

# The Continuing Saga of Tom Corbett: Space Cadet

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Tom's name was her curse. She started with Tomika, but by the time she was four, everyone in her family called her Tom, and once that stuck, her grandfather made a joke: "Tom Corbett, eh? How's the Space Academy? Are you going to be in the Solar Guard this year?" Or "Have they let you drive Polaris yet? How's your buddies, Astro and Roger Manning doing?" He was relentless.

It was irritating until she turned ten, found out who this "Tom Corbett" person was, and then took her birthday money to the used bookstore where she found copies of *Stand by for Mars* and *Treachery in Outer Space*. From there, she discovered Tom Corbett videos on the Internet, Tom Corbett comics, and Tom Corbett View-Master discs, which meant that she had to buy a View-Master in the toy store. For the sixth grade Halloween party, she made her own Solar Guard uniform and wore it every day until Christmas.

Of course, the other kids started calling her "Space Cadet," which they didn't mean in a good way at all.

By the time she was a freshman in high school last year, "Space Cadet" was a label. She put the Tom Corbett books away. She took the "Space Academy" badge off her shirts, but it didn't matter. The nickname stuck. Some of the kids called her SC, which rhymed with "Jesse" without the "J." Some of the teachers too, who didn't even know where the name came from, called her that, even though she carefully printed her full name, Tomika Corbett, on every piece of homework. For most people, though, she was Tom, Tom Corbett: space cadet.

She may have taken the Solar Guard medallions off her shirts, but she couldn't take it out of her heart. Tom sat at her desk that faced her bedroom window. Her house topped a hill with open country on all sides. Her parents bought here when they thought a subdivision was going to spring up around them, but so far they were the only house. Outside, in the dark, with no trees or obstructing buildings, she had an unencumbered night view, straight east. Leo Minor nearly touched the horizon. The bright light by its mouth was Jupiter. She knew star names: Regulus, Algieba, Procyon, Pollux, and Alhena. She wondered what it would be like to be an astrologer, or to sit in the pilot's seat on the control deck. She'd toggle the intercom. "All stations report," she'd say. "All clear on the radar deck," a voice would answer, and then another, "All clear on the power deck."

She'd be in command, the control panels displayed in front of her, the power to take off to the stars underneath her hands. Tom looked at her own hands, resting on the keyboard at her desk. If only she could press the right buttons. Her bedroom window could be the control deck view panel. The stars would rush toward her. She would look up slightly, chin thrust forward, a picture of confidence and adventure for all who could see.

Tomika got up from her desk, cracked the bedroom door open. The hallway and living room were dark. Her parents had gone to bed. Good. Their room was on the other end of the house. They slept with their door shut and a fan going. When they were asleep, she could be as loud as she wanted. She shut the door, snapped off her lights, turned up the sound on the computer's speakers, and then clicked the icon on the screen. The rumble started in the background very low, almost subliminal. Tom leaned back in her chair, looking out the window, trying not to see the drapes hanging on each side. She just wanted stars as the rumble sound grew and grew. It was rocket engine noise, building, and there were electronic sounds in the background. Doors irising open or closed maybe? Blasters? Emergency klaxons? And then the engines cut out, and were replaced by footsteps on metal decks. Distant orders being shouted out. The ping from ranging equipment.

Tom strained to hear, but the voices were always indistinct. Occasionally, she'd make out a word, "Asteroid," "Orbit," "Translunar," but never an entire sentence. She'd set the sound clip to replay. The entire audio was almost ninety-minutes long. Most nights, she'd fall asleep with it playing before the engine noise started again, but tonight, it replayed five times. The sun rose directly in her window as she watched.

She turned the sound off. The rising sun filled the room with warmth. She thought, if I close my eyes now, I can get a half hour of sleep before Mom tells me to get ready for school.

At breakfast, Mom, a slight, slender woman with long black hair, and Dad, whose hair was brown and curly, talked about real-estate values. They'd been looking at houses on the north side of town that they could buy, refurbish cheaply, and then sell for a huge profit. Dad thumbed through the obituaries in the newspaper.

"Here's one," he said. "The guy was ninety-four. It says his family lives in Chicago."

