

10:05 PM, Month 03, 2545 AC

Jack gained consciousness as the sound of some infernal beeping tugged on his drugged mind, some alarm that he couldn't place at first. His senses grew more acute as the drugs left his system. He recognized the alarm, even though it was only one he had heard in drills, the O2 alarm. A feeling of panic set in. What had happened? And, where was he?

Slowly, painfully slow, he began to remember. There had been a fire . . . and someone had screamed. It had been him, he recalled. His leg had been burning, and then he had fallen and hit his head. Then darkness.

The pain came rushing back. His leg hurt like hell, a deep searing pain, and his head felt like someone was jumping up and down inside his skull, pounding on his brain with a hammer. He opened his eyes—everything blurred at first—then slowly the room settled into focus. He was strapped into the seat of a Class 3 escape pod. The emergency lights were not on, but the cramped compartment smelled of smoke, burning rubber, and electronics. The blinking alerts on the monitors around him were only lights he saw.

This class of pods was low budget and thus didn't have any AI onboard. He looked around and saw the emergency med kit flash in the universal Red Cross sign. It was attached neatly to the seat and within reach.

Jack pulled out the kit and quickly found the painkiller hypo. He put it to his neck and pressed the small trigger. There was a light pinch and then a *shuuush* as the drugs were pumped into his system. Within seconds, the pain diminished throughout his entire body and became only a light pulsing annoyance.

Beep . . . Beep . . . Beep . . .

As the alarm continued, Jack studied the monitor. The fog on his mind lifted a bit, and he read the gauges: O2, 15% Remaining; Carbon Dioxide Filter, Yellow. That meant that the filter was working overtime to clear the gasses from the air. But his main concern was the O2 alarm. He had about three hours of oxygen left before he would run out of air.

Jack unstrapped from the seat, not wanting to get up just yet. Besides the pods where designed so that the occupant had to lie down when launched from a craft. This way the foams and stabilizers could better compensate for gravity shifts. Which he then noticed. And of course, since he was in gravity, that meant the pod had landed somewhere.

His O2 went down to 14%. He had most likely lost some of the oxygen tanks in the landing.

Jack looked at the monitors and reached out to activate the touchscreen. It lit up with all kinds of information.

Hull Integrity, 45%.

Life Support, Red, O2 Alert.

Batteries, Green.

Heater, Red. *Damn it. I'll be breathless and cold.*

Radio Communications, Operational. *That's something.*

ADD, Ready to Launch. *Great. At least the advanced distress drone works. Now we're talking.*

Location, Unknown. *Figures. Lost in the middle of nowhere.*

Jack flicked the switch to external view, but the cameras weren't working, and sensors told him that there was no atmosphere outside. The temperature was -50 Celsius and the gravity pull was only half of Earth's.

Rising from the seat, he took two steps over to the small window and peered outside. Gray rocks, boulders, and dust stretched on for miles in the darkening gloom. The angle of the window was such that he had a good view of his surroundings. The crater trail that he had made while landing stretched far behind him. Debris—pieces of his pod—littered the ground. There were his battered O2 tanks and a few other parts he didn't dare think about. The ground was a fine ashen dust covering rocks and larger boulders, much like the surface of the moon. In the distance, he spied what looked like hills and crater walls, but alas, no Earth in sight, and he knew he was very far from home.

Above him, he could see nothing but the clearest stars, nothing that indicated anything human-made or any planets that he recognized. Where was he?

Beep . . . Beep . . . Beep . . .

O2, 13% Remaining.

Well, first things first. He had to see if he somehow could stop the oxygen leak and restore the airflow. Jack looked outside at the place where the tanks were—or what was left of them. Only two oxygen tanks remained out of the six, and a thin stream of air vented from one of them. He couldn't get outside since his suit was incomplete. And when he looked around for a helmet, he saw that it was missing.

He typed in some commands in the terminal, redirecting the airflow from the damaged tank over to the now almost empty main tank. The gauge in the main life support O2 reserve rose. His O2 was now at 42%. Now he had a little over eight hours of oxygen. *Excellent. Another five hours to play with.* Then he noticed that the fire warning alert had stopped, meaning that since he had cut off the air for the damaged tank, the fire also didn't have anything to live on. One more problem solved. He felt rather good about killing two problems with one stroke. The immediate problem was that he needed to keep warm, and with the life system damaged by the landing, he needed to get the heater fixed, but that would drain the batteries . . .

A voice cracked over the comm. "Hello, anyone out there?" she said.

