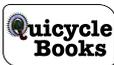


EXCERPT 7: *Nuclear Gravity*

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Excerpt from...
CHAPTER 26:
Yarrow

Commander Bolt manipulates the settings on the coms monitor. "Lander B, this is Lander A. Allie, do you read?" Static. The star flare is still on. He touches the controls, switching channels. "Centaurian Two, this is Lander A, do you read?" Again, only static. Another channel change. "Intrepid, Lander A, come in."

"He's not going to answer you," says Suco, quietly.

"Cardinal, for Christ's sake. Allie went down to the bomb. Do not detonate. Do you read?" He looks at Rudiger. "Can you make that send to him on a loop?"

"Yeah." Rudiger accesses the coms system.

Bolt needs to think quickly. The priority is getting a message to Yarrow as soon as possible. If she has not reset the fail-safes, she needs to get the hell away from that bomb. The lander was not meant to carry five people, but if they head back to rendezvous with the *Centaurian II* first, they will be moving further from the north pole and further from being able to reach Yarrow. He has already lost one comrade on this mission. He is not about to lose another if he can help it. Between the air in the lander's reserve and in their spacesuits, they should have enough oxygen to take the detour, even with more bodies on board than the craft is designed to hold.

"Ok," Bolt decides, "we're going for a ride, chaps. The north pole. Strap in. Rudi?"

"It'll send every twenty seconds until they receive."

"Good. Let's go, but Johnny's not strapped in, so don't kill him on the G's."

"Thanks," says Bang.

"Hold tight, Brother," says Rudiger.

The lander begins to change course, and Bang grunts as he has to use his strength to hold himself in place against the inertial forces. “Is it me or is it getting dimmer in here?”

“The flare is dying down?” asks Suco.

“That’s a double-edged sword,” says Ohr.

The others know what he means. If the interference from the star’s radiation is reduced, their messages will be able to reach Yarrow more easily... but the *Intrepid’s* detonation transmitter will also be able to reach the bomb more easily. Will this be a race to broadcast line of sight? If so, the lander should be able to get there before the larger ship.

The G-forces ease up slightly as they come out of their steep banking maneuver.

Bolt returns to the coms monitor. “Lander B, come in. Allie, do you copy?”

The star flare is still too intense. Bolt looks through the shaded cockpit windows. The lander is coming in towards the north pole, which has just crested the horizon. They would be able to raise the pole from here if there were no star flare. If it is, in fact, decreasing, they should be able to reach her at any moment. Bolt finds himself holding his breath.

PROXIMA CLOCK: Orbit 17: Minute 59

On the surface, Yarrow sits at the cockpit controls in Lander B, recording a message on the coms monitor.

“...but I couldn’t re-engage them. I’m gonna try to move it away from the Archive with the lander. Cardinal can be responsible for blowing up a bunch of rocks. *Asshole*. Lander B out.”

She touches the ‘send’ icon on the monitor, checks the scopes one last time, gets up, and heads for the ramp.

In Lander A, Bolt tries again.

“Lander B, this is Lander A. Allie, do you copy?”

The light outside continues to dim.

“It’s definitely decreasing,” says Rudiger. “Keep trying.”

On the surface, the coms panel in Lander B is beeping, but Yarrow can neither hear nor see it. She is in the Archive entrance with her helmet visor down. She finishes attaching one end of a long cargo strap to one handle of the nuke. She picks up her radiation shield in one hand and the free end of the cargo strap in the other, and starts walking towards the lander. She runs out of strap about six feet short of the ramp.

“Damn.”

The bomb is too heavy for her to carry on her own. She could drag it, but dragging a nuclear weapon with its fail-safes disengaged does not exactly feel like a wise idea. She had been hoping to attach it to the lander with the cargo strap, and she could then use the craft to gently lift it and move it a few kilometers away from the Archive.

She walks back to the bomb. The smooth floor of the entrance area has a distinctly ceramic feel to it. Maybe she could drag the bomb carefully and slowly across it, just far enough to get the strap to reach the ramp. If she could tie it on, she could fly with the ramp extended, and it should be strong enough to hold the extra weight of the bomb without any trouble. But she is going to have to drag the bomb by the strap while also holding her radiation shield. That will be cumbersome. But, so be it.

Yarrow gathers a length of strap, puts it over her shoulder and around her abdomen, and takes up the radiation shield. She senses the flare is beginning to dim slightly, but not enough to forego the shield. She takes up the slack and engages her leg and back muscles gradually against the weight. No sudden moves. Just enough force to overcome static friction and get the bomb sliding.

“Nobody blow up, now,” she grunts. “The nice lady is just gonna move you a little bit.”

It takes more effort than she expects, but the bomb begins to glide slowly across the surface. It does not go off, and Yarrow realizes she would sigh with relief if she were not straining at the exertion. Dragging a nuclear weapon is really hard work, especially in the grip of Proxima b’s over-enthusiastic force of gravity.

“*Ughhh*. Of all the things I ever dreamed of doing on Prox b,” she gasps, “this sure as hell wasn’t one of them.”

She remembers the young girl she once was, single-minded, eyes tuned to the heavens, embarking on the journey that has led her to this moment. She had always refused to play with dolls; only ever planes. Her uncle had had a 4-seater electric plane, and as she had grown older, he had allowed her more and more control while flying — against the wishes of her mother, his sister. He always went on about how her face lit up whenever she was off the ground, and how she never shut up about it whenever she was on the ground. While he had tried to nurture her passion, her parents had worked to rein it in, believing it impulsive and reckless.

At thirteen, Yarrow had crashed her father’s self-driving car after figuring out how to control it with the motion sensors on her wristwatch. A wrist going here when it should have gone there, however, resulted in a cut on her forehead and some rather expensive car repairs. Despite her father’s aggravation, he had also found the feat quite impressive, and her appetites were more constructively shepherded from then on. Her parents had realized they could not stifle the person their daughter was fighting so determinedly to become or they would only have landed themselves in her crosshairs. They knew better than to choose that — that ‘40s empowerment parenting again. Of course, Yarrow thinks with a smirk, if they had known it would lead to this bizarre nuclear scene, they may have resisted with a little more commitment. *Look, Ma, no failsafes!*