

Ivan the Terrible

The executive shuttle tilted and shook as it hit atmosphere.

“Damn automatic sequencing. I can’t even change the entry vector!” Brad cursed, clutching helplessly to his harness. *Thing’ll probably burn us up before we can crash and die the ole’ fashioned way!*

Jess cried out behind him as the shuttle pitched to the left.

“Just hold tight. It should smooth out!” Brad turned, offering a hopeful smile.

“Just no more-” Jess started to say, but the shuttle bucked and bounced again. She grimaced, holding to the blood soaked compression bandage wrapped around her mid-section.

“Bouncing. No more bouncing!”

“Hold on. We’ll find a med station. A little clot-factor 7 and some penicillin should fix you right up.” Brad smiled hollowly. He knew the truth. Stopping the bleeding wouldn’t be enough. She needed to get the bullet out. And he sure as hell wasn’t a surgeon.

“What makes you so sure we we’ll find help down there? The Russian colony has been dark for two years. No coms. Just horror stories and rumors,” Jess said breathlessly.

“Because we need them to be,” Brad whispered. He couldn’t turn to meet her gaze. He got her shot, he sure as damned wasn’t going to let her bleed to death too.

The shuttle continued to bounce and shake for several minutes, until finally the heat shield opened. Brad grabbed the control stick as the computer chirped and pinged. The large display glowed brightly, showing a host of random sensor data.

“Air temp is seventy five degrees. Nitrogen levels are higher than earth norm, but within tolerance. Looks like their terraforming project worked.” Brad read from the display, more to fill the silence than anything else.

“Pilot Alpha-44901, entry sequence complete. Would you like to take control?” the computer purred.

“Would I?” Brad laughed sardonically. “Alpha-44901 is finally taking the stick!”

“Confirmed.”

He felt the computer relinquish control as the -stick went heavy-. He leveled the small craft out and applied flaps to cut speed. The stomach churning vibration that had resulted from the computer’s entry guidance immediately disappeared.

“Oh, now that is much better,” Jess moaned behind him.

The display flashed through a number of screens, guided by the neural input of his gloves.

“The beacon is lit. That’s gotta be a good sign,” Brad said, turning, but felt his stomach turn over as soon as he saw Jess. She slumped in her chair, and her eyes were closed. Her face had taken on a deathly pallor.

“Jess! Wake up, Jess!” he shouted and ripped at the buckle to his harness.

“What!? I’m awake. I’m fine!” Jess’s eyes snapped open, but rolled in her head for a moment before finally locking on him. She wavered for a moment, before clutching to the seat and sitting up.

She’s lost a lot of blood. She needs to stay awake!

“Stay with me. Keep talking, Jess. You need to stay awake!” Brad said animatedly as he turned back to the console.

“I’m so tired.”

“What about your parents? Tell me about home,” Brad said.

Jess laughed drunkenly, but sat up a little straighter in her chair. She rambled a bit, but then cleared her throat and started in about her farmer parents, especially their disappointment with her leaving home for colonial service.

The shuttle broke through the murky clouds. Lightning arched across the dark sky, flashing like forked javelins of blistering light. The landscape rose up through the storm. He could see rocky bluffs and thick green trees. Brad nosed down, bleeding altitude as quickly as he could.

“Destination marker, distance threshold. Twenty nine kilometers and closing,” the computer said smoothly. Brad cut his speed further. He couldn’t afford to overshoot their target, and risk not having enough fuel to turn around and backtrack.

Jess was talking about a boy her father ran out of the yard with a shotgun when he spotted the landing beacon. The flashing blue strobe barely cleared the canopy, but effectively cut through the storm.

Brad brought the small craft around as he circled the complex. He connected to the computer using his neural-tech glove, activating laser distancing and thermal landing cameras. Marker lights flared out of the gloom, but over half of the complex sat in complete darkness.

“Link request accepted. Открытие Вешалка дверей. Здравствуйте,” the computer chimed in Russian.

Even their computer speaks Russian.

“I hope that means somebody’s home,” Brad whispered, as he navigated the small craft down into the darkened structure.

The shuttle’s lights split the darkness, but as the pads touched down banks of fluorescent lights flickered to life overhead. Row after row the lights activated, until much of the hangar emerged from shadow.