Jack turned on his comm. "Yes, Jack McMillan here! Engineer 1st grade. How are you?"

"I'm okay. Small cuts and bruises, and a torn-up pod. Alendria Nadien, Pilot 3rd grade."

"Nice to hear from someone else," Jack said.

"Yes sir! Do you remember anything about what happened?"

"Not really. I was asleep as far as I can remember. The last thing I recall, there was a fire. At some point, my leg was on fire and I tripped and hit my head. I woke up here, strapped into my pod and the alarms going all haywire on me. My pod's a wreck."

"What's your O2?" Alendria asked.

"About 42% left."

“No reserve tanks?” Alendria sounded concerned.

“Nope, got smashed in the landing, but I managed to kill the fire and close an air vent, so I’m good for a few, at least.”

“Well, I was sleeping when the alarm went off to evacuate the ship. And did as we all do in an Evac alert—I grabbed my kit and ran to my assigned Evac station. But as I was launching—and I think I was one of the first—the ship began to get hit by antimatter blasts. That might explain the fire you remember and the odd screeching of the antimatter hitting the hull.”

“Antimatter? But there shouldn’t have been any Anroc vessels out here,” Jack said.

“Well, I’m not entirely sure that it was the Anroc Syndicate. As I was hurtling down toward this rock, I caught a glimpse of the vessel that was firing at us. And it was something I’ve never seen before.”

“What did it look like?” Jack asked.

“I don’t know, I’ve never seen that kind of ship before. It was roughly half the size of our ship, and it was shimmering. It had a great deal of construction done to make it blend in with the surrounding space. For the lack of a better word, it kind of looked like a camouflage spider.”

“Spider? I’ve never heard or read anything about a spider-shaped stealth ship. And I have TS clearance.” As a Senior Engineer tasked with designing ships and combat systems, Jack had top secret access, and he thought he’d seen it all.

“Yes sir, same here,” Alendria replied. “It was eerie how effective and fast that single ship could penetrate the *Bouwall*’s shields and hull. Then I lost vision of the fight and crashed here on this rock.”

“Do you know where we are? My nav systems aren’t working.”

“No, I don’t. My nav system shows everything is green, but it can’t give me any location. It’s as if we’re in a dark spot.”

“Have you had contact with anyone else?”

There was a long silence, then Alendria's voice came back. "No, you're the first I've been able to reach. Sorry about that—had an alarm go off. Some sort of air filter warning, but it's green now."

Jack flipped a switch that turned on a pulsing light beacon called a EME, again some military acronym. It had its own separate power source, and it would enable anyone from the sky to see him. "I have just turned on the EME, and we can hope that the *Bouwall* or someone else can find us."

"Won't that enable the Spider to see us, as well?" Alendria asked, her voice rising in pitch.

"Yes, but what choice do we have? I run out of air in seven hours. I'd rather be a prisoner of war than a corpse, if you don't mind," Jack replied. "Can you see if you can get anyone else on the comms? I'll see if I can get something working here. Let's talk again in ten minutes."

"Okay, talk to you soon." Alendria signed off.

Jack moved over to the wall and opened the emergency compartment, looking inside to see what he could use. He found food rations, water containers, a chemical bag filled with purification tabs for cleaning dirty water, hypo caps with different drugs, and a little black box with a skull on the top. Likely a suicide pill. Well, at least he wouldn't have to die a slow, agonizing death from suffocation.

Next was a xeno blanket, designed to either cool or heat you; it auto-adjusted to the surrounding temperature. There was a small case with tools—one he was well familiar with—but it would not help him make air.

He was looking for a Roberts converter but was out of luck. It might have prolonged the current air he had to several days.

Jack took the food and water, sat down in the seat, and looked out the window. He had a perfect view of the stars and was rather at peace with himself. There was an odd calm about knowing that in seven hours he would most likely die. But until then, he had nice military rations to keep him company.

"Jack," Alendria called over the comm.

"Yeah? Just resting and eating a bit. What's up?"

“We are not alone here. There are several others in other pods around us; I can see their beacons out my window. Some of them even try to blink to me with flashlights, but you are the only one I can get on the comm. My scanner tells me that there are five other pods within five clicks, and at least one of those has been trying to communicate with me. What’s your status?”

Jack got up and looked out the window, trying to see if he could spy other beacons or lights around him. But there was only darkness.

