



BATAVIA

by

Martin Cuff

Martin Cuff
Warnham Court, Warnham, West Sussex, UK

www.martincuff.com

batavia.martincuff.com

+381 62 107 3365

martin@martincuff.com

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It's 04.45am, June 4th 2079. Seven months, thirteen days, eleven hours, and forty-six minutes since the ORS *Batavia* cast off from Chongzhu Space Station and set sail for the V.O Company's mining colonies on the moons of Jupiter. Seven months in, we're almost on the far side of the Asteroid Belt, with another six weeks of the journey still to go, give or take.

Batavia's Mission Director Franklin J. Pelser has recently awoken in his private suite after a good night's sleep. Since his bed is an actual a bed rather than a hammock slung from the walls, and the soft mattress is bigger than most crew bunk rooms, *and* it's covered in Belgian linens and real goose down comforters, this is unsurprising. After prayers, he is currently propped up on velvety throw pillows, sipping fresh coffee from a bone China service laid out on a silver tray, reading the stock reports on his e-pad, and preparing himself for another working day. Classical music is playing, and Pelser taps his bony fingers along to the melody.

The crew may call him 'The Slender Man' (partly for his gauntness, partly for his ability to impersonate human beings) but Director Pelser enjoys the privileges of command. And under Vickers Olburg Company laws, every single decision on the *Batavia*, from the flight plan to the crew rations to the balancing of the holds, is his and his alone to make. Pelser's authority even outranks the ship's captain, Ariano Jacó Barrantes, who's actually flying the fleet the 340 million miles to Europa Moon. Now, Barrantes is the real deal, a ruggedly handsome space-mariner in his fifties, with decades of professional experience flying all kinds of spacecraft in all kinds of space environments; he is afraid of neither work nor hardship. But the Company demands he

defer authority to a hand-picked Company Director, someone like Frank Pelser, a smug know-nothing lacking the most basic astro training, a bureaucrat basically, and a monumentally petty one at that.

This grinds his gears - has done, all the way from Chong.

Unusually, given his rank, Captain Barrantes is also awake at this time of the morning, and is on duty on the bridge. Barrantes' presence on deck not only suggests he has not forgotten his blue collar roots; it also signals a growing desire to avoid the Honourable Henrietta Swan, a commercial passenger who had attached herself to his rank and privilege like a magnetic mine shortly after departure. Though she'd be loath to admit it, Henrietta had boarded the *Batavia* as a paid companion of the wealthy passenger, mining heiress Lakshmi Jain, but Henrietta chafes at performing even the very basics of her duties and is much more focussed on finding a husband than actually assisting the lady in question.

Worse, she recently told Barrantes she might be pregnant. Since abortion is a capital offence, Barrantes wants a bit of space to think about what to do about it.

And space he's certainly got.

Out here, it's so vast, so vacant, you could sail through the entire Asteroid Belt and never see a flying rock unless you were actually looking for one. Yes, there's some space debris - the manmade detritus of broken satellites and abandoned bits of engines and vehicles and discarded cargo containers - but that mostly hangs in near-planet orbits. Not out here.

Here is one vast, dark vacuum of nothing.

So, it's strange when the Third Officer, Ivan Bogdanov, squints into his personal screen and quickly cross-checks his digital charts. He glances out again through the

digital displays that serve as windows. Night or day, out here it's all blackness; yet he's sure he's seen something.

His space radar gives off a weak identifiable bleat and then retreats into silence.

'Boss, will you look at this?' he says to the woman sitting next to him. 'I'm getting a strange reading.'

'What now?' says Second Officer Dee Helmann wearily. She sweeps a hand across her head although her hair is already neatly tied in a ponytail. 'I swear to God, you're going to have to get your eyes tested.'

'I'm sure I saw something.'

He prods the screen with his index finger, and it magnifies itself many times over. They stare at the enlarged image, looking for discrepancies, anomalies, anything out of the ordinary. Helmann looks back at her tablet, swipes her hand over a screen or two. She pops up a layout of the sector mapped out in 3-D. Turns it around for another angle. And another.

'The charts all say there's nothing in this quadrant. Look,' she says.

'I know,' says the Watch. 'I can only tell you what I saw. A glimmer of light. A reflection off something.'

'Captain?' says the Second Officer to Barrantes in the main chair. 'Watch thinks he's seen something.'

Barrantes sips his coffee. His eyes are bloodshot and his sinuses are blocked; his hand tremors a little and he's wishing he popped some bourbon into his brew. You can't always be a high-functioning alcoholic.

‘Perhaps we should slow, Sir?’ says Helmann cautiously. ‘We’re pretty far out of normal trade routes. Maybe the charts aren’t 100% accurate?’

‘*Porra!*’ says Barrantes under his breath. He pushes himself wearily from his seat and walks across to the officers and leans over their shoulders to see their screens.

‘What about the radar?’

‘The radar’s quiet,’ says the Second Officer. ‘There was a ping, but it’s not picking up anything now.’

‘Did you request scans?’

‘The AI is offline.’

‘Do we know why?’

‘System updates?’

What Barrantes and his team do not realise of course is that the System sees ghosts - or thinks it does. The high-powered scanning radar, already a fragile system over such distances, has been deliberately compromised by an injection of malicious malware, source unknown, which had left it twitchy and unreliable, second guessing itself. It sees ghosts - and it misses actual obstacles.

On a ship like the *Batavia*, such sabotage doesn’t stop. With its strict Christian Nationalist governance, and a punishment schedule ranging from flogging to keelhauling to rapid decompression, most incidents are petty – blocked toilets or cleaning chemicals dumped in the drinking water tanks. Such incidents are usually just pushback by exhausted or humiliated crew. There have also been episodes of corporate espionage; the *Batavia*’s secrets could unlock fortunes for rival enterprises. But some, like the sabotage of the *Batavia*’s radar underway here, are the actions of anarchists of

the Universal Labour Coalition demanding human rights for workers in space, against a system that sacrifices lives for profit.

The Company deals with all instances in the same way: brutal clampdowns, corporal punishment, ejection from the airlock - no second guessing, no second chances.

Yet the hits? - they keep on coming.

Luckily, there's still human judgment: 'I know I saw something,' says Bogdanov. The Bulgarian has been with The Company for the best part of a decade. He's a good kid, a little over-cautious.

There's human judgment, but also human error.

'If every piece of finely tuned tech on this multi-billion-dollar spaceship says there's nothing in this sector,' says Barrantes, 'then there's nothing in this sector. I'm not changing course based on a hunch.'

A thousand meters long, fifty metres tall and three hundred and fifty meters across the beam, the ORS *Batavia* is the biggest, most complex and possibly the most expensive machine ever built by man. An outrageous feat of human engineering, she has six decks in the prow holding the bridge, the Director's staterooms and strongroom, the Central Server, officers' bunk rooms and cabins for the discreet handful of First-Class Passengers, a Security suite and armoury, and stores for food and medicine. There are another four decks aft, including a triple volume atrium, a cryo-suite carrying 400 sleeping souls, the dormitories and cafeterias, rec rooms and medical facilities for

the wide-awake crew. The privileged front of the ship is separated from the back by three long maintenance corridors that can be slammed closed at the press of a button in case of any disturbance or incident.

Between the prow and the stern, the *Batavia* is lined with a full kilometre of holds that are packed with containers of mining and extraction equipment, robotics, origami-engineered tensegrity buildings, terraforming supplies and tech and trade goods for the colonies. There are also eight smaller craft clamped along the mother-ship's spine – the South African 'inventor' called them oxpeckers, and the name stuck – each of them taking advantage of the bigger ship's immense pulling power through space. The arrangement is efficient, elegant, and faintly biological: a beast with parasites. Almost 100 wideawake crew work around the clock to keep the system humming.

This, then, is the magnificent vessel that is being driven towards disaster. For a ship of such size and complexity, the *Batavia* is moving fast: her massive engines conduct thermonuclear fusion reactions in magnetically confined plasma, and expel it at over forty kilometres a second, thrusting the monster vessel forward into space.

'Stay alert. Keep an eye out,' says Barrantes. 'But let's keep full steam ahead.'

'Aye aye, sir,' says Helmann.

'Aye aye, sir,' says Bogdanov.

'Full steam ahead,' says the Pilot, Nkosinathi Malusi.

Which is when the meteoroid, not fifteen meters in diameter, slams into ORS *Batavia's* unprotected side.