Brad unbuckled Jess from her harness and eased her to the floor. He propped her head up on a manual and covered her with his jacket. She looked up at him, her eyes puffy and dark.

“Gonna leave me, huh?” Her teeth chattered together and her body shook. Brad squeezed her hand reassuringly before peeling the paper backing off the last adrenaline patch and sticking it to her neck.

“This is the last patch. It’s better if I don’t move you right now. I’ll look for help. If I can’t find anyone, I’ll see what medical supplies I can wrangle together,” Brad said, sliding the shuttle’s com unit into her hand.

“Wrangle. Funny. Like a space cowboy or something,” Jess laughed weakly.

Brad turned to leave but Jess pulled him back.

“Don’t be gone long,” she said, her smile fading.

Brad squeezed her hand one last time and jumped down out of the shuttle. The door hissed and slid shut, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

The air was cool, clammy, and smelled musty. He looked around the empty hangar, the massive fluorescent banks above him buzzing and flickering like party strobes. Somewhere off in the distance water dripped from the ceiling.

Tentatively, Brad jogged towards a terminal set in the wall. The monitor was dark and there was no response when he laid his glove on the touch screen. He set off at a run down the length of the hangar, ducking his head into each of the service bays.

No ships. No crew. Where in the hell is everyone?

Brad’s breath caught as he approached the last in the long line of service hangers. Unlike every door behind him, these doors were closed. He reached down and lifted a massive, hardened case lock, looped through a wad of square-loop chain.

The left door eased out, swinging open a foot before the chain went taut. Brad leaned in. There was just enough room to ease his head through the gap, but he would never hope to squeeze the rest of his body through.

The space was dark, and felt horribly empty. Brad felt his heart sink and moved to pull his head back through, but then a single bank of fluorescent bulbs flickered high overhead. The bluish light filtered down, exposing a massive dark shape. The bulb surged and flickered brighter, exposing the expansive hull of a ship.

Brad punched the door, the heart wrenching anxiety instantly breaking. The fluorescent light surged brighter still before popping and going dark once again. An image remained, burned into his vision.

Sparrow One.

It wasn't just a ship. It was a frigate. Sparrow class frigates were old, but they were rugged ships that had at one time constituted the heart of colonial transport. At the least they had well-appointed medical suites. But in some instances they were equipped with fully automated med pods, capable of surgical procedures.

Hold on Jess!

Snaking his head back through the gap, Brad pulled ineffectually at the chain. He turned the massive lock over in his hands. There was no way he would break it, and with no tools, he couldn't hope to pick it. He would have to find something to cut the chain instead.

There has to be bolt cutter, torch, or pry bar I can use to break it.

Brad sprinted back down the hangar. He passed the first few open doors before ducking through the third. He felt compelled through this one, like he was being guided. He moved quickly into the gloomy space, scanning the floor and scattered tool boxes for anything he could use.

Brad stopped before a solitary door on the back wall. It hung open an inch. “инструментальный цех” was written in chipped, blocky letters above it. A dark-brown handprint had been smeared just above the handle.

“Instrument...” He sounded the words out. His understanding of Russian was rudimentary at best, thanks to mandatory modules in Colonial school. But he got the gist.

Instruments, tools...close enough.

Hinges groaned as the door swung open. Lights winked on, activated by a motion sensor on the door frame. Work benches straddled the walls, perched beneath overburdened racks of hand tools. A large pile of equipment lay jumbled in the center of the floor.

Brad stepped up to the first work table, but jumped back as his foot landed on something squishy. He looked down to find strange milky-white vines sprawling all across the floor. They snaked in and around the work benches forming a complicated matrix.

“What the...” Brad mouthed as the light popped on and then off again. A large, dark stain covered the ground in front of the service elevator. Like something bleeding had been drug, clawing and kicking, into the dark shaft.

Unwilling to tear his eyes away from the shadowy opening, Brad moved from table to table. His fingers shook as they glided over hammers, ratchets, and screwdrivers. And then he saw them, their rubber handles hanging teasingly out of a bucket not ten feet away.

His heart pounding in his ears, Brad nervously tiptoed toward the bucket. Water dripped loudly as he pulled the bolt cutters free. Unfortunately, the bucket had collected water leaking from above, leaving the bolt cutters heavily encased in rust.