“No one here with me, and I can’t see you, either. You must be on a ridge somewhere behind me, outside my field of vision. That also means that I am very likely one of the five your sensors can detect. Do you have a full EVA suit?”

“Yes, I do, and I have been considering going outside to see if I can get to some of the other pods around me. Let me suit up and I’ll get to it. At least I might be able to get to you.”

“No.” Jack took a deep breath. “Secure the others first, or at least establish comms with them. I have no helmet. That means that I can’t get out of here unless it’s inside an area that has an atmosphere, or unless you can find me another helmet. The others might be in worse shape than me, and you might get lucky and find help to get me out of here.”

“Okay, Jack, I’ll check to see how the others are. Maybe I’ll find a spare helmet or find a better pod.”

Jack sat down and waited, the minutes ticking by.

“Jack? Can you hear me?”

“Yes, going through just fine. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Left my pod and am heading over to the one with the blinking lights. This place is very much like the moon back home—same rock types and same dust. Light in gravity.”

“You’ve been to the moon?” Jack asked.

“Yup,” Alendria said with a smile to her voice, “all pilot cadets train for six months on the moon. Makes it easier to execute maneuvers and such when training for low-gravity combat. Fun times. Okay—I’m getting closer to the pod, and I can see the light blinking at me.”

Then there was silence for a few more minutes.

“There is someone inside using his flashlight to signal me. He looks to be badly hurt—there’s a lot of blood and I can see his leg is bandaged. Insignia looks to be a medic. I’ll try to see if I can find out more. I’ll be back, Jack.”

Jack hated waiting and hated not being able to help. The helplessness was almost as bad as the air meter dropping by the minute. He went over the inventory once more, so he at least had something to do.

Jack had joined the fleet at a young age, and with his background as the son of a Mech, it was only natural that he enter the Mechanical Core, and after training on shipyards for a few years, he became a Mech. His first assignment was to a low-class gunboat, the United Conclave of Planets *Rosemary*. It was a decent little ship with forty crew members and soon taught him the ropes of being a space mechanic. But he had never been good at sitting still. After the tour on the *Rosemary*, he got transferred around to different ships for the next ten years, till he had landed the engineering job on the latest battleship, the U.C.P. *Bouwall*. She was fresh off the shipyards around Mercury. Her paint still smelled new when he arrived. He loved that boat. Every part of her core purred like a kitten and was just perfect. Then this . . .

It was supposed to have been his last assignment before he retired from the Fleet and opened his own Mech school on some warm paradise planet somewhere. Now it seemed it was going to be his last assignment anywhere.

“Jack!” Alendria’s call hissed over the comm in a mere whisper.

“I’m here. What’s happening?”

Another whisper: “I don’t think we’re alone here.”

“Whatever do you mean? There might be people in the pods—didn’t you just find one?”

“Shhh—not so loud. Yeah, I found the medic but can’t get him out alone. His pod is too damaged. And can’t communicate with him. But I don’t think we’re alone here. I see movement.”

“Movement? What kind of movement?”

“There is something moving over at my pod. Shit! I can only see something moving around in the shadows only. My pod is in the light from the sun, and that’s why I can see it or them—they move like dogs on a trail. . . . The Maker’s Balls! They’re tracking me. One of them is circling out from my pod.”

Jack could hear the panic in her voice, and he could hear her heavy breathing. It sounded like she was running.

“Calm down, Alendria.” Jack himself tried to be calm, but his own pulse was racing. He looked out the window, trying to see where she might be—lights, movement, anything besides this blasted darkness.

He could hear her—“I’m okay for now, they are still at my pod. I have moved away from the medic pod. I’m on the other side of it and am running toward the next pod. There’d better be someone there who can help. Hold on.”

Her comm went silent. Fifteen minutes of pure agony passed.

Then,

“Jack, the pod here is dead, and I can see that the movement at my pod—it’s circling out more and more, trying to find my tracks or scent or however they do it. I can see a pod far off, down a canyon, and I think it might be you! I’ll try to flash a light very briefly, look for me!”

Jack pressed up against the glass and said, “Ready.”

“3, 2, 1 . . . On!”

Off in the distance on the ridge, a pinprick of light flashed.

“I see it!” Jack yelled. He was so relieved, he had no control over the rush of raw emotions that flushed through him at that tiny light in the dark. Tears streamed down his checks.

“I see you,” Alendria said. “I’m on my way, Jack, and I got you a helmet from the dead pod.”

A few seconds later, a tiny figure bounced down the slope. She was still hundreds of yards out, but he felt so relieved.