The unnamed meteoroid is the rocky, icy, ammonia-y offspring of something from the Kuiper Belt that has split and spat its component parts outward like snooker balls after a break. It's small, unyielding and uncharted and it smacks hard along the *Batavia's* naked flank at high velocity. The contact is immediate, enormous and catastrophic. Where it connects, it smashes full on into the oxpecker *MV Matterhorn* and the troop carrier crumples in on itself like a flimsy soda can in the hands of a bodybuilder before disintegrating completely. Loose debris is sent spinning into space, but there isn't much of it, so resoundingly is the military craft obliterated out of existence.

Slowing a little, the rock next glances off the farm ship *Monsanto LXVII*, violently wrenching it from its moorings and casting it over and over itself in a chaos of water and soil and aluminium pilings and broken glass. It remains attached to the *Batavia* by sheer luck and a couple of tendons of steel cable. Once it reaches its furthest distance from the *Batavia*, the farm ship snaps back like a diver on a bungee cord, smashing back into the *Batavia's* exposed flank with a shriek of crunching metal and glass, and a sucking of the ship's air as it escapes. The stricken *Monsanto* then smashes into the next oxpecker, the Company's little tug vessel *Caliban*, ripping it from its anchorage and sending it spinning helplessly into space, a flattened jagged disc where a small craft had once

been. The *Monsanto* hangs on though still, bobbing about like a puppet with tangled strings.

The meteoroid itself is still moving at speed. It tracks deep into the *Batavia*'s belly like a bullet into soft tissue, cracking an immense and gaping rift in the ship's protective outer hull. At least six of the pressurised holds are ruptured instantaneously, and massive containers of earthmovers, terraforming equipment and pre-fab housing are sucked out into the void like lumpy guts in a violent disembowelling. Moments later, meteoroid fragments meet the ship's keel, and the frame buckles and twists, metal bellowing in pain and shock, the stern and aft bending towards each other like a hunchbacked cripple or a man suddenly caught with the impulse to vomit.

Slowing now, the last fragments from the impact then ricochet into the engine rooms, where one of the giant turbines explodes. An immense fireball, bright and magnesium white, shoots out from the thrusters, the soundwaves from the blast rippling through the solid walls of the ship as if it's water. The explosion engulfs more of the oxpeckers in supra-heated flame and the survey drone ship *Pioneer*, and the ore refinery *St. Barbara* incinerate. Two more turbines ignite and the explosion bucks the *Batavia* like a prospector's mule, shaking her and rolling her helplessly.

Throughout this devastating impact, the *Batavia*'s crew and passengers - are trapped in a maelstrom of noise and shrapnel.

Acting Chief Medical Office Uzo Igwe is jolted so hard by the impact that the hammock she's sleeping in is torn away from the walls, and she ricochets around the

tiny cabin like a pinball in a machine. Tensed, she would have broken something, legs or even her back, but luckily - if luck even comes into it in a situation like this - she is merely bruised and sprained and she has a cut over her eye where she head-butted a wall-bolt on her way to the floor. She wakes again, stunned, in total darkness, even the emergency lights have failed, and she's floating, weightless. At first, she thinks she must have died, but then her bleeding face connects with the cloth of her hammock which covers her like a caul, and she realises that it hurts and she is still very much alive. The only sounds she can hear are the tortured bending of metal and the rush of air as the artificial gravity tries to stabilise itself in a craft where the pressure and rotation have been inexorably damaged. Then the emergency atmospheric system kicks in and Uzo plunges to the floor with a crack of a rib and a whup as the air is forced out of her lungs. Emergency lights flicker on and the claxon alarm sounds throughout the ship.

On the First-Class passenger deck, Mrs. Lakshmi Jain emerges from her berth wearing a silk shawl and expensive silk pyjamas, the tailoring precise, the stitches intricate and hand-made (child labour in the East now a genuine competitive advantage.) Even woken so abruptly, she is still most beautiful woman many people will have seen outside of electronic billboards or South American telenovelas. With the shining skin and long, glossy hair of a Bollywood movie star, she looks as out of place in the grim collapse of *Batavia* as a slipper orchid on a slag heap. She stands in the groaning, undulating corridor, not quite sure what to do.

Further down the hallway, Predikant Gisbert Bastiaans and his grey wife appear from their cabin. The Predikant, in his late sixties already, has the broad cheeks and

slow wit of a man only a degree or two removed from the peasantry, a simple man whose faith springs from the fairly literal interpretation of gospels he can barely read. Bastiaans is scheduled to replace the vicar at the Mission Station on Asteroid XO158 – which is as clear a sign as any that he’s basically otherwise unemployable. If it wasn’t for the social elevation offered by his faith role, he’d be down in the Third-Class steerage with the rest of the indentured labour. Next to him, his wife is shivering in a simple grey nightshift that’s clearly too thin and threadbare for the sudden cold on board; her flesh stipples, pale and sickly, like chicken skin. She’s holding her arm strangely, it appears to be broken and she’s in shock, but she doesn’t say a word except to look at her husband with large watery eyes. The Predikant gawps like a fish.

Lakshmi takes control. ‘We need to get to the Atrium,’ she shouts over the screaming siren. ‘To the assembly point.’ Clutching each other’s hands, they step out into the *Batavia*’s wailing hull and follow the mars-lights zipping along the floor towards the maintenance corridor.

Also in the prow, Deputy Director Jeronimus Cornell is thrown so hard against the wall of his berth that the thin metal wall buckles and collapses under his weight. He wakes to find himself, still snarled up in his hammock, sprawled out in the cabin next door. In the flashing emergency lights he scrambles out of his bedding and realises that he has landed on the dead body of Captain Chuan Chittarong, formerly captain of the oxpecker *Matterhorn*. Chitty’s neck has been broken, and his head is lolling at a terrifying angle, his eyes stare out blankly, his mouth hanging open in a silent O. Jeronimus is unaffected by this though, only by the urgent need for self-preservation, so

he pushes himself off the corpse and checks himself briefly for damage. Remarkably there appears to be none, except for a very sore lower back. He kicks his way out through the cabin door and into the corridor, where he joins the throng of passengers and crew limping their way to the evacuation station in the atrium.

Except that Jeronimus heads in the opposite direction.

Uzo doesn't need thirty years in space to realise that whatever has happened to the *Batavia* has been catastrophic. She fights her way out of her cabin – the door has warped and stuck inside its frame – and sprints towards the Medical Suite. She dodges torn metal and broken pilings, the dull grey of the *Batavia*'s interior buckled and dented and heaving as it tries to resist the changes in pressure from the damaged exterior. She passes people shuffling their way to the atrium, their breath condensing as the temperature plummets in the thin air. The staircase to the medical centre has been dislodged, so she's forced to shimmy down and drop a floor, and she gives silent thanks that she has at least retained some muscle strength in space.

The Medical Centre has been spared the worst of the impact, though it's in total darkness because the emergency lighting has failed. There's the sound of screaming from someone in one of the hospital beds, and the electrics spit and spark dangerously. Uzo runs quickly through the ward and spots Maria Sanchez, one of the farmers from the *Montsanto*, holding the hand of her son Manny. If she was a praying kind of person, Uzo would also be giving thanks right now that she'd moved the eight-year-old into sick bay just the previous evening in order to monitor him for the radiation sickness that was

wracking his small body. Maria is wide eyed with terror, and her Spanish is panicked and staccato.

Uzo tries to calm her. *‘No se que ha pasado. Tienes que ir a la sala. A la sala, bien?’*

Uzo doesn’t know at this stage that Maria’s husband and baby daughter have been killed in the catastrophic damage caused to the *Monsanto*, so she’s not lying when she says: *‘Vas a encontrar a Eduardo en la sala. Pronto, Maria, pronto.’*

Maria Sanchez nods an assent and hurries out in the direction of the stern, her boy still groggy and slow on his feet.

You’d think, from the way they sell it, that cryosleep is a warm, delightful waterbed of restfulness and luxury - a wonderful chillaxing way to while away the emptiness of Space. Like you’ll wake at the other side feeling glorious, and strong and vigorous, like a Bond girl, or an actor in the morning-after scene for an advert for Ambien. In reality, Cryosleep is an inexact science that has been little improved since the system was first invented; the coffins are faulty, the cryo-gel is toxic, the plastic feeding tubes are poor quality and prone to cracking, and the liquid oxygen in the system is erratic and inconstant. The chambers are known to everyone as coffins, for obvious reasons. But it’s the cheapest and least fractious way for the Company to get people from A-B, so it’s the go-to system for most travellers. So the catastrophic damage to the ship’s main systems means there is an immense crisis heading for the

people travelling in cryosleep. They will start drowning in their own body fluids within minutes. There are 360 people travelling in them on the *Batavia*. All of them may die.

When Uzo enters the cryosleep facility, it is in darkness, the life support systems have failed, and the locked-in inhabitants are facing a tragedy on an unthinkable scale.

Unless she can void the chambers of their liquids.