Mom nodded, a coffee cup in one hand and her tablet in the other. She swiped at her screen methodically. Tom wasn't sure what Mom was looking at. She said, "We could give 'em a lowball offer. Out-of-towners won't know the market, and they'd probably be glad to unload the house. I'll drive by this morning and put a flyer in their mailbox."

While Tom finished her cereal, her parents talked about discount carpets, and how a cheap, new carpet in an old home could return the purchase price by one hundred and fifty percent. "Fresh paint and new carpet covers a multitude of sins," said Dad.

They left together for work before Tom had to start her walk to the bus stop. She realized as she headed out the door that neither one had spoken a single word to her, but that was pretty normal.

At every stop, more elementary and junior high kids crowded onto the bus. Most high schoolers drove themselves or went with their friends. In high school, only losers took the bus, but Tom didn't mind. She gave up her seat to two fourth-grade girls who liked to sit together, and then walked down the aisle looking for an empty place. The only spot was next to Jacob Rose, another sophomore, who everyone called "Jacob the Hutt," because he was huge, the biggest

kid Tom had ever seen. If it weren't for Jacob, Tom would be the best mathematician in the tenth grade, but it didn't earn Jacob any friends. Jacob covered much of the seat. He scrunched next to the window to give Tom more room.

"Sorry," said Jacob in his deep voice. He held a book on his stomach, his finger marking a spot.

"Whatcha reading?"

"You'll think it's boring."

Tom settled into the seat. She braced her knees on the chair in front of her. "Try me."

Jacob shrugged. "Okay. It's *Atoms to Andromeda: Selected Lectures on Theoretical Physics, High-Energy Nuclear and Cosmic Ray Research, Plasma and Thermonuclear Physics, Astronomy, Astrophysics and Electronic Computing.*"

When Jacob opened the book to continue reading, Tom could see pages filled with tiny print and math formulas. "Is there a graphic novel version?" she said.

Jacob glanced up, surprised, as if he'd already forgot she was there. The bus lurched into motion. Kids yelled back and forth. A ball of paper flew past them. It was a typical day. "Do you play *Destination Ceres*?" he asked.

Tom knew the game, a third-person PC shooter set on fantastical versions of Mars, Venus, and Ceres. The science in it was terrible.

"Do you?" she said.

"No, not really. But I like to wander around in the game. The worlds are beautiful." He looked at the kids on the bus. "I don't think I belong here."

Tom nodded. "I know just what you mean."

When they got to the school, Tom watched Jacob walking deliberately down the middle of the sidewalk. Kids ran around him as if he were a moving island.

She thought he had a kind of dignity in his steady pace.

Tom dreaded English. Last year, in the junior high, she'd turned in a book report on *Stand by for Mars*, the first book in the Space Cadet series. The assignment had been, "Choose an influential book that you read in elementary school, and explain its impact on you." Tom wrote how the book made her check out astronomy texts and encouraged her interest in rockets. Ms. Schneider, a second-year teacher, scheduled a private meeting with Tom after she turned it in.

"I'm concerned about your choice of reading. I don't think a young, twenty-first century woman should be interested in this sort of book," said Schneider to open their conversation. "It's terribly sexist. You could select much more appropriate literature."

Tom didn't have a chance to reply.

"Look at this quote," said Schneider. She had a faded copy marked with several sticky notes between the pages. "Here, Corbett and his friends, Astro and Roger Manning have gone to Crystal City. They are trying to book a room at the hotel, and Manning treats the clerk, who is a woman, of course, like a prize. He even says, 'What's the matter with beautiful girls? They're official equipment, like a radar scanner. You can't get along without them!' What sort of universe is this? Women are always 'cute' or 'pretty' or they get whistled at. Where are the women who are cadets or commanders?"

Schneider snorted derisively. "Terrible. Here, I think you should read this." She handed Tom a copy of *Girls Who Looked Under Rocks: the Lives of Six Pioneering Naturalists*. "I think this has much better role models for you."

Tom took the book. "Does it have rocket ships?"

"Phallic tripe," muttered Schneider.

Tom was pretty sure that the comment wasn't directed at her, but if Ms. Schneider didn't think that Tom knew what "phallic" meant, then she was underestimating her.

