

The Breach

The red light flared. It cracked the darkness a split second before the alarm above the door sounded. For a moment Brad thought that it was just a bad dream. But then he felt a tremor, and a heartbeat later he heard the first explosion.

“Son of a...” Brad cursed as he rolled awkwardly off the cot.

The ground beneath him shook wildly and he nearly fell flat on his face, but just managed to save his balance. The red light above the door flashed again, only this time it flickered as the fluorescent lights cut out. All was dark for several moments, until the emergency lights *popped* loudly and started to glow.

“Brad...212,” his radio crackled and chirped from the table next to his cot.

He grabbed the radio just as another tremor shook the ground, this one more violent than the last. Oft-read magazines and knick-knacks fell from the overhead compartments and clattered to the ground. “Go ahead, 212.”

“We’re reading a detonation on o2 separator module, port side,” the emergency dispatcher rattled off quickly.

“Roger that, port side,” Brad growled into the radio as he teetered out of the ready room, bouncing against the wall as everything tilted wildly. He rolled over, clutching to his right arm as pain shot through his shoulder.

“Jess,” he growled and pulled himself back up to his feet, using the dispatcher’s name directly. “I’ve lost gyros on four...gravity is failing! What the hell’s going on?”

Jessica, the third shift emergency dispatcher replied right away. “Brad, it’s not good. We are showing red across the board. Oxygen panels are dropping in Alpha and Bravo rings. Power is down to half the station!”

Brad read the panic in the normally controlled young woman's voice as he stepped into the boots of his zero-g suit. He threw his hands into the sleeve loops, pulling the skin-tight fabric up and over his body. He zipped it shut as he pulled on the neural-tech gloves.

The station shook violently as he slid through the hatch and into the seat of Pod One. Lights kicked on, the hatch closed, and he felt the pressure build in his ears as the computer pressurized the cockpit.

"Hello pilot Alpha-44901," the computer purred in its computerized female voice. But Brad cut in, interrupting its programmed greeting.

"Skip standard boot. Initiate emergency sequence one, three, and five. Warm up boosters and initiate immediate launch protocol."

The computer chirped loudly, and the panel of instruments flooded with flashing lights.

"Launch in 3, 2, 1...go." The pod shook as the docking clamps released. The boosters rumbled and Brad was floating in space.

"Jess, I'm off station. Where do you need me?" Brad said over his radio as he navigated the pod out and around the launch module. His radio crackled, cutting in and out. He heard words, intermittently.

"...Top side...oxygen production...release..."

"Roger that," he replied quietly, gathering enough from the smattering of words to understand his directions. Using the neural gloves, Brad navigated the maintenance pod around the exterior of the massive space station. He passed the southern rings, designated Charlie and Delta respectively as the service shaft that separated them came into view.

"I see massive damaged to several oxygen supply lines, and..." Brad faltered as he rounded the last. "I'm not sure if you can hear me, but o2 separator module 2 is...gone!"

His radio crackled and for a moment he thought that he heard a voice in the static.

Just hearing things.

Brad navigated his pod carefully through the debris field, using the high density cameras and thermal sensors to analyze the damage.

“Analyze data,” he said to the computer as he finished a complete circle of the damaged area. The panel lit up and chirped as the onboard digested the images. He extended tool arms, expanding the small pod like a spider.

“Suggested route of repair as follows. Increase production of o2 module 1 to 100%. Switch bypass to valves 21a, 54c, and inlet 1,” the computer replied once it had finished digesting the data.

“Relay that data to dispatch, and initiate a work order in progress,” Brad replied. He went to the task as outlined by the computer. But as he prepared to open up the service panel on the primary o2 module something collided with the side of his pod.

The ring of metal on metal filled the cab, but the pod’s neural link maintained control, keeping the small craft from spinning too far away.

“Damn! Dispatch, I’ve been hit by something...” Brad cursed into his radio, but a voice echoed throughout the cab, drowning him out.

“Brad, I can’t let you near that o2 module.” The voice was gravely and deep. He would know it anywhere.

“Dutch...” he whispered as a suited figure appeared from behind some floating debris.

“That was a warning, Brad. I don’t want to put a hole in your pod, but if you get any closer, I will,” the older man said, waving a stalky piece of equipment before him. Brad

recognized it immediately. It was a phase riveter, and it could put a slug of depleted uranium clear through both sides of his pod, and him, at the same time.

“Dutch hasn’t anyone told you? There’s been an explosion. We’ve lost oxygen dispersion to Alpha and Bravo rings. I need to get I switched...”

Yeah, I know all about it,” Dutch interrupted. “Amazing what twenty five pounds of thermite and blasting caps will do to a pressurized can in space.”

“Wait. How do you...” Brad started to ask, but realization froze him in place. “You set the bomb?”

“You’ve always been a quick study, Brad. You were the fastest through preliminary training. I’ve never seen anyone master fiber-circuit reflowing like you. I worried for a long time that young pups like you would force me out of a job. But that doesn’t matter anymore,” Dutch said, using the thrusters on his mech suit to move between modules.

“You taught me everything I know, Dutch. But if we don’t switch over that module and the bypass valves, half of the people in this station are going to suffocate,” Brad said as he subtly tried to navigate his pod closer to the last remaining oxygen separator.

“Precisely, Brad,” Dutch said, grunting as he heaved open a panel on the stations central column. “If you haven’t noticed the problems plaguing this place by now, then maybe you’re not as smart as I thought. Admins on A and B sit back and earn double the credits of everyone else, and they do a fraction of the work. Meanwhile schmucks like you and I die all the time, scrapping along in the frigid dark of space so they can stay comfy and warm. No more Brad, no more.”

“Dutch, I agree with you. It sucks. But you can’t do this. Grieve it. Use the system. You can’t just kill the people that don’t see things your way,” Brad argued, gauging his distance from the module while keeping an eye on the other man’s location.

Dutch’s voice crackled over the radio. His laughter died away, “Talk, Brad? You’ve never had to work with these people. They aren’t reasonable. They hoard all the meds. They get the best food. Did you know that when the air scrubbers from alpha and bravo are shot they bring them down and install them in the lower rings? Yeah, you’re breathing their dirt too.”

Brad extended the service arm. It was almost in reach of the maintenance docking port. If he could connect it would allow his computer to recalibrate the o2 module’s settings. It would only take seconds. But something flashed by, and then the arm buckled. Rivets slammed into the extended arm, severing it in the process.

“I told you, Brad!” Dutch had the phase riveter leveled at him.

Brad couldn’t hear the tool fire, but he felt it. Metal screeched as the rivet tore through the skin of his pod. Alarms sounded, lights flashed. He was spinning away from the station, gaining momentum as the thruster pack vented its fuel into the vacuum.

Brad stifled a cry, saving every mental faculty to bring the craft back under control. He just managed to stabilize it, but the craft was wounded and he was still drifting slowly away from the station.

“I’m sorry, Brad. I wanted you to be a part of our new beginning,” Dutch said somberly over the crackling radio.

“Don’t do this, Dutch. Don’t become the monster. Show everyone there is a better way,” Brad pleaded.

“It’s already done,” Dutch replied simply. “Goodbye.”

Brad watched as the massive space station broke apart. He realized then that Dutch wasn't simply depriving those who had wronged him of air, but was banishing them altogether. With no way to re-separate and profuse their air, they would suffocate in months, maybe weeks.

"You aren't just killing them. You're torturing them," Brad shouted angrily into his radio, but only silence greeted him as his wounded pod drifted deeper into space.