
Kronos

by Allen Steele

Science Fiction

3.10.2070 2316Z--PARN *Intrepid*

Consciousness returns to Kinnard like an aerated bubble rising from the bottom of an aquarium. He stirs within the zombie tank as the last dregs of the biostasis drugs that kept him under are flushed from his bloodstream.

When he finally opens his eyes, it is to the dimness of the hibernation deck. The lights have been turned down low, but the dull blue glow of the status panel above his tank's open lid nonetheless causes him to squint and blink. He takes a deep breath; his lungs are assaulted by antiseptic cold air, making him cough. There is an urge to vomit, even though there is nothing in his stomach to bring up.

"Easy, Captain ... easy." A voice from the darkness, softly accented, warm and familiar, the last voice he heard before his eyes closed nine months ago. "Keep shut your eyes, take shallow breaths."

He shuts his eyes. A plastic mask is placed over his nose and mouth. Pure oxygen forces the nausea down, diminishes the pounding in his temples. The voice murmurs something unintelligible to another person, then the mask is lifted away. "Try again," the voice says. "Don't rush so this time. Everything's cop."

Kinnard carefully opens his eyes again. The status panel blurs, then gradually focuses, resolving into an electronic quilt of lines and graphs. Thin plastic tubes filled with blood and phlegm-colored liquid dangle from sacs suspended above his body, leading into major veins in the crooks of his elbows. No strength in his arms, legs, or back; the soles of his feet tingle painfully, his bladder feels ready to explode.

A face comes into the light. Narrow and fine-boned, with albino-pale skin tattooed with intricate swirls and whorls resembling a magnified fingerprint. Above dark blue eyes twice the size of his own is a Gaelic cross, its spiked bars running across a hairless forehead and down the bridge of an aquiline nose.

"Peter..." he gasps, his lips and mouth parched and dry.

"A second, then be done." *Intrepid's* doctor nods to his assistant. She steps into the weak light: Anna Christ-Webster, the ship's cargo master, Peter's first-wife. Anna's face is also marked with the Gaelic cross of Christ clan; unlike her husband, whose skull is shaved bald, Anna's blond hair is tied into a long braid that tumbles over her narrow shoulders like a loose rope.

A plastic waste-disposal bag is in her tattooed left hand. Before Kinnard can object, Anna reaches beneath the sheets, her long fingers sliding across his groin in search of the catheter. She carefully secures the bag around his penis. Anna's intent is anything but sexual, but his member involuntarily stiffens at her touch; her pale skin blushes beneath the tattoos, her large blue eyes making brief contact with his. It's an embarrassing moment for both of them.

"Sorry, Marion," she whispers. "Take just a moment."

"Deep breath, hold it," Peter says.

Kinnard obliges, then Anna releases the catheter and his bladder lets go for the first time in nine months. He gasps in agony, almost wishing that they had left him under.

When it is over, Anna takes the bag to the recycling chute. Peter gently pulls the tubes from Kinnard's arms and gives him a soaked sponge to suck on; then, without being asked, he reaches up to a ceiling monitor and switches it to a real-time image from outside the ship.

There, on the screen, is his destination. Kinnard stares for a long time at the immense ringed planet. "Ship?" he finally asks.

"She's fine, Captain." Peter favors him with a rare smile. "A-okay, everything is. All conditions green."

Kinnard nods. He raises his head a little. Eight men and women still sleep in tanks arranged along the walls of the hibernation deck. The captain wonders what strange dreams float through their slow-time minds; he cannot recall his own.

"Good," he says, his vocal cords rasping from disuse. "Thanks for ... taking care of me." He pauses and swallows. "Now get ... me out this thing."

* * * *

3.11.2070 0610Z

The Pax Astra Royal Navy frigate *Intrepid* falls toward Saturn, inexorably drawn into the planet's gravity well as the vessel continues its long deceleration burn.

Sixty meters in length, *Intrepid* is relatively small for a ship with a maximum range of nine a.u.'s. Designed for military missions rather than exploration or trade, few accommodations have been made for passengers and none for freight, other than the two missile pods slung on either side of its forward hull and the manta-like shuttle moored beneath its wasp-waisted midsection. Imagine a half-liter bottle--the payload module--with its spout glued to that of a three-quarter liter bottle--the engine module--and you essentially have the warship's architecture.

Mounted beneath the forward module is a large round aerobrake shield. Its ceramic tiles, each a different color, have been carefully arranged so that they form the warship's figurehead: an angel with a sword, her wings spread wide as if flying through space.

Intrepid's nuclear-pulse main engine has fired continually ever since the ship left the Moon two hundred and seventy-five standard days ago, its lasers fissioning the deuterium pellets constantly fed into the reactor chamber, causing the uninterrupted string of tiny nuclear explosions which gradually accelerated the ship, at the end of its boost phase, to nearly one-tenth light speed. As *Intrepid* passed through Jupiter's orbit one hundred and sixty eight days ago, its crew flipped the ship around until its bell-shaped engine nozzle was pointed in the direction of flight. Ever since then, the ship has been applying the brakes as a long prelude to entering Saturnine space.