Tom read the book. It wasn't terrible, but the next book she read was *The Rocket Robot*, which was the third time for that title. She paid closer attention to Tom Corbett's world. Schneider was right about the story being all about the men, but that wasn't how Tom read it, she realized. In her mind, the characters weren't about being boys or girls. They were about having

adventures, and anyone could have those. She wanted to read about going to space, and if she had to do it with male pronouns, so be it. When she read, she boarded the ship. She gave the commands. She looked out the port to see the curve of a new planet.

Today Ms. Schneider gave the class a fill-in-the-blank quiz. The first sentence was, "If a doctor gives you advice, you should listen to what \_\_\_\_\_ says." The second question was "If a kindergarten teacher is speaking, the class should pay attention to \_\_\_\_\_."

Most of the class filled in the first blank with "he" and the second blank with "her," which Schneider used to springboard into the unconscious sexist assumptions in the society. Tom's answers were "the professional" and "the alien in the corner." She didn't share that with Schneider.

After school, Tom didn't ride the bus. The land behind the school was undeveloped. It rose to a treeless, flat-topped hill, littered with nearly white limestone on dark soil. Almost no vegetation. For the last month, Tom had been climbing the hill to work on her project. She dropped her backpack, picked up a pair of melon-sized stones, and then added them to the thirty-foot-tall letters she had been forming. The perspective was wrong for her to get a proper look at what she was writing, but if her plans were right, from directly above, the message read "TAKE ME WITH YOU."

Mom and Dad were at the kitchen table arguing about landscaping when Tom walked in the front door. Open Chinese takeout boxes surrounded their briefcases. Dad said, "Fewer plants and *newer* plants show better from the street. I say we rip out the hedges, lay down a nice, colored gravel, and plant a couple of roses. It cleans up the look, and the buyers will see possibilities."

Mom shook her head. "Too expensive and too much work. We get a gardening service to tidy up the bushes, and the house says 'I'm already beautiful' to buyers. No one gets into a house so they can spend their weekends putting in plants. Not in that neighborhood."

Tom put her backpack on the counter behind them, poured a glass of milk and grabbed a handful of cookies. "I'm home," she said.

Dad said, "A little extra investment at the beginning pays off big later. Curb appeal is everything."

"Lookilooos don't sign contracts. They don't even go inside the home. Mature landscaping is the right answer for this house."

"I'm thinking of starting a terrorist cell," said Tom. "We'll call ourselves the High School Freedom Front. I might get a tattoo."

Dad glanced her direction, nodded curtly, then turned to Mom. "Newness generates interest. Old bushes say worn out property. We've had this discussion before."

"Yes, we have. When you come to your senses, I'll be in the office faxing today's documents to the bank." Mom snapped her briefcase closed and stomped out of the kitchen.

Dad said, "Have you been home long?"

"Hours."

"There's some Moo Goo Gai Pan and rice in the fridge if you'd like some."

She held up the cookies, "I'm good," but he'd already turned away to study a thick sheaf of papers.

Back in her room, Tom opened her notebook that she'd titled "Ways to Get Off the Planet." She'd labeled sections: Rocket Engines, Ramjets, Ground-based Laser/Microwave, Space Elevator, Project Orion (nuclear bombs), Alcubierre Drive (warp drive), Piggyback Jets, Rocket Sled Launch, High Altitude Blimp Launch, Verne Gun, Launch Loop, and Favorite.

She'd also designed capsules using empty gas station storage tanks, train tanker cars, heavy culverts with end caps welded on, and a host of others. Based on her figuring, there was no practical way she could make a capsule capable of maintaining an atmosphere when there was a vacuum on the outside from wood, ceramic, plastic, or concrete. Lately, she'd been collecting articles on 3D printers. If she had a large enough printer, she should be able to make a space ship!

And, of course, nothing she'd put into her notebook could be built in the backyard.

She added the title of Jacob's book to her "To Be Read" list. It was too long to remember, but she found it online from just the first three words: *Atoms to Andromeda*.

Tom opened her webpage that she'd been building for the last year. It was basic HTML (she did the coding herself in a plain text program). The page's title was SOLAR GUARD APPLICATION. Under that, she'd created what looked like a job application form. She modeled it on the college application forms they kept in the counselors' office. In it, she'd entered all her grades since third grade (straight A), and included descriptions of what she'd learned in math and science. She had a section with the books she'd read, and her thoughts on them, several personal essays about what service in the Solar Guard would mean to her and why she should be chosen.