She runs along the side of the coffins, punching the emergency evac command, and each button hit responds with the sound of flushing as the stinking watery gel gushes out of the system. One by one, Uzo forces open each of the coffins and releases the inhabitants.

‘Let me help.’ A voice behind her. It’s Sergeant Jon Lin. Uzo wants to cry with relief when she sees the handsome leader of the platoon of space marines. They’ve become close on this trip.

Ok, that’s an understatement; he has fallen in love with her, and she, very much against her will and her judgement, with him. He kisses her briefly.

‘I think we were hit by something,’ he says.

‘Whatever it was, it was big.’

‘And fast. Which ones are my guys?’

‘Rows 28 and 29.’

Jon Lin gets to work immediately. He starts pushing his muscled shoulder against a coffin door that’s stuck.

The process of emerging from hypersleep is dangerous and disorienting even under controlled conditions; in a total emergency evac, it is perilous in the extreme. So, there's a lot of gasping and puking and people weeping on all fours, lots of streaky, bloody stigmata where catheters have been prematurely ripped from sides and wrists, lots of noxious fluids, human and chemical, dripping through the grating, lots of pruneey, stibbled flesh mashing against the cold metal floor. Still, Uzo is able to work swiftly and confidently, voiding the coffins, resuscitating the occupants, wrapping them in thin metallic emergency blankets, and sending them at a disoriented shuffle to the central atrium to await Emergency Disembarkation. The speed of the operation increases further when Jon's soldiers, newly awakened, stay to help the emptying of the hypersleep chambers. They work against the plaintive wailing of the sirens, and the terrifying keening of warping metal and breaking glass.

The last coffin empties with a wheeze, and the lifeless body of its inhabitant slops out onto the floor like solid effluent in a liquid waste, too late to save. There's no time to mourn though. The hull of the *Batavia* is still rippling and grinding, and the metal moans and shrieks as it settles uncomfortably into place. Uzo and Jon survey the scene one more time and flee out into the corridor in the direction of the atrium.

When he bursts into the Bridge, Pelser finds a team under pressure to regain control of the wounded ship. The pilot, Malusi, punches commands into keyboards that will ignite engines or reverse thrusters in an effort to balance the ship's now-erratic rotation. Bogdanov is extinguishing an electrical fire with a flame-retardant foam. 2 i/c

Dee Helmann leans over her screen receiving feed-outs, electronic and voice, from different parts of the ship, each recounting the significant and escalating damage the *Batavia* has sustained. Barrantes marches behind them, demanding clarity or giving instructions. A loud claxon sounds over the top of it all, cementing the vision of hellish chaos.

Director Frank Pelser moves quickly and decisively. He throws himself at Barrantes and twists the captain up and back over one of the consoles screaming:

‘What the fuck did you do? What did you do to my ship?’ into his face.

In his turn, Barrantes forcibly shoves the Director backwards and aside, and he stands upright angrily. ‘I didn’t do anything,’ he snaps.

‘Then what the fuck happened?’ screams Pelser, frothy bits of spit jetting from his mouth.

‘We were struck by a meteoroid. Something that wasn’t picked up by any of the monitoring systems.’

Pelser strikes Barrantes across the face. It’s a weak blow but the intent is clear. In return a look of pure fury and hatred washes over Barrantes’ expression and shockingly he raises his fist to hit Pelser back. At the last moment though, he remembers his place and lowers his punch, resolving instead to simply push Pelser away from him.

‘Touch me again and I’ll break your fucking face. Let me get on with my job. I’ve got a ship to save.’

Deputy Director Jeronimus ‘Jerry’ Cornell only has a couple of floors to descend, but it’s a problematic journey in the near darkness of a shuddering ship. Still, Cornell is methodical. It’s not that he is oblivious to the perilous situation in which the *Batavia* now finds herself, it’s just that he doesn’t react to that peril like other people. He is conscious of the fact that the ship may break up, and as a result that he might die – and he is acutely aware that he does not want to do that just yet. But he does not feel fear, not exactly. He’s not even very anxious. This is somewhat due to his Christian faith which tells him that, if the destruction of the *Batavia* is God’s will, who are we to fight it? But that’s a minor part of the reason. Mostly it’s because he is a psychopath; he does not feel anything except perhaps irritation at the porcine squealing of the crew and passengers blocking his passage.

Jeronimus is clear about his priorities. He knows the emergency drill; it’s clearly laid out in the *Batavia*’s crew manual, and there have been enough of practice runs during the voyage for everyone to know what’s what: head to the assembly point in the atrium at the stern of the ship and wait for further instructions. But unlike the rest of the crew and passengers, Cornell knows that this is largely pointless; the Company is not legally obliged to carry sufficient numbers of escape pods on its vessels, so it doesn’t. If everyone is awake, there’s no way everyone is getting off the ship, even if some of the oxpeckers can be cut free.

Jeronimus also knows that the decisions about the fate of the *Batavia* and its people will not be made in the stern, but rather on the bridge, in the prow, where the senior Company Officers – Pelser, Barrantes, Yang Yip - will be gathered.

Well, that’s what he’d tell anyone who’d asked.

However, the real reason that Jeronimus is heading to the front of the ship is even more basic: it's where they keep the guns, and the gold.

And Jeronimus wants his hands on both.

His first destination is the Security Centre and the armoury within it. He needs to make sure that - however this disaster plays out - he's the one who ends up packing the weaponry.

He finds the door to the Security Centre is ajar; the monitoring and listening station within is empty, and through the frame of the big sound-proofed window, now in glittery glassy pieces on the floor, the computer terminals that once monitored every utterance mouthed or letter typed are now unoccupied, headsets dangling inanely from cords. Empty coffee mugs lie on their sides where they've toppled in the impact, creamy mocha pools of liquid making little antique maps of land formations over paperwork and Formica.

Jeronimus calls out 'Hello? This is Cornell. Chief? Is there anybody here?' He moves slowly and cautiously. Over the sound of the claxon and the accompanying screams of people and metal as it buckles, he enters the armoury. Through the metal grille, all of the firepower on the ship is tantalisingly just out of his reach. He tests the heavy padlock on the gate by shaking it, an utterly ineffectual gesture that only serves to frustrate him further.

Then Security Chief Abel Mabinga enters the suite. Dark-skinned and spectacularly space-muscled, Mabinga is barking orders into a walkie-talkie, and listening to replies garbled by static and background noise. He sees Cornell and holds up

a finger to indicate his attention is elsewhere. Cornell walks towards him and waits until he's finished.

‘Chief,’ he says. ‘Happy to see you made it.’

‘You too, Jerry. What a fucking nightmare.’

‘It is. What can you tell me?’

‘Collision. With a meteoroid. Some catastrophic damage. The outer hull is breached in a couple of places, and we’ve been gutted of several hundred cargo containers.’

‘What about your team? Houphigny?’ asks Cornell. Houphigny is Mabinga’s second, and an altogether different creature; a wiry white guy with terrible teeth, bad skin, a shaved head and an egregious attitude. A tattoo of a snake writhes its way up the veins of his neck. Houphigny is the kind of guy who puts the force into security force.

‘He should be here. I need him to get through to the atrium and institute some crowd control.’

‘I should think so. It’s going to get very messy at the back of the boat.’

‘But what can I help you with?’ says Mabinga, suddenly aware that Cornell’s presence in the Security Suite is not exactly orthodox.

‘I’m making my way up to the bridge. I thought I’d check in to the areas along the way, see if anyone needed anything.’

‘Oh,’ says Mabinga. ‘*Bien sûr.*’ Cornell’s rank, and to be honest, his whiteness, are enough that he doesn’t question further.

‘Anything you need me to relay to the bosses upstairs?’

‘Just what I’ve told you. But can you take ‘em up some radios for me? They’re battery operated, so we can make do until we can get the main systems back on line.’

‘Sure,’ says Cornell. ‘No problem.’

‘Cool. Hang on then. I’ll get some out of the armoury.’

‘Fine,’ says Cornell, and he follows Mabinga to the gate and waits while he unlocks the digital padlock.

And as Mabinga steps through the gate in front of him, Houphigny steps forward out of the shadows, a sour intent playing on his face. Silently, he pulls out a knife and stabs Mabinga deep and hard between the blades of his shoulders.

Mabinga gasps and crumples to the floor.

‘*Merde*,’ says Houphigny, wiping off the blade on Mabinga’s jacket. ‘I’ve been wanting to do that for ages.’

Jeronimus bends over Mabinga’s lifeless body and removes the keys to the armoury from his pocket. ‘Well, then, we’re both happy,’ he says.

