weeks, an important fact emerged—certain ethnic groups appeared to be almost totally immune to the virus."

Dr. Martin paused for a moment and swept the room with his eyes, perhaps to gauge the effect of his tale on his young audience. But since all had heard the same lecture many times before, in school and at work, they simply sat there patiently, waiting for it to run its course.

"Here," he continued after a brief pause, "begins a dark chapter in the history of the New Nations. The epidemic, which many believed would be the end of some ethnic groups, induced panic. Panic fostered the spreading of many tales, all similar at their roots, according to which the immune ethnic groups were the ones who spread the epidemic.

"These false accusations started a bloodbath that spread around the world, resulting in the slaughter of tens of thousands of humans. Thousands of others, men, women, and children, were imprisoned by their governments in research facilities where ruthless scientists used them as guinea pigs in the attempt to characterize the virus and to find a cure for it.

"Pretty soon it became apparent that no conspiracy existed and that the reason for the immunity of certain groups resided in a gene that imparted resistance against the disease. That gene—now called 'Davies Gene' after the scientist, who identified it, or simply 'Gene D,' is the gene for which you are going to be tested here today."

Dr. Martin paused for a second, pulled his sleeves, and glanced from right to left, then continued.

"Even after the epidemic subsided and no longer threatened to obliterate humankind, many still requested sanctions against D-positive groups. This resulted in harsh laws that took away civil rights from the immune population and, in practice, turned them into second-rate citizens. This phase lasted about twenty years, until fifty years ago when the Supreme Court of the New Nations abolished those laws, but allowed two limitations to stand. The first is the prohibition for D-positive individuals to marry D-negative partners. The reason for this limitation is that it is scientifically proven that half-breeds are much more apt to contract the disease than the rest of the population. This means that if we let many half-breeds be born, the epidemic may return with such strength that we may not be able to fight it. Today the disease is less common than other contagious diseases such as AIDS or tuberculosis, and therefore is no longer considered a global threat.

"The second limitation has to do with the ban on D-positive workers in sensitive governmental positions. The Supreme Court accepted the government's view that it is necessary to prevent the infiltration of D-positive elements to key positions because it is feared that 'negative elements' who are both immune to the disease and in key positions, may think that a renewed pestilence will serve their purposes. Beyond those two very reasonable limitations, citizens who are D-positive enjoy all the rights of every D-negative citizen.

"I hope that now," he concluded theatrically, "you appreciate the importance of the civil duty that you are performing today by taking the test. Questions?"

"What happens if a 'pure' and a 'positive' still wish to marry?" somebody asked.

"That's a very strange idea—a perversity, I would even call it—but according to law the woman may undergo a sterilization procedure, or the couple may sign an a priori waiver of the baby. In such a case, if the woman reports her pregnancy in time, it will be terminated. Otherwise, the baby will be taken from its parents and sent to a confined facility which it will never leave as long as he or she lives. We only know of a very few such cases. More questions?"

The girl who sat to John's right raised her hand, and when the instructor nodded in her direction, she stood up.

"I wish to understand," she said hesitantly, "why are those persons who turn out to be D-positive punished? And you will agree with me that the limitations of which you spoke are a form of punishment. They certainly didn't choose to be positive..."

"Yes," the instructor answered with open derision, "just like a poisonous snake didn't choose to be born a snake. Nevertheless, when we meet a poisonous snake, we kill it; we don't sit beside it and discuss its bad luck with it. What's the difference?"

The girl lowered her gaze and sat down. Nobody asked any more questions, and after a brief interval the instructor sent them, one by one, to a small room where blood samples were taken from them.

John killed time waiting for the test results by watching a documentary about the pestilence and its roots. After another wait, the tested youths were called one by one, in alphabetical order, to a small room, to receive the test results.

The girl who had asked the question was third in line. John watched her enter the room with bowed head. He hoped very much for her that she'd test negative, but her countenance made her tension clearly apparent. When she left, walking fast and containing her tears, John understood that her fears had materialized and she had tested positive. He couldn't help feeling sorry for her. In contrast to many of his friends from "pure" families (as it was customary to call those families that sported negative D-test results for all their members), John never felt that he was better than any "positive," and never considered them his inferiors. Two positives worked in John's department and he treated them as equals.

John was so deep in thought that the clerk standing at the door had to call his name several times before he heard him and got up. He walked into the small room that was almost completely occupied by a desk covered with documents, and stood before it.

"Sit down, please," said the clerk politely.

"You know, I'm in a bit of a hurry, sir. Perhaps you could just give me the certificate of testing and let me go?"

"It's not so simple," answered the clerk who had seated himself heavily. "Sit down, please," he repeated.

John sat testily. He wasn't new to the waste of time that went with official procedures—a well-known trait of every public servant, but this was becoming aggravating. Still, like every experienced citizen, he had learned that letting the clerk go through the prescribed procedure was often the shortest way. He shifted in his seat with a sigh and waited for the clerk to go on.

"I am holding in my hands your family's file," he started. "I see that they are all pure, right?"

"Absolutely," said John with satisfaction. At least the clerk had taken the trouble to find out who he was dealing with.

"You received a full day of instruction today. Of course you learned that pure families can give birth to a positive subject, although chances are very low."

"Yes. Less than a half per cent."

"Correct. And have you appreciated the dangers of cross-breeding between pure and positive individuals?"

"Of course, and not for the first time. What is this, a pop quiz?"

"No," the clerk answered without looking him in the eyes, "I am giving you the results of your test."

"What are you saying?" John asked, doubt clutching at his heart.

"You tested positive. You are not pure," stated the clerk.

John heard the words, but his brain refused to record them. He got up with a jerk and stood there, shaking his head in disbelief, his body trembling uncontrollably.

"But...it must be a mistake. It can't be true..." he murmured.

"I'm sorry," said the clerk and handed him a piece of paper with the result written on it. He looked embarrassed, but went on speaking in a businesslike voice. "Our test is never wrong."

John mechanically took the paper that the clerk had been holding before him, turned away, and left the room without another word.