"Begin MECO at ten, on my mark..."

"Copy that, sir. Ready for MECO."

"Mark. Ten ... nine ... eight ..."

A tattooed hand lingers on a throttle yoke as its companion hovers over a set of toggle switches.

"Seven ... six ..."

A pair of wide blue eyes framed by a Gaelic cross watches the readouts on a comp screen.

"Guidance positive. On course for transorbital insertion."

"Five ... four..."

Another pair of hands flits across a keyboard. Lights flash from red to green. "Main feed valves closed, central rank offline. Dumping residual core reactants."

"Three ... two..."

"Heat regulators on, radiation buffers engaged, main tank pressure nominal. All systems copasetic..."

"One ... now, please."

As if choreographed by a stern dance master, hands and AI systems execute a complex fandango that charms the nuclear beast to bay. A disgruntled tremor runs through the ship as, for the first time in nine months, the white-hot glow in the exhaust bell quickly diminishes to orange, then red, then fades out altogether.

"MECO complete."

"Reactor shut down and safe, Captain."

"All systems on standby, sir."

Kinnard floats upward against the straps confining him to his seat. Little more than six hours has passed since he was brought out of biostasis, just enough time for his body to readjust to even low-gravity. Now that *Intrepid* is in free fall, his arms and legs don't ache quite as much. He wants to sigh with relief, but that would be an inappropriate response. His crew might interpret it as a sign of weakness.

He glances at the men and women seated at consoles arranged around the circular command deck. In the company of bio-engineered Superiors, a baseline human is a freak, and not vice-versa. His rib cage isn't anorexically compact. His arms aren't long and sinewy, the fingers of his hands don't resemble articulated pencils. His legs aren't double-jointed at the knees and ankles, his toes haven't been expanded to become a second pair of hands. He has no cerebral implants which allow him to interface with computers, and his eyes don't look like dark blue chicken eggs with a second set of translucent lids.

When the Navy assigned him command of the *Intrepid*, Kinnard was informally warned that Superiors--or "googles," as Admiral Coonts referred to them, when they were alone in his office at River House--harbored a certain disdain for unmodified Primaries--or "apes," as Superiors often refer to baseline humans, under equally private circumstances. Superiors are born and bred for space; the first gene-tailored embryos raised in a secret lab in Mare Tranquilitatis just before the Moon War had come of age. For them, the cosmos is not a frontier, but a birthright; their origins as egg and sperm donated by lunar colonists is an embarrassment, not a heritage. Even the Christ clan, which has embraced neo-Mormonism instead of the extropic philosophies of the Superior families which have migrated to the outer system, were condescending toward their Primary captain; his weaknesses were forgiven, but not easily forgotten.

Kinnard has been captain of this vessel for three years now. He has come to trust his crew, and

believes that they trust him. But their differences are more broad than their similarities, and he never permits himself to forget this fact.

"Very well." Kinnard loosens his seat straps as he rotates it to face the bow windows. "Isidore, initiate rollover maneuver. Jon, finalize trajectories for Saturn atmospheric refueling and Titan rendezvous. Cayenne, ship status?"

"All systems nominal, sir. A full report is on your screen." Cayenne Christ-Caswell doesn't resort to the broken-English patois most Superiors use when they're not in the presence of Primaries. Even after two voyages with her, Kinnard still doesn't know whether he should be complimented or insulted.

Kinnard calls up the report and pretends to study it, but cannot help looking up as *Intrepid* turns end-over-end until its bow is pointed toward Saturn. Even at the distance of twelve million kilometers, the planet fills the deck's portals. He involuntarily sucks in his breath as the ringed giant glides into view. He has twice been to Mars and--during the short-lived Callisto Station insurrection, which *Intrepid* helped put down--even the Jovian system, yet even Jupiter's vast and terrible beauty pales next to the serene majesty of its cousin. No photo, film, or VR simulation he has ever seen has prepared him for this first glimpse of its intricate rings, nor the dull yellow-orange bands of its cloud patterns.

A hushed silence falls upon the deck as his crew takes in the spectacle. "Kronos," Isidore Christ-Ortega murmurs, using--as common practice among Superiors--the ancient Greek name for the planet. "She is beautiful, eh?"

Kinnard smiles. Considering Superior stoicism, his first officer's reaction is a small wonder in itself. Yet understandable; *Intrepid* is only the second crewed vessel to venture this far into the outer system. His people are among a rare handful to see Saturn through naked eyes, bio-enhanced or otherwise...

And no one knows what happened to the first group of visitors.