At the bottom was an e-mail address that she'd set up just for the website. Although she'd never linked to the site anywhere, she received occasional e-mails. Some were fun, like "Is this for real? Can I join?" Some were mean. "Get a life," or "This is stupid." And some were creepy, like "Are you really a girl? Show me your boobies."

But how else was she going to contact the Solar Guard? She'd sent Morse code messages out her window with a huge flashlight, and tried the same trick with a home-built laser. She'd taken apart an old DVD burner for the laser diode and followed instructions from the Internet. The beam was surprisingly powerful. It could burn a hole in dark paper. The most expensive part of the project were the safety goggles. She'd also sent signals through a Walkie Talkie she'd found in the garage, which only managed to piss off a nearby construction crew who were using the same wavelength, and then she'd built her own radio transmitter and receiver. She picked up static, distant stations in foreign languages, police and fire calls, and at certain wavelengths, the beeps, pings and pulses from satellites. She liked those best.

She scrolled to her web page e-mail. Three new messages. One read, "I thought this site was about solar panels. LOL." The second one said, "I'd rather be an officer on the *Enterprise* in the United Federation of Planets." And the third said, "We are looking for a recruit. Watch the skies."

If only, she thought. But she stayed up until the horizon lightened in the east, watching the skies.

At breakfast, Mom said, "Your dad and I will be attending a week-long realtors convention in Atlanta, starting this afternoon. I've left forty dollars on the mantle, when you need to buy anything, and you can call us if there's a problem. If we don't answer, it's because we're listening to one of the presentations, so leave a message."

Dad was coming down the stairs with two huge suitcases when Tom left through the front door.

She rode the bus with her eyes closed, next to a third grader with a SpongeBob SquarePants lunch box. Kids shouting blended into a white noise background. The swaying and bumps lulled her into near sleep. She wasn't dreaming, but her imagination ran free. She stood before an entrance committee for the Solar Patrol, four officers with serious expressions. They argued among themselves:

The one on the far left said, "Why take an Earthling, especially an American one? They've abandoned their manned space program. A few robot probes don't show a national commitment. We should be looking at Chinese recruits."

"Just because the country doesn't seem space-bound doesn't mean that we can't find a qualified candidate among them. Look at what this one has accomplished."

The first officer to speak said, "That's true. She has shown both aptitude and desire."

"We should test her further," said the officer on the other end.

"Yes, let's."

Something in the tenor of the background noise changed, and Tom realized she was still riding to school. Reluctantly, she watched the admissions committee fade away, and she was back in the bus, surrounded by noise.

She opened her eyes. A dozen kids sitting in front of her were looking over the backs of their seats. Tom thought at first they were looking at her, but a deep voice shouted incoherently behind her made her look back too.

Four boys were out of their seats, two in the aisle, two kneeling on a seat so they faced the

bench behind them. Their open hands rose and fell, and the boys were laughing. Jacob cringed under their blows, his arms up, covering his face.

"Take it!" yelled one of the boys as his hand came down on the top of Jacob's unprotected head.

Smack. Smack. Smack. It was the laughing that infuriated Tom most. They weren't just hurting Jacob, they were mocking him. Some kids in the back of the bus chanted, "Fight! Fight! Fight!" but no one tried to stop the beating.

Tom looked to her right. The third grade girl was watching like everyone else. Tom grabbed her metal SpongeBob Square Pants lunchbox. It had a nice heft to it. Probably a thermos of milk inside beside a sandwich.

She slung it overhand at the nearest boy.

It was a lucky shot, but the results were spectacular. The box whacked solidly into the back of the head of one of the kneeling boys, popping open in an explosion of potato chips. At the same time, the bus suddenly slowed, throwing everyone forward.

"Hey!" yelled the bus driver, "what is going on back there? You kids get into your seats."

Three of the boys, still laughing, sat in nearby benches. One said, "That was a serious slap-ping. Did you video it?"

"No, doofus. How am I going to shoot it if I'm laying the slap-down too?"

"Did you call me a doofus? A doofus? How old are you?" and they both laughed even louder.

