

Little House in the Asteroid Belt

By Bill Wolfe

Dear Diary, big doins today. A bad storm came up from Old Sol and our receiver's down till Pa can get to the trading post at 1 Ceres for spare parts. If Ma hadn't called over to Mrs. Halverson on the lasercomm for her gossip, we wouldn't have known until it was too late. She quilted herself a program that tells her when the other homesteads are line-of-sight so she can 'chat.' I bet Pa never teases her about it ever again. Ma's quilting is almost as famous as her molasses chews. Nobody has her knack for growing sugar cane in the hydroponics.

When she told Pa about the storm, I could see him trying to figure whether he'd have time to stable all the grazers before they got fried. She offered to take the mule out to Payload but everybody knows that storms are hard on babies when they're still small in the belly, so he let me go do it. The mule's easy to ride. With only one CO₂ thruster even an Earther could steer it. But Pa looked me square in the face for a long time and then he said: "You can do it, Half-Pint. Just make sure you check for rad and get back in plenty of time." My tummy felt funny when he said that, kind of high-up and in the middle.

He told Ma to get the storm cellar ready, then he took the wagon out to the South Range to tend the iridium grazers first. I was real excited about riding the mule till I saw the look on Ma's face when he'd gone. They'd been talking all season about how important this crop was going to be. With a new baby on the way, Pa was planning on moving the whole house over to Payload once he'd had a chance to sell the eggs, especially the platinum eggs from his 'lucky' rock. If he had to buy a whole new herd because of the storm, I don't know what we'd do.

I'd heard them talking, at night. The homestead is so small that I hear lots of things at night. Pa said that we were about to 'turn the corner' on the farm. That after ten years of hard work we were almost out of debt and about to start pulling ahead. They told us in school that was why the big corporates couldn't graze the asteroids. You can't pay folks enough to work sixteen-hours, seven days a week and barely make enough to eat and keep the air-recyclers working. But folks who wanted to leave the crowds and sickness of Old Earth and be pioneers could do it.

My job was the two grazers in Payload, but I guess I'm going to have to get used to calling it our house. Pa set two of his oldest, dumbest grazers to hollow-out the nickel-iron asteroid that got them through that first hard season, before I was born. I haven't been out there in a while and from what I can tell, they're almost done. I still can't believe I'm going to get my own room in the new house. The space inside the first compartment—Ma calls it our parlor—is bigger than our whole homestead.

With just a small hole where the airlock goes, it was kind of creepy being inside there by myself. The parlor is done, so I had to go in deeper to find the grazers. It was really dark till I remembered to turn on my helmet lights. I hardly ever need them, most times Big Jove is bright enough to see by, when I'm outside.

It's funny, Diary. The homestead is cramped, smelly and almost all metal everywhere you look. Since it's what's left of a mine-scout actually built on Old Earth, it's not even shaped right. Everything is up and down, which don't really make any sense out here. The big empty spaces in Payload should have made me feel free, like I could stretch-out in every direction but when I was inside there all alone, I just felt tiny. I felt like one of Ma's little dolls put in her hope chest all by itself with the lid closed. It was strange and I didn't like it.

I stabled the first grazer fine but had to wait for the "Shutdown Complete" on the second. It told me its "High Value" compartment was full and asked if I wanted to "Harvest" now. This was the oldest grazer we have. It's twice as big as the others but it's slower and dumber than an Earther. It was busted, but Pa traded a whole batch of Ma's molasses chews and some household-chores programs she quilted for it. It only took him a week to get it working, so he said it was worth it.

I didn't know what else to do so I pushed "Yes." I could feel some gears grinding 'cause I had my hand on its belly. I thought it was busted again and was worried about what Pa would say when I noticed a hatch on the bottom was open. Pa had said he didn't understand all of what this grazer did, so he just set it to digging holes.

Diary, inside was the biggest diamond I've ever seen! Big as my fist! There ain't much lenticular carbon out here, it's mostly from comets from out in the Oort. It probably took this grazer a hundred years to collect and egg this much diamond dust. No wonder it was so slow.

Pa made it back from the North Forty in plenty of time. Ma was worried and checked his dosimeter before he even had his boots off. She laughed when she told him there might be more young'uns after all. They think I don't understand them when they talk like that. But I'm not a baby.

I haven't told them about the diamond, yet. It's almost Christmas, after all.

The End