The *Batavia* is dying. She continues her slow rotating fall into the grip of Jupiter’s gravity, shedding metal and heat and shipping containers. In moments, she will be invisible from the other side of the planet, low on oxygen, water, heat and food. She is a world that’s breaking, a system revealing itself like wasps in a fig.

The ship rolls, wounded and enormous, toward the swirling intangible surface of a planet with few mercies, the remaining oxpeckers clinging feebly to her back. On the bridge, the officers still wrestle to stabilise the tumbling vessel. In the stern, the atrium fills with bruised and terrified people who have trained all their lives for the wrong disaster. It smells like copper and vomit. When the overhead lights die and the weak, bruised orange of emergency illumination flickers on, the ship gives out a deep animal groan, ungentle, beyond argument.

And finally, there is silence in space.

The atrium at the *Batavia*'s stern is in pandemonium. None of the senior Company officers has appeared on deck, and terrified passengers and crew mill around, wailing and distraught and directionless. The temperature plunges by degrees every minute, and a frigid wind howls through, looking for a way out. Uzo and Jon find Lakshmi in the crowd, and they hug each other with relief and gratitude.

'Thank God,' says Lakshmi. 'But you're bleeding. Are you hurt?'

Uzo dabs a finger to her forehead, where the wound over her eyebrow is starting to congeal. 'Head wound,' she says in explanation. 'It looks worse than it is. How about you?'

'Bruises,' says Lakshmi. 'Nothing's broken.'

'Did Judit get out?' Uzo asks. Judit is Predikant Bastiaans's teenager daughter, the second eldest of his nine children, who's been volunteering at the clinic during the flight. Uzo's grown fond of the girl.

'Yes, she's fine. She's with her family. They all made it. I see you got everyone out of hypersleep?'

'All of my team,' says Jon.

'Marlon and Portia and Luke too,' adds Uzo. The Hayes family were en route to Callisto Moon where they'd invested in a concession selling provisions to the miners and terra-formers working around the Moon base. ('It seemed like a good idea at the time,' Portia had said when Uzo first met her, her warm smile flickering on and off like a shorting bulb.) 'We lost too many though.'

‘Yes, but we saved more, thanks to you,’ says Jon. ‘You should have seen her? The most efficient evacuation in the history of space flight. She was incredible.’

Uzo’s dark cheeks blush. She looks at the handsome Korean in his fatigue pants and his tight black t-shirt and smiles at him. ‘Enough,’ she says. ‘Has anyone seen Pelser? Or Barrantes? Or Jeronimus Cornell?’ she asks.

‘No, not yet,’ says Lakshmi.

‘They’re probably trying to stabilise the ship,’ says Jon.

‘Would be good if they could get word to us,’ says Uzo. ‘It feels like things could get out of control back here.’

Looking around, the survivors in the Atrium are squirming and irritable. Bitterly cold and often soaking wet, they’ve already splintered into pugnacious little groupings dedicated to self-preservation. Friends and families stick together, nationalities, job titles; it doesn’t really matter how the bonds are structured; *like attracts like* at times like these, and these times are nothing like anyone could have imagined. The groups are also aggressively territorial, and they scrap over the limited deck space deck, or blankets, or overturned tables and metal panelling that has come loose from the walls that might be salvageable and put to use as windbreaks or shelters from the cold.

Then Uzo notices a man emerge from the cafeteria carrying two armfuls of individually wrapped ration packs, plump and blandly enticing. A second man thinks this is a very good idea and attempts to snatch some from his hands. The first man’s wife weighs in, fists flailing, protecting her stock of stolen bounty. More men and women

see the exchange and rush into the kitchen and return again through the swing doors carrying foodstuffs or bottles of water.

‘This isn’t good,’ says Uzo.

‘They’re going to clean us out. I hope there’s more food in the stores?’ asks Lakshmi.

‘Did the stores even survive the impact?’ says Jon.

‘No idea.’

And now, the crowd shifts as one, a panicking squall of humanity, roiling like a shoal of sardines silvering out of reach of a shark. The mobbing crowd heads for the kitchen doors, a stampede that thuds inelegantly into the unmoving frames of doorways. Limbs get caught up, splayed, left behind. The bone of an arm cracks loudly as it breaks. People scream, or try to, as they are jammed up against the backs of the people in front of them who cannot move forward either.

From one side, the Brat Pack, a slack, smug, entitled trio company cadets, junior officers with an over-inflated attitude – basically an amalgam of hair gel, testosterone and protein shakes - try to corral the crowd.

‘Fuckin’ stop!’ yells JP. He’s the alpha male; fit, perma-tanned, with piercing blue eyes and a self-confidence that belies his utter lack of experience . ‘Fuckin’ stop, you fucking fucks!’

But without a security team to enforce the Company’s rules, anything done now to constrain the mob has to be much more persuasive; no one is in the mood for reasonable discourse. JP, Max and Steve-o are simply pushed aside.

Jon Lin watches closely, and though he feels *nada* for the Brat Pack's hurt feelings, he springs to action. He calls to the members of his team who survived the coffins and gathers them close. There are maybe thirty of them, men and women, wet, dishevelled and blue with cold. But they are professionals, and they are ready to coalesce and move at his command.

Jon says: 'Civs are looting the cafeteria. Until we can access the stores in the front of the ship, they may be taking our only source of food and water for a while. So: I want you to split in two teams. Wirsan?'

Wirsan Ali: she's Jon Lin's 2 i/c, 1.85m of lithe and muscled Somali woman with a long neck and round cheeks and wide eyes that make her look at once astonished and wary and very, very tired. She rubs her hand over her smooth scalp; Jon recognizes this as her tell of high levels of stress.

'Yes, boss,' she says.

'You take one team inside the kitchens right now and guard the stores. The rest of you with me, we'll create a barrier in front of the cafeteria's doors. Let no-one in. Let nothing else be removed. Not even for the kids. Clear?'

'Hoo-ah.'

'Move out.'

The soldiers immediately split and move off, pushing their way, hand to hand, towards the kitchens. Passengers and crew are shoved aside, forcibly and indiscriminately; there are a few indignant *heys!* and raised voices, but the colonial

marines successfully work through the crowd and spread a human barrier in front of the cafeteria doors.

‘You’d better say something,’ says Lakshmi to Uzo.

‘Me? Why me?’

‘You’re the senior officer on deck. They should listen to you.’

‘They won’t.’

‘They will. They like you.’

‘That’s debatable.’

‘What are our other choices?’

Uzo nods, albeit unenthusiastically, and makes a move towards the stage area. She climbs as high as she can so everyone can see her.

‘Hello, hey! Can you be quiet a minute?’ she says trying to raise her voice over the chaos. ‘Hello, hey!’

She tries waving her hands above her head to gain attention, but it doesn’t really make a difference.

‘Shut the fuck up, people!’ yells Jon Lin, leaping onto the stage by her side. ‘Just shut the fuck up for one single solitary fucking moment and let the Doc speak.’

And miraculously, the crowd does indeed settle and turn towards Uzo with something approaching respect.

‘Hey there. Hi. Most of you know me. I’m Dr. Igwe. I’m the Chief Medical Officer – or at least I have been since we lost Dr. Ivanova. I ask you to try and stay calm please? Thanks. So just bear with us a second.’

‘What’s happening?’ shouts a voice from the crowd.

‘What the fuck happened?’ yells another.

‘What the fuck is going on?’ Another.

The patience of the crowd disintegrates and erupts into a collective bellow of rage and confusion and Uzo has to fight to be heard again.

‘Wait,’ she shouts, finding strength in her voice. ‘Just wait a second. Wait!’

And strangely again, the crowd settles.

‘I don’t know what happened. I don’t know any more than you do at this point. It appears that we were involved in some kind of collision. We struck or were struck by something. But I don’t know yet.’

A few yowls of anger rise from the crowd.

‘Hey,’ says Jon Lin jabbing a finger at the perpetrators. ‘If you hadn’t noticed, the Doc is in the same boat as all of us here, so shut your mouth, ok?’

Uzo grimaces out something that passes for a smile. ‘Right. So far it looks we’ve got no contact between us here the rear of the ship and the officers at the prow. The upper corridor to the Bridge is blocked, but I know some of you got here through the lower corridor, so the route may still be passable?’

‘It’s not,’ shouts a man from the crowd. ‘The second explosion blocked it.’

‘OK.’ Her voice takes on a measure of practicality. ‘Well, that means the central corridor is our only access point. The manual says we have to wait here for the folks at the prow to get news back to us. So, all we can really do is hunker down and wait....’ again the voices rise and she is forced to speak loudly again: ‘Wait here, *calmly*, until we get word from Director Pelser.’

‘When will we abandon ship?’ shouts a woman clutching a small child. The child’s thin blonde hair is stuck to its head with dried hypersleep gel.