The boy Tom had hit wasn't laughing. He had laced his fingers together over the back of his head, while eyeing the front of the bus balefully. Tom made sure not to catch his gaze. She was sure if he saw her grinning, he'd know that she'd thrown it.

Jacob sat with his head down. He rubbed a coat sleeve under his eyes. Tom picked up her books and sat next to him.

"Go away," he said.

Tom didn't move. "Are you all right?"

"Go away."

"No."

The bus made the turn toward the school after picking up the last kids. They were a mile from the building.

"They're just stupid bastards, you know," said Tom.

The boy sitting in front of them who'd been hit with the lunchbox, said to no one in particular, "I think I have a concussion or an infarction."

Someone nearby said, "Infarction isn't even a word. You're brain scrambled."

Jacob looked up, his cheeks bright red. At least a couple of the slaps had got through his arms. "We're surrounded by idiots."

"I'll grant you that," said Tom.

"And what kind of idiot lets idiots beat him up?" Jacob said bitterly.

"The kind of idiot who understands abstract algebra and differential equations in the tenth grade. You'll be buying and selling the likes of them before you're twenty-five. They're going to be sweeping the hallway outside your office so they can earn enough money to buy the inventions you're going to come up with."

Jacob looked at her, his eyes bloodshot, his cheeks wet. "If I live that long. This is a bad place. I don't belong." He turned to the window and didn't speak for the rest of the drive. Tom wanted to do something, but even putting her hand on his shoulder felt patronizing. He was right. What kind of world did she live in where people could be so . . . horrible? If she could get away, she would, to a place where nobility was recognized, where the brave succeeded, and medals were earned. She needed to be in the Space Academy. She thought for a moment that she didn't have to go to school. Her parents were gone. She could walk home. For the rest of the day, she could reread the Tom Corbett books, do research on space flight, think about Mars and Venus and the places in deep space that had yet to be discovered. She could stay home all week if she wanted. The temptation was intense.

But when they got to the school, Tom shuffled down the aisle with the handful of high

schoolers. She was taller than most. As she stepped through the door, she heard behind her the third grader she'd been sitting beside exclaim, "Someone stole my lunch!"

That night, Tom opened her bedroom window, turned her rocket noise clip as loud as the speakers could go without distortion. The night was particularly warm and clear, so clouds didn't reflect city lights. Every star shone like a diamond point. She pushed the desk out of the way so she could sit right at the window and see the most sky. But Tom hadn't slept much the last two nights, so she put her head back against her chair, closed her eyes, and let the ship sounds sweep over her. A subsonic rumble filled the background. She imagined the mighty engines throwing them forward, ever faster through space.

A life on a ship is one filled with purpose. Everyone has a job, and the destination is clear. Not like her life where she didn't know where she was going, where she didn't know her job. On a ship in the Solar Patrol, everyone belonged to the team. Each had a responsibility and purpose. She longed for clarity, for a mission.

Footsteps went by her on a metal corridor floor. A conversation rose and fell. Metal locks clinked open. Pneumatic pistons released pressure. Pumps engaged. She loved being on the ship. Gradually, she slipped into a dreamlike state. The Solar Guard committee sat before her again. "Tomika," said the first officer, "After much discussion, we have approved your application for admission into Space Academy. We can only take one from your planet, and you have been chosen."

Tom tried to contain her joy, but a smile spread through her anyway. "I'll do my best," she said.

The second officer said, "We know that. Your passion, your strength in math and science, and your drive to succeed won us over. We don't think you belong here. There's a place for you, if you earn it, among the stars."

She nearly leapt from her seat—she pictured herself throwing a handful of clothes in a bag, writing her parents a quick note, and then leaving, really leaving—but a thought stopped her. "You can only take one?"

"We don't have to take even that," said the first officer. "Sadly there are many years when we don't find a suitable candidate at all."

Tom swallowed hard. "I . . . shouldn't be the one, then. I know a better person. He's way stronger in math. A genius I think. His name is Jacob Rose. You should take him."

The first officer frowned, turned to the second one. The other two leaned in to the discussion. They murmured for several minutes.

The second officer addressed her. "We have Jacob Rose on our short list. His qualifications are known to us. You would give up your place and have him attend the academy instead? We won't offer this opportunity again."