The sunlight shone on her briefly as she crossed between the ridge and the valley floor. There was a gap in the ridge where light managed to filter down into the darkness. Had he been a devout man, he might have seen the bouncing

white form as an angel coming to save him. Then she vanished in the darkness again as she left the sunlight, but after a short while he could see the small light bouncing toward him.

“Looking good, Alendria, how are you doing?”

“Can’t . . . talk . . . too . . . much,” she gasped as she ran.

Suddenly he saw something come into the light. It ran like a dog, and it looked like one, but was thin, almost skeleton-like, and all black. It had a long, sharp tail poised like a scorpion, and it was following Alendria’s trail fast. As it got to the middle of the light, it stopped and raised its head from the trail in the sand and moved its pointy head around from side to side. Then it lowered its head again and, quick as lightning, followed the trail. As it vanished into the darkness, he saw three more enter the light following the first one.

“Alendria, RUN!” Jack yelled. “Black dogs are following your trail. Run, run, run—”

“Oh shit!” Panic was clear in her voice and he could hear the labored breathing as she picked up her speed.

The bouncing form got closer and closer.

She was very close now, so close that he could see her in the pod lights, and right behind her, no more than 50 feet away, the black dog came into view. It was a thing out of nightmares. It was the size of a small German Shepherd, hairless but with the skin stretched over the skeleton, like it hadn’t been fed for a long time. Its pointed oval skull had no eyes, only empty sockets, and its jaw was filled with metallic teeth. And it moved carefully, as if unused to the lower gravity. It had a collar, spiked and vicious looking. These were not wild beasts; they were bioengineered, part flesh and part robot. They had an owner and had been sent to hunt.

“RUN!” Jack yelled.

She reached the airlock and slammed the buttons to open the door, and as the door began to open, the first of the robotic dogs reached her and sank its teeth into her leg, erupting a cloud of dust as the space suit’s air was released in

a violent gush. And then there was blood. Then the second black monster joined the fray.

Jack was screaming at the top of his lungs. But, of course, to no avail. There was no one to hear him. Two of the dogs ran off into the darkness, and one remained, its head pointed in his direction and slightly askew, listening.

On the ground sitting in the pools of blood was a helmet.

So close and yet so far away.

As Jack's mind scrambled for ways to get the helmet without breathing, one of the black monsters ran into the light and began to attack the airlock door. Jack sat down with a bump. This was the end. Even if there was a rescue team coming, they would be in grave danger from the black dogs.

Jack turned on the rescue probe's recording functions and began to report the events, noting the attack on the ship as Alendria had explained it and the number of pods on the moon. He detailed the attack of black dogs—how they looked and acted, how they attacked and coordinated the hunt. But who had sent them and why, he had no idea, not even a theory.

That done, he sat quietly and looked up at the stars, reflecting on his life. He remembered his early days as a boy on the outskirts of Alpharetta on the planet Alpha Centauri One, and from there to the academy, where he had met his best friend, Sammy Thorgrim, a proud Nordic descendant. He claimed even to be related to Harald Bluetooth, a famous Viking. Then Jack pictured his graduation, where he had seen his parents for the last time. And from there he went to his first assignment where he'd met a variety of people, some of whom became his best friends and meant everything to him.

He sat for a long time, reminiscing about his past, and in the end, was left with a sad recognition that there were no future memories to be had. The O2 alert kicked in again. Jack looked at it in a stupor. How odd it was, how numb one gets when death comes knocking. He wasn't even afraid anymore. Just sad.

Air gone, the black dogs scraping at the hull, Jack began to drift off. His head swam, but he willed himself to focus. Hand trembling, he flipped the emergency distress system to Launch.

The automated system kicked in and a hatch opened on the pod.

A lone drone rose from its launchpad, and as it gained altitude, it detected other signals on the dark, dusty surface of the cratered moon. It detected first one *beep... beep...* and then one more, and more. As it left the field of gravity, it scanned the space around the moon, detecting compositions of metals, residues of energy discharges, and nuclear radiation from large A-weapons. Below, the entire surface of the moon was covered in small blinking lights and beeping distress beacons and some odd signals it couldn't comprehend. In orbit around the moon, two lifeless ships wrecked by gaping holes drifted. All around them, space was littered with debris and frozen bodies.

No one heard their cries for help.

No rescue.

Beep . . . Beep . . .

Bee—

The drone began to emit its distress signal and the recording crystal delivered its message toward distant Earth.