‘So far there’s been no command to evacuate.’

‘That might mean we’re good?’ says a man, optimistically.

‘That might mean we’re fucked,’ says another, and the crowd murmurs again treacherously.

‘Maybe,’ says Uzo using her hands to dampen down the restlessness. ‘That may be. But what we can’t be doing, ok, is raiding the cafeteria? We don’t know how long we’re going to be here, so that may be the only food and water we’re going to have in a while. It would be really stupid to survive the crash only to die of hunger, so let’s try to be sensible, right?’

The icy, icy wind scuttles through the atrium again. The temperature plummets further, and a thin crack appears in the elegant glass domed roof. The crowd looks up, gasping, barely under control.

‘OK, so let’s keep calm everyone, please. We’re following the manual. There’s nothing else for us to do until we hear from the Bridge, so everyone should just keep still and keep warm. You may as well try and make yourselves comfortable because this

may be a really uncomfortable night. And while you're settling down, we're going to come around and make a list of who we've got here, and see if any of you need medical assistance, get those of you in need of help down to the sick bay. Then we can start making some proper plans.'

There's even a little flutter of applause as Jon helps her down from the stage. They cross the crowd back to Lakshmi. Judit joins them, and the Medic Bruwer also makes his way towards them, stepping gingerly through the people spreading out slowly across the atrium floor.

Uzo greets them with relief. 'Thank God you're ok. What about McCormack?'

Bruwer shakes his head. 'Didn't make it.'

'Shit,' says Uzo. 'Ok,' she sighs, gathering her thoughts and her resolve. 'Let's triage this. Three levels. Red, Yellow, Green – red for those who're going to die, orange if they need care, and green for those who've got minor cuts and bruises. Let's work out where we are in terms of numbers. When we've got an idea about what's what and who's who, Jon, can we go back down to the Medical Centre and get some drugs?'

'Thought you'd never ask,' he says.

On the Bridge, Pelser calls his team to gather. 'What do we have?' he says.

Chief Engineer Bob Brydon takes the lead. He is one of those gruff, no-nonsense Yorkshiremen who were once the foot-soldiers and bureaucrats of the British Empire. There is no Empire now, of course, nor even a very united Kingdom, which is why he finds himself in space. Previously he was responsible for the physical operation of the ship, including the maintenance and management of its operating systems and the immediate supervision of the crew that runs it. He knows the craft better than anyone, and he knows the situation is perilous. He clears his throat, not used to speaking in public.

'At 4.53am, the *Batavia* suffered a near-fatal impact from an uncharted meteoroid. The hull is damaged in at least four places and the top of the spine is completely sawn through. But in spite of that, the old girl's integrity is holding up... Just... I can't say for how long at this point, but... small mercies where we find them. The Central Server is in emergency mode and all onboard systems are operating below par. Life support is currently around 30%, oxygen is about the same, and the interior temperature is minus nine - that's Fahrenheit - and falling.'

'What about the cargo?' asks Pelser.

Priorities.

'A quick visual suggests we've lost a third of the containers. There's no telling whether more are damaged until we get the electronic monitors running. I've sent out some tech drones for a clearer look. At the moment though, they're stable.'

‘Good,’ says Jeronimus. ‘The oxpeckers?’

‘The MV *Matterhorn* is gone, completely. She was destroyed in the initial impact. The soldiers were in hypersleep on the *Batavia*, but all their weaponry equipment, and supplies are lost.

‘The PV *San Angelo* was clipped by shrapnel but it’s still solid. Its thrusters were damaged so it can tag along for the ride but can’t do much more than that. The bulk of the passengers were in *Batavia*’s cryosleep, so we’ve no reports about casualties at this time.’

‘Very good,’ says Pelser, in a tone that clearly states it probably isn’t.

‘The AV *Monsanto* was de-coupled and thrown about like a child’s toy. We have no contact with anyone on board and from what we can see from our observation decks, the greenhouses have been destroyed. Depending on the state of it, we may need to cut it loose. She had twenty farmers and three crew on board. No news on their fate yet, but the way the ship was hit, I’d say it’s unlikely there are survivors.’

‘The RV *Joe* was also hit by debris but seems to have survived. I’m waiting for a hard copy report on the research chemicals it was carrying. Depending on how toxic, we’ll see if we can get technicians in there.’

‘The *Caliban*, the *Pioneer*, and the *St. Barbara* are all gone. The *Virgin Galactic* shuttle is still intact. Can’t get enough diagnostics done to check its vitals, but it seems solid from an eyes-on perspective. So, all in all, the damage is significant, but it clearly could’ve been much, much worse.’

‘And what’s the prognosis on regaining power? The engines? Mr. Yang?’

Yang Yip is infamous for his irascibility and ill-temper, and there's a permanent scowl across his anger-creased forehead. He smokes almost without cessation, and the mucus he yocks from his nicotine-stained mouth is grey and quivering like it's something alive but dead, all at the same time. Perhaps it's understandable; once an acclaimed astro-physicist nominated for a Nobel Prize, he was jailed for twenty years for anti-social web searches. His sentence was to labour on the construction of massive space rockets in a gulag in Manchuria, and when the engines were complete and had been fitted into belly of the *Batavia*, to work out the rest of his sentence providing maintenance in space.

'No chance,' says Yang. 'Dead-dead.'

'But you'll try?' asks Pelser, more of a command.

Yang shrugs and oiks some more mouth-snot.

Chief Engineer Brydon intervenes. 'What we're looking at now is securing the basics: Integrity, Shelter, Food and Water. The very first task is to secure the integrity of the hull, try and balance the pressure so we can get the life support systems back online. Once we've done that, we can start to get the temperature back up to somewhere at least bearable. To stabilise, we'd need to get a team outside to seal up any breaches. We don't have the manpower or probably even the tools to do that though. Engineering was heavily affected when the turbine exploded. So, our best bet for now is to try to seal off any affected compartments from the inside. I've got a team working on that as we speak.

'Beyond stabilisation though, our first problem is water. Normally the *Batavia* recycles it from around the ship - from the air, as fuel cell by-products, waste from food prep and the showers and toilets. But now we have two issues.' The Chief marks the

issues with his fingers. 'One: the C.O.R was damaged in the collision...that's the reactor for the last stage of the purification.'

'Meaning we can't generate clean water?'

'Right. Not 100% clean and drinkable at any rate.'

'That sounds bad enough. What's problem two?'

'Two,' says Brydon, 'is that the impact also damaged two of our four clean water cisterns. One's been drained entirely, the other has a leak that I've got a team trying to fix. So, we've got nowhere to store clean water, even if we had it.'

'Bottom line?'

'Bottom line is that until I can get the reactor back online, we don't have enough water on the *Batavia* to last us more than a couple of days.'

'Right,' says Pelser, white-knuckling the table top. 'What about the oxpeckers? Do any of them have their own supply?'

'The *Monsanto* had its own supply. It's grey water, but as soon as we can reattach it to the *Batavia*, we will at least have another option. We'll check on the others, but it's unlikely.'

'Noted. And food?'

'If we can secure water, the lack of food is potentially our biggest problem of all. Before the crash the *Batavia* was carrying enough food for the hundred or so people travelling wide awake – and we had six weeks of rations left, give or take. If the hypersleep coffins were evacuated, that'd mean we have another three hundred odd people to feed. And we're gonna be out here a lot longer than six weeks.'

Pelser looks at him blankly for a moment. Then he shakes himself and says: 'Do we know if the hypersleep chambers were actually emptied?'

'We don't, sir. It's policy that they should be, but we haven't had any word from the back of the ship to know if it happened.'

'Well, for god's sake. Deputy Director Cornell, take a handful of men and report back to me on the status.'

Cornell reaches the stern and finds the survivors there assailed by brutal conditions; cold, wet and miserable, they huddle together in the semi-darkness. With the Central Server offline, the ship can run only limited programmes, and when the frigid cold passes through the torn insulation membranes cladding the ship's exterior, it radiates dangerously into the body of the craft. Differences in on-board pressure move that cold air through the ship at gale force, whipping it around tired, damp and exhausted bodies in a manner that is perilous to survival. It's also difficult to breathe, since the on-board atmosphere has been placed on low-power outputs; the diminished oxygen in the system competes with the acrid smoke of electrical fires and chemical spillages that can no longer be effectively ventilated. All the blankets and bedding from the dormitories have been dumped in the atrium, but they offer the survivors little comfort. The food and water in the cafeteria have been used up almost in its entirety. The toilets have also backed up; raw effluent seeps malevolently under the floor grating via broken piping. The stench is unbearable.