She could see the stars glittering like a million promises behind them. What would it be like to be in the academy, studying with purpose, a future filled with service and adventure in front of her? What would it be like to climb the stairs to her own starship for the first time? "Up ship," she'd bark into the intercom. Deep in the ship's bowels, her Power Deck officer would reply, "Aye, aye," and the metal around her would come alive, quivering with the power that would send them out and out.

Tom felt the control buttons beneath her fingers. She smelled ship air. Everything, all of it, so real and only a breath away.

"Yes, you should take Jacob. He is better qualified."

The first officer shrugged with resignation. "We will consider your suggestion."

The committee faded, and when Tom opened her eyes, the rising sun sat on the horizon through her open window. She shivered in the morning breeze, and she realized her cheeks were wet.

She moved through her Tuesday listlessly. It was only a dream, she thought, but loss still weighed on her, like a real opportunity had passed. On Wednesday, a note from administration called her from her first hour class. She sat outside the vice principal's office with three other students. One by one they were called in. Tom went last. A stranger in a business suit and tie sat

next to the vice principal. "This is Detective Tasker. He has some questions for you . . ." he glanced at a list on his desk, "Tomika."

The detective, a young man with a skinny, black moustache, asked her about Jacob. When did she see him last? Did he seem depressed? Had he said anything odd to her lately?

She told him about the slapping incident on the bus Monday. She didn't tell him about the lunchbox. The detective frowned as he wrote the information down. "This doesn't sound good," he said.

The vice principal looked concerned. "You should have reported this to us immediately, young lady. You know we have zero tolerance for bullying. We have other students to interview, but I will talk to you about your responsibility when the current situation blows over."

"What's the current situation?" asked Tom.

"Oh . . . I thought you knew. Jacob Rose is missing. He's been gone since sometime Monday night."

The detective gave her a card. "Call me if he contacts you, or you think of anything that might help us find him."

Some kids talked about Jacob during the day, but his absence didn't seem to affect anyone else. Tom, though, felt lighter. The dullness from yesterday faded some. She put her hand up in class more often. She chatted with the kids around her. Where was Jacob? The vice-principal seemed to think that he had run away, or maybe hurt himself, but Tom dared to hope differently. Jacob had said, "I don't think I belong here."

She imagined Jacob waking in the middle of the night. "We have an opportunity for you," the first officer might say. And Jacob, as smart as he was, would go with them. They would take him into space because he was the best candidate.

The thought made her happy. If it was true, that is, if Jacob was gone and safe.

That night, she sat at her window again, her room silent. The stars flickered just as bright, but they seemed impossibly remote now. She thought about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy, the fantasies of her childhood, and she knew that Tom Corbett and the Space Cadets would fade into her past too. For now, the thought that Jacob had joined the impossible Solar Guard buoyed her, but what if it was true? She'd never know. If it was true, she'd given away her one chance.

Maybe she would sell real estate, like her parents. She flinched just thinking about it.

Still, for the moment, the stars were beautiful. The impossibly remote night sky spread out like myths made real, a visible reminder of possibility. No world could remain mundane when every night the universe could unfold like this before her.

And high in the sky above the Pleiades, a star unhooked itself from the background. She thought at first that it might be a satellite, but it grew brighter and brighter, until it was no longer a star. It was a flame descending, and then she could hear it like a hum at first, but soon a roaring that shook the house and vibrated in her chest.

The ship landed, a needle balanced on end. A door opened in its side. A ramp extended from it to the ground. A tall figure emerged. Illuminated from the light within the ship, Tom recognized the first officer's uniform, and soon the officer stood outside her window. "Are you coming?" the officer asked.

"You said you could only take one. Didn't Jacob go with you?"

Standing on the lawn, only a few feet from her, the officer nodded. "The committee talked about you, Tomika. We decided that a candidate who would sacrifice her dream to save someone else is exactly the kind of person the Solar Guard should recruit."

"Yes, of course." Tomika could hardly breathe.

A meteor streaked across the blackness. Tomika saw it as she ran toward the ship. The light left a trail that glowed like a sign, an arrow, like a long invitation. She dashed up the ramp, glad beyond hope, her heart throbbing like a rocket engine's pulse.