They'll have to do.

Brad flexed the cutters open and closed. They were stiff, and rust flaked off like broken scabs, but they worked.

They just need to work once. Get moving!

He turned to leave, but felt his foot come down on one of the strange vines. A horrible, grating noise echoed from the elevator shaft. It prickled the hairs on his neck and arms. He slid his foot forward, but something contracted forcefully around his ankle.

He was standing one instant and flat on his back the next. The vines covering the floor had come alive. They writhed and flexed, coursing over the ground like pale octopus tentacles. A strong surge pulled on his leg, and he started to slide.

Brad clawed at the tentacle wrapped around his ankle, but he couldn't prize his fingers under it, its hold was too tight. He slid along again and he rolled onto his stomach and clawed at the smooth concrete.

The noises echoing out of the elevator shaft reached a fever pitch. More of the tentacles wrapped around his leg and waist, and he started to slide faster. He rolled, brushing into the jumble of equipment piled on the ground. Brad just managed to grab ahold of a boxy panel. The tentacles rolled him again and his hands shifted.

Brad felt a tickle as the neural-tech glove connected. But it was unlike any connection he had felt before. It wasn't just ordered binary code translated into readable thought patterns. He could feel something thinking, considering him.

His hand broke free and he was sliding again. His fingers caught cracks in the floor, and table legs, but the pull was too strong. He couldn't hold on. He heard a buzzing noise behind him. Something rattled and whined, like hydraulics, but he couldn't look away from the elevator shaft, and the creature that appeared.

Long spiny legs arched out of the darkness, scrabbling against the floor, reaching to pull him into the gaping maw. He saw more tentacles slide forth, and teeth, so many pointed, gnashing teeth.

One of the legs thrashed across. He felt the spines break through his zero-g suit, sinking hungrily into the meat of his calf. He kicked and clawed, but it wrenched him forward. He was a meter away, then just feet. He was going to die.

Bright light flooded the space. The creature in the elevator shaft screeched angrily and shrunk back. He heard the rattle and whir of hydraulics again and then he was floating in the air.

“Опасность!” It was a strange voice, deep, and mechanical, and definitely didn’t speak English.

A bulky mechanical hand wrapped around the leg skewering Brad’s calf and ripped it free. He cried out as the barbs tore loose, taking some meat with them. He was pulled back, and a buzzing saw blade chopped down, severing the tentacles wrapped around him.

The world whipped around and then he felt solid ground beneath his feet. Brad stumbled backwards, the strength of his injured calf gone.

“пробер,” the large robot said urgently. The tentacles were already worming their way around it though, wrapping around its legs and arms. Brad turned as it slid backwards, teetering on the edge of the elevator shaft before disappearing into the darkness.

He scooped the bolt cutters off the floor and hobbled out of the tool room and into the service bay. He hopped, dragging his injured leg into the hangar. It felt like he was barely moving. His lungs burned and his muscles cramped. When he stopped to rest, his feet slipped in the blood leaking out of his suit.

He passed the shuttle, his thoughts inexplicably turning to Jess. But he knew that she would be safer inside, at least until he could get the doors open. Then he could move her.

Brad’s heart was pounding in his chest by the time he reached the chained door. His hands had grown slippery with sweat, and he struggled to maintain a grip on the heavy cutters. He stopped and leaned against the door, hefting the jaws up to the bulky links of chain.

Please...please! He squeezed the handles together as hard as he could and felt the jaws bite into the soft metal.

Brad shifted, putting all of his weight into the cut. Something gave way and he tumbled. The bolt cutters rattled to the ground next to him, the broken handle clattering against the door.

“NO!” He pushed off, swinging the broken bolt cutters at the resilient chain. He struck it again and again, until he lost his grip on the broken tool and they fell away. Desperate, sobbing, and thoroughly deflated, Brad leaned into the door.

A shadow fell over him as bulky metals fingers wrapped around the chain next to him. The heavy links snapped, raining down as the hefty lock rattled to the ground. Brad turned as the large robot reached up to pull severed tentacles free. A name, spray painted in big red letters, appeared on its chest plate.

“I help!” the robot said, its accent thick.

“Thank you, Ivan,” Brad said, slumping to the ground.