In spite of their fear and discomfort, the survivors greet Deputy Director Cornell with cheers and not a little relief: the Company may operate like a police state, but it's able to do so because of the continued willingness of passengers and employees alike to submit to the Company's total authority. Cornell represents that authority. People come forward obsequiously and shake his hand. Someone even pushes a baby into his arms; he holds the thing awkwardly before he remembers he is supposed to kiss it on its wrinkly little forehead. The child's mother virtually curtsies when he hands back the yowling brat.

But they're not entirely compliant.

'How long til we get the power back on?' shouts someone.

'We're freezing. Can't you do something?'

'We can't continue like this!'

'We need some food!'

Jeronimus holds up his hands again to quieten them. 'Listen,' he says. 'Ladies! Gentlemen! We don't have all the answers yet. But I *promise* you we're working on them. We've got teams trying to seal up breaches in the hull, so we'll soon be airtight. Chief Brydon is trying to reboot the Server as we speak. With any luck, we'll have the lights on and the temperature back up before you know it.'

Murmurs rumble through the crowd but they do dissipate.

'Where's Dr. Igwe?' asks Cornell.

'In Medical.'

Jeronimus heads in that direction.

When he gets to the medical suite, Cornell is halted by the smell - a heady mix of chemical antiseptic, coppery blood, and acrid smoke from a conduit that's still smouldering in the corner. There's another odour too, deeper, richer, more fetid: the stench of death. In the half-light of the emergency strobes, he sees tens of bodies lying along the bulkhead, shrouded in canvas but unmistakable, nonetheless. One of the shrouds shifts as trapped air escapes. Cornell pulls his collar up over his nose, but it does little good. The floor is sticky with God knows what.

Inside the Medical Suite, Uzo is consumed with saving a Company employee who has a javelin of raw steel passing clear through his torso. The man is curled on his side, white with pain and slick with sweat and body fluids. The wound is ragged, blackening, and his breathing is shallow and rasping, a death rattle building at the top of his failing lungs. Lakshmi tries to hold him still. Judit Bastiaans mops away bile and torn flesh with cotton cloth, throwing the sodden pads to the floor as they turn pink and wet and putrid.

'Doc,' says Cornell. 'Lakshmi.'

'Just a second Jerry,' says Uzo, and then to the others: 'We're losing him. Bruwer, are you ready?'

Bruwer the Medic moves quickly around the gurney, takes a grip on the metal rod and braces his feet, ready to tug.

'On my count, ready?' says Uzo. 'Three, two, one....'

Bruwer tugs on the pole. But it's smooth and slick with blood and he loses grip.

'Jerry? Some help?' Uzo appeals, with urgency.

Cornell waits a beat.

'Jerry?'

He moves and joins Bruwer.

‘Again, three, two, one...’

And this time the metal slips through, clattering out the their hands onto the floor.

Cornell speaks into the hand-held radio: ‘The coffins were cleared. 274 survivors this side, over.’

‘274, confirmed, over’ says Pelser at the other end of the handset.

‘273,’ says Lakshmi solemnly, pulling a cloth over the head of the pierced man on the operating table.

On the bridge, Pelser has immediately grasped the immensity of the problem. ‘And about 60 this end. So around 330 in total.’ he calculates out loud. ‘Allowing for half a kilogram of food per person per day... we had 102 people awake before the crash, 6 more weeks to fly, so 42 days. Assuming that the stores all survived – we were carrying... say, 2200kgs of food. But if there are 330 people awake, and we need to last 12 weeks not six, that’s...’

‘...We’d need 13,680kgs of food. Which means we have enough food for all the survivors for about a week,’ says Uzo clearly.

‘Pelsers, out.’ Pelser puts down the radio and switches it off. ‘Back to work,’ he says to his officers. ‘Captain Barrantes, with me please. You too, Mr. Fields.’

He clicks his fingers, and the two men follow into the corridor.

It's become clear to Pelser that the *Batavia* has been irreparably damaged; unable to restart the nuclear turbines or activate enough onboard generators to maintain all the life support systems, she is largely dead-in-the-water – low on energy, low on heat, low on water. She'll likely float helplessly towards Jupiter, where the planet's immense gravity awaits her. If she's trapped there, the *Batavia* faces a violent, destructive, and end; Jupiter's not called the '*vacuum cleaner of the solar system*' for nothing – her power draws in and destroys comets, asteroids, and other stray materials. If the *Batavia* get's caught in Jupiter's grip, she'll face tidal shredding at the Roche Limit, but at least that would be quick. Alternatively, pressure and temperature will both increase exponentially, creating conditions equivalent to being at the bottom of a deep ocean, but at temperatures hotter than the sun's surface. Anything left of the *Batavia* then would be simply vaporised. Only if they are very, very lucky, and luck has not been on the *Batavia*'s side thus far, she may get trapped in a stable orbit and simply sit helplessly as she waited for rescue - or for destruction, whichever comes first. The groans and spasms of the hull suggest the latter may be more likely. Jupiter may crush the ship's wounded carcass ever before anyone knows they're missing.

Pelser spells it out: 'Our engines are non-responsive, and our life support systems are failing. We're floating powerless on the edge of Jupiter's gravitational pull and we can't make any kind of contact with the Company, or anyone in the outside world. We can't call for help. And we can't flag down a passing ship – we are literally quadrants away from the normal shipping lanes. Noone knows where we are. Noone knows our status. Noone is coming. So, our options are very, very limited. Agreed so far?

The two subordinates nod.

‘And we simply don’t have enough food or water for everyone on board? So, if we just sit still, we will all starve. But...’

and here it comes:

‘The Virgin Galactic shuttle is undamaged and likely operational. I will take it, crew it with the best sailors we have, and make an emergency run to Io Moon. It’s about, what? - six weeks at full power from our last recorded location? Without the *Batavia*’s thrust it may take a bit longer.’

‘It’s not built for that kind of journey,’ says Sally the worrier.

‘We don’t have a choice.’

‘And then?’ says Barrantes.

‘And then hopefully they’ll have a rescue vessel in port in that we can return with to save the gold.’

‘You mean the survivors?’ asks Fields.

‘No, I mean the gold,’ replies Pelser as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

The Company has sent gold bullion in its outbound fleets since the catastrophic cryptocurrency hacks of the 2070’s. The *Batavia* is carrying forty-seven billion in New Yuan-Dollars in a discreet strongroom suspended within the hull, a sealed capsule of dense alloy and layered, seamless composites, walls ribbed with ablative plating and honeycombed shock absorbers. It’s engineered so that if the rest of the vessel burns to dust, the strongroom and its contents will endure as a single, perfect nodule, adrift and inviolate.

‘The gold will be safe until we can bring a team to evacuate it,’ says Pelser. ‘God willing, we’ll be back within twelve weeks, fourteen at the most.’

‘You’re abandoning ship?’ says Barrantes.

‘I’m not abandoning anything,’ says Pelser, indignantly. ‘I’m going for help. Otherwise, we’re just waiting here for the *Batavia* to collapse under the pressure, and then we’ll all die for nothing.’

Barrantes thinks about it for a moment. ‘If you’re leaving, I am coming with you.’

Pelser looks at him.

‘You said you need the best sailors you can get,’ says Barrantes. ‘I am the best.’

‘Whatever,’ says Pelser.

‘I’m bringing Henrietta,’ he says.

Pelser sneers at him. ‘Whatever. Just get moving.’

Barrantes runs to find his girlfriend.

Sally Fields asks: ‘Should we notify the people in the stern?’

Pelser looks at him, surprised. ‘Whatever for?’ he says.

Cornell is passing back through the Atrium - ‘*God Bless you, sir!*’ ‘*Thank you, sir!*’ echoing in his ears - when the *Virgin Galactic* Shuttle passes up and out over the picture windows of the atrium. Fully functioning and brightly lit, the shuttle looks like a mirage, a dream, a fiery metallic chariot of glorious angels against the dark night sky.

It also looks like it is leaving.

The un-missable sight of the shuttle passing overhead rouses many of the passengers and crew huddled in the atrium. Men and women stand slowly, watching the

small craft float by, all serene and elegant and silent. And then they notice it fire up its engines and turn slowly away from the side of the *Batavia*.

‘What’s going on?’ the murmuring begins.

‘What’s happening?’

‘What are they doing?’

‘Where are they going?’

And eventually, the question that weighs increasingly on people’s minds: ‘What will become of us?’

It’s safe to say that no-one quite has an answer.

When the people in the Atrium suddenly grasp that the *Virgin Galactic* shuttle has disembarked and they have been abandoned on a failing ship, the mood changes rapidly. Bawls of anger and frustration erupt, and in violation of the Company’s strict regulations, the survivors charge through the central corridor in the direction of the prow. Men and women, some carrying their children, flow through the narrow space, roiling with fear and fury. Their purpose in doing so is largely unclear: it’s not as if they are going to be in time to stop the disembarkation, that ship has literally sailed. Perhaps they merely need to see for themselves just how forsaken they all actually are?

And they are.

As the mob reaches the shuttle’s former dock, they scramble over the boxes of food and crates of water that could not be fitted on board the evacuation craft, as well as the cases of trade goods and piles of personal belongings that had had to be abandoned in the rushed departure. With nothing else to satiate their fury, they tear into

the it and carry it off – though someone with clearer understanding of the peril of the situation stands at the hatch door crying, thumping it slowly, with both fists.

A second group head in a different direction and reach the Director's private suite and the first-class cabins, thundering through the hallowed doorways without a thought. The Director's personal possessions are ransacked, and men reappear wearing Pelser's finest clothes, and passing out the captain's finest cigars. Bolts of Lakshmi's cerise and peacock green and shocking pink sari cloth emerge from her cabin wrapped around male bodies who run through the corridors like it's a toga party somewhere decadent. Someone is wearing her emerald drop earrings. Someone else is wearing Mevrouw Predikant's beige knickers on his head like a hat and her bra between his legs as a jockstrap. Someone is weeping. Someone else has emptied the bar in the Officer's Mess and has essentially killed himself with alcohol poisoning, though he won't know it for a good few hours yet.

Eventually, Houphigny's SWAT team manages to wheel out the R.A.P.T.O.R – the Resonant Adaptive Pulse Targeting & Oscillation Ray – and points it towards the mob. He engages the tech, dialling the power to lethal. When he compresses the trigger, there's no noticeable discharge or recoil, only a strange metallic hum, the air shimmering like a heat mirage.

The effects of the microwave gun are instantaneous.

A man with wild grey hair and a limp is stopped in his tracks. He drops to his knees in shock as the microwave cuts through him and melts his insides, falling forward onto his face without a sound. Next, the R.A.P.T.O.R is turned towards a woman who almost backflips given the power of the 300mw charge that hits her. She clutches at the wasp's

nest buzzing inside her skull, and her eyeballs bleed and her skin chars as her internal organs burn and melt. A terrified teenager turns and flees in the opposite direction, but the microwave gun follows him too, and he flies forward, arms out like a duck clipped by a hunter's shot, his chest ballooning grotesquely, steam hissing from his pores as his body fluids boil.

Point made, Houphigny reduces the charge and sends short, more controlled bursts of microwave into the bodies of the mob, heating skin to levels that are too hot and too uncomfortable to bear, rounding them up and pushing them back like so many sheeple. Within minutes, the *Batavia* is back under a semblance of order and the exhausted survivors have skulked back in the stern, nursing their third degree burns under piles of filthy blankets.

After the disturbance has been quelled, Cornell reviews Pelser's hastily written note in the privacy of the Director private boardroom. Detritus from the riot is still scattered about him, and an open whiskey bottle drips onto the floor. But Cornell's attention is only for the note, which tells him that Pelser, Barrantes, and some thirty of the crew's top sailors have decided to race ahead to Io Moon to get help. The Director will return with a rescue vessel to remove the survivors and the gold as soon as possible.

The depth of rage that comes to Jeronimus Cornell as he reads this is a bit of a surprise to him. He even puts his hands out in front of him and silently marvels at the fact that they are shaking.

They fucking left, he yells to himself. *They. Fucking. Left.*

He seriously wants to harm things.

Yet at the same time, Jerry Cornell checks himself: heightened emotions are things that control other, lesser people. So, he quickly swallows back his anger, and his expression settles back into its habitually cool and collected mask.

Because.

Because.

And this is important...

Because the note, officially, unassailably, in writing, and on Company letterhead, formally gives command of the *Batavia*, its oxpeckers and cargo, its passengers and crew - and its unimaginable horde of gold - to Jerry Cornell. He has been made undisputed master of the ship and 296 survivors, personally endowed with all of the power and authority the Vickers Olburg Company can muster. When he says jump, everyone will jump.

And he alone will decide how high.

In spite of the damage to the ship and its personnel, in the next hours, the *Batavia* is pulled back from the brink. She's still shaky as hell, but a couple of generators are reactivated, lifting the survivors out of darkness into a perpetual twilight. And as the breaches in the hull are soldered shut, the pressure stabilises, and the worst of the winds drop away. An HVAC technician en route to the new company base in the Cornelia crater on Vesta turned out to be a specialist in air turbines - the kind they parachute in to build viable habitats on terraforming projects - and she'd frankensteined together enough machinery to double the amount of O₂ circulating in the stern while filtering out the very worst of the toxins from airducts. The food and medicine stores in the prow have all been secured, and a careful inventory is being made that will eke out the supplies for as many days and for as many people as possible.

The water situation though is a bigger challenge, and Mayken Cardoza, the deputy Deck Chief, has volunteered to reconnoitre the incapacitated *Montsanto* to determine whether any of the farm ship's water tanks have survived the impact. Mayken's astrosuit is heavily insulated and she's already perspiring as the team strap and zip and velcro her into it.

'Sorry,' says Uzo, as she sticks the cold pad of a systems' monitor under Mayken's undershirt and onto her damp and clammy breast. Mayken flashes a distressed smile. Uzo flicks a switch on the monitor, and it beeps into life, Mayken's vital signs digitally skipping across the screen.

Bob Brydon hands Mayken the headpiece with the microphone and video link. This also connects back to a screen; Mayken's point of view is relayed in grainy, time-coded black-and-white.

'Ready?' says the Chief

'As I'm ever going to be,' says Mayken. This isn't her first spacewalk, so the risk is not entirely new to her, but it is by far the most dangerous she's even undertaken. 'Let's do this,' she says simply.

She lifts the heavy helmet and pulls it over her head. Brydon and Uzo seal the collar, check her gloves, give her one final pat down. She flips her visor closed, and her face disappears behind the oily plastic.

Testing, testing comes over the microphone.

'We can hear you clearly. Video is clear. Body monitors 5-5-5. You're good to go. God speed. Over.'

'Thanks,' says Mayken, and she lumbers inelegantly into the airlock, boots heavy, suit rigid. Someone pushes the door closed and it seals the young woman inside. The light above the portal switches from safe green to stand-by orange.

Through the small viewing window, and relayed to their screens by a pair of go-pros hovering just inside the door, the team watch as Mayken climbs slowly into the powerpack and straps herself in. Her breathing is loud in the mouthpiece.

'Here goes,' she says.

'OK, Mayken,' says Brydon. 'Let's do this on my count.'

'Fine by me,' she says.

'So: places everybody. And we'll go on ten, nine, eight, seven....'

Uzo finds she's holding her breath.

‘...Sixer, fiver, four, three, two, one.....’ and he punches the button that shoots open the external airlock door. Mayken and the drones are whipped out of the portal at impossible speed. She’s thrown around like a weak-legged puppet on a very long string. The connecting cable races out behind her to its full length; Mayken is snapped back viciously.

‘Fuck,’ she exclaims as the breath is knocked out of her and she’s sent spinning hopelessly.

‘OK, Mayken, love,’ says Brydon. ‘Try to stabilize yourself now.’

There’s nothing from Mayken except a spike of her heart rate and sounds of exertion. The mini-drones dart around her, offering a glimpse of her private pandemonium.

‘Mayken? Can you hear me? Mayken? Cardoza? Come in please?’

But Mayken’s tumbling like a Russian acrobat; the images from her helmet cam spin nauseatingly, the aligned drones jumping about like wasps trying to avoid a swatting.

‘Mayken?’ says Brydon again. ‘Can you hear me? Try to stabilize yourself now, over.’

‘That’s what I’m fucking trying to do, Bob,’ says Mayken drily, and the tension in the observation deck is punctured.

Brydon laughs. ‘Good to hear it,’ he says. ‘I thought maybe you were having yourself a nice little snooze there.’

‘Fuck you, Bob. Next time, you can do it yourself.’

Mayken activates her right thruster, which gives her some control over her spin and within a few seconds she’s upright and entirely in control of her motion.

‘Good girl,’ says Brydon.

‘Go fuck yourself, Bob,’ says Mayken pleasantly.

‘Right you are, Mayken,’ he replies, equally equitable. ‘Are you ready to unhook?’

‘Sure am,’ says Mayken. ‘Detaching from support cable in 3, 2, 1....’

She unlocks the carabinier and the cable floats off behind her like a discarded umbilical that re-winds itself into the heart of the *Batavia*.

Mayken glides elegantly across the open space.

‘You’re on your own now.’

‘No shit, Bob,’ says Mayken.

‘Right. If you look to your right, the drones are pointing out the hatch. The *Monsanto* is about five hundred meters above you. Watch as the hull swings.’

‘Yup, I see it.’

‘It’s attached to the *Batavia* but only by some heavy cabling. Looks like some angry bits of metal there, so don’t tear your suit.’

Cardoza snorts dismissively. But above her she sees a huge metallic gash in the stern of the *Monsanto* that gapes like the toothy mouth of a carnivorous fish, the nightmare kind from the lightless depths; her helmet-cam streams the footage back to the *Batavia*.

‘Our scans suggest that it’s only the outer hull that’s damaged,’ says Brydon over the mic. ‘The inner hull is still intact. The life support systems appear to be off but there’s no clear reason why they should be. The stability system is definitely fucked though, so the floor’s dicking about like a barrel over Niagara. You’re going to need to watch yourself. Use your magnetic boots.’

‘Roger that.’

Mayken uses her jetpack to manoeuvre to the outside of the *Monsanto*’s hatch.

‘Right, attach your harness to the frame there.’

‘Bob, I’m not a complete cretin. Just give me the access code so I can get inside.’

‘Eh up, lass,’ he says grinning. ‘The entry code for the hatch is, ready? - 7634892.’

Mayken punches in the number with her big-fingered gloves and the hatch slides silently open. She unhooks the carabiner and reattaches it to the inside of the pressure lock. Then she presses another button, and the exterior hatch closes behind her. There’s a suck of air pressure, and the room stabilizes.

‘Entry code for the inner door.’

‘Hang on,’ she says, taking off her thick outer glove.

‘5429177.’

The inner door opens and Mayken steps into the darkened interior of the farm ship. She activates the magnets on her boots and secures herself to the floor.

How to feed people in space was one of the earliest questions tackled by NASA, CNSA and Roscosmos, the Indians, the Europeans, the corporations. The very future of interplanetary exploration ultimately depended on the ability of spaceships to generate their own nutrition during their long journeys. There were challenges: of gravity and irrigation, UV light-emitting diodes, soil consistency, air flow, ecological interplay, efficient use of floorspace, nutrient delivery mechanisms, water recycling, even how to deal with the unwanted heat of light bulbs. But by 2079, the systems have radically improved and ships like the AV *Monsanto LXVII* have proliferated in space.

The farm ship is – or at least it *was* – a closed-system silo. It produced fresh greens, for human consumption and to feed the Giant Flemish Rabbit stock that

provided most of the meat for the *Batavia*'s stateroom. Leafy offcuts also fed huge glass cases full of genetically modified, flightless grasshoppers and soldier flies that made up the bulk of the protein consumed by passengers and lower ranking crew. Vegetable waste, spinach roots, and animal and insect poop, was in turn eaten by other insects, where it was converted into a rich, loamy mulch that fertilized the spinach and other vegetables. And thus the cycle began again. While the systems were mostly automated, the best and most adaptable tools available in space were still human beings, and around 20 indentured human farmers were attached to the farm ship.

The *Monsanto* is in darkness now, except for emergency strips flickering along the corridors, and a white emergency strobe light that pulses across the damaged floor grill. Mayken peers into the fractured glass of greenhouses, and sees plants shredded, soil disrupted and muddy water pooling on the floors and floating in weak gravity where it's leaked out of broken pipes and aquaculture chambers. Dead rabbits, hairless as gargoyles, bob around weightlessly in Perspex cages. She also sees one of the Mexican farm hands floating face-down, unmoving. He's next to a massive lighting array that's been casually picked up and tossed across the hall by the force of the collision. 'Oh,' she says.

'Keep calm, Mayks,' says Brydon – although her heart rate is remaining pretty constant. 'Keep going.'

The drones flit ahead like honey-guide birds.

'Looks like the pipes into field zones one, two and three are all bust,' she says. 'There's a lot of water on the floors and in the air, I'm guessin' some fairly catastrophic damage to the system. Hang on, let's have a look in here.' She peers into the window of another greenhouse. 'Nope,' she says. 'Same story.'

‘The main reservoirs are on the floor above you,’ says Brydon.

With the artificial gravity systems damaged, Mayken proceeds carefully, taking methodical steps and holding onto the buckling walls in order to provide a semblance of balance. The drones buzz around her head.

‘Can’t you keep those fuckin’ things away from my face?’ she says. ‘I’m going to smack one in a minute, and it won’t be pretty.’

The cameras zip a little higher and out of her reach.

She grumphs a thank you and makes her way up a damaged stairwell into the next level of greenhouses and storerooms. Here, the damage to the *Monsanto* is extensive, the muddy sludge now covers everything like the aftermath of a dam burst. A cracked pipe is dripping water, and the droplets fall lazily in the low gravity air. Her eye is drawn to the glass terrariums of the wingless grasshoppers, where thousands of tiny flightless gargoyles flit and stridulate vainly against the stumps of their wings.

But then she passes into a section at the back and sees six large mobile watering containers against the far wall. Three of them have toppled off their hydraulic moving systems and lay on the floor like the fallen columns of Grecian temples. They won’t be moved now, at least not by her. Two of the other containers are still upright but they have been punctured and damaged by flying debris; a massive chunk of metal in the shape of a satellite dish is half buried into the side of one, and the freezing water from both of them leaks sluggishly into the overturned soil. The final one though, as she examines it manually, is intact. She taps the carcass with a knuckle, and it sounds and feels – as far as she can tell in her space suit – like it’s full.

The sticker on the side announces: ‘Potable Water.’

She opens the spigot on the side and fresh, clean drinking water sputters out.

Jeronimus Cornell presents this bounty to the huddled masses at the back of the boat himself. It's not that he cares for the people particularly, not one way nor another, but he does like the grateful adoration. He pulls a luxurious jacket with a black mink collar – a coat he's commandeered from Pelser's abandoned wardrobe - tight around him and climbs onto the atrium stage.

'Ladies,' he says with a grandiose, *we're-all-in-this-together* smile on his face. 'Gentlemen. As you've gathered, we ran into a little problem. A little problem like a meteoroid.'

'You said that right!' shouts someone in the crowd, but good naturedly.

'Not so little,' shouts someone else, and there's a ripple of laughter.

'The good news is, we're still here. Right? Right?' This is met with some positive assents. 'And, Director Pelser....' The crowd actually boos. 'Director Pelser went to get help.'

'He left us!'

'He fucking well left us!'

'He's a fucking coward!'

'No, no, no,' says Jeronimus redirecting the crowd. 'That's not what happened. He couldn't just sit here, don't you think? With the radio communications down, he had to go for help, right?' Right?

He pauses and the crowd which mills sullenly.

‘So, if we play our cards right, we’ve just got to keep ourselves alive until he comes back with a rescue ship.’

‘When will that be?’ someone shouts.

‘How long are we gonna be here?’ shouts another.

‘I don’t know exactly,’ says Cornell, flapping his hands up and down to shush them. ‘A lot depends on where Jupiter is in its elliptical orbit. We’re working on that.’

The crowd mumbles, somewhat unconvinced.

‘Please, I just ask for a little more patience. And as proof of our intent to make your stay as comfortable as possible, Ladies and Gentlemen, I offer you the hero of the hour.’ Jeronimus throws open an arm in the direction of the entrance, and the crowd turns round to look where he’s pointing. ‘Fresh back from the space-walk of the century, I give you Deputy Deck Chief, Mayken Cardoza. And what does she have with her? A really rather *huge* tank of fresh water.’

Mayken guides the water tank into the atrium on its hover-cart. If the tank is as full as it feels, it could be carrying at least twenty thousand litres of liquid. The crowd, who haven’t had an awful lot to be cheerful about since the collision, rightfully see this as a very small victory against their ill-fate, and perhaps an indication that their situation may be about to change for the better. Cheers and applause fill the thin, cold air. Even in their exhausted state, the crowd lifts Mayken onto their shoulders and carries her around the room in embarrassed triumph. She laughs and her fringe falls out of her ponytail and bobs in her eyes. They do the same with Jerry Cornell, who doesn’t like

being touched at all, but he knows the part he's playing, so he allows himself to be schlepped around like a big bag of butternut.

When the celebration finally peters out, Jeronimus retakes his position on the podium.

'Thank you, thank you,' he says politely. He brushes himself down. 'So now, for more practical measures. As you know, with Director Pelser gone from the ship, I am the acting Director of the *Batavia* and the Company's authority rests solely with me. We're going to have to institute rationing of food and water. But I promise you, I *promise* you, I will be do everything in my power to get you safely off this wreck.'

Trustingly, this is met with cheers and a fluttering of applause.

Jeronims smiles. Because Jeronimus Cornell has in fact already decided that some 200 people on the stricken *Batavia* need to die.