This thought brings Kinnard back to the present. "Okay, let's get back to work." he says. "Plenty of time for sightseeing later." He catches Jon's eye and favors him with a wink. "Specially you, navco. You get the fun part."

For this, he is rewarded with the fleeting grin. Jon Christ-Caswell can't wait for the challenge before him. This is noticed by Cayenne, who lapses into google-speak. "Cut you no tether now," she warns her first-husband. "This ship not built for joyriding boyshit, hey?"

"Ease off the feedback, fem." Jon turns back to his console. "We copy, over."

Kinnard ignores this as he reluctantly unbuckles his harness. "Marie, have you received anything from *Herschel Explorer*?"

"Word nyet, Captain." Slender wires leading from the back of Marie Christ-Ortega's skull drift about her braided black hair as she shakes her head distractedly. Her eyes are unfocused; her brain's MINN--Mnemonic Interfaced Neural Net--is linked with *Intrepid*'s comnet, so her attention is divided between com deck and cyberspace. "Negatory on all channels. Solid telemetry link on Q and A bands, but nada talkback."

Isidore turns to look at his first-wife. "Huygens Station, try microbeam downlink with them, eh?"

"Do that, okay." Her lips move silently as she subvocalizes a message to the outpost on Titan's surface, her long fingers pantomiming keyboard strokes as she opens a microbeam relay to the base.

Kinnard pushes himself out of his seat and, pulling himself along ceiling handrails, moves to the map

table. A holographic one-quarter slice of Saturnine space materializes before him. *Intrepid* is a tiny silver spot passing through the orbit of Phoebe, the outermost moon. Eleven million clicks away, past the orbits of Iapetus and Hyperion, is Titan.

Kinnard punches up the course that Jon has laid in. Studying it, he absently smiles, satisfied that the navigator has done his job. *Intrepid* arrived at Saturn with its fuel tanks nearly depleted; this was a necessary sacrifice of constant thrust that approached one-gee when the ship began its midcourse deceleration. However, the frigate was specifically designed for refueling by an aerobraking maneuver through the planet's upper atmosphere, during which gaseous helium-three would be scooped from the thin stratospheric layer high above its swirling cloudtops. This raw fuel source was less efficient than deuterium pellets extracted and refined from the Moon's regolith, but it was enough to get *Intrepid* back home. Indeed, his crew had safely performed much the same maneuver during the Callisto mission two years ago.

Jon has laid in a trajectory that would graze the top of Saturn's atmosphere below its rings. Before *Intrepid* made its refueling run, it would drop off its shuttle, *Excalibur*, near Titan. By the time he and his crew were viewing the rings of Saturn from below, the landing party would be on Titan's icy surface, trying to discover why all contact had been lost with Huygens Base and the *Herschel Explorer*.

This the single aspect of the operation that makes Kinnard nervous, although he wouldn't dare admit it to any of his crew. He alone is aware of certain aspects of this mission that no one else aboard knows yet ... and what little he knows scares the hell out of him.

Marie interrupts his thoughts. "Microbeam with *Herschel*, no can do. Got nothing, see nothing."

Kinnard peers at her through the holo. "No contact at all? Not even with the AI system?"

"Nada, Captain. White noise, all down the line."

Kinnard nods. He was half-expecting this. "Open a channel to Moscoviense PADSS," he says, referring to Pax Astra Deep Space System, located in the Sea of Moscow on the lunar farside. "Use Priority One daybook encryption and have it relayed direct to CHNAVINT at River House."

Jon and Cayenne glance up from their consoles. Communiques from the *Intrepid* are normally directed to FLTCOM at Descartes City on the Moon. CHNAVINT is Sir Lucius Robeson, the Chief of Naval Intelligence. His office is located in River House, the Pax Astra's seat of government in the LaGrange colony of Clarke County, and it is a well-known fact that his *defacto* power is second only to the Prime Minister himself. "Inform them of our arrival," Kinnard continues, "that we've received nothing from either the *Herschel* or Huygens Base."

"Going in, then?" This from Isidore, who has silently come up behind him and is now clinging to a ceiling handrail with his toes. "Launch a rescue mission, we do now, eh?"

Kinnard turns to look at his first officer, knowing that this is not a question at all. His clan has piloted the *Intrepid* across eight and a half a.u.'s without knowing the full details of their mission; now they learn that their captain is reporting directly to Naval Intelligence. Clearly there is more to this than simply finding out why contact with the Titan expedition was lost ten months ago.

"It's still a rescue mission," Kinnard says, "but there may be more to it than just that."

Isidore stares at him. "And when do we learn more, Captain?"

Kinnard hesitates. As commanding officer, he is within his rights to simply refuse giving an answer. Or

he could tell everything he knows, now, and let the chips fall as they may. He takes neither option. "When we receive a message from River House," he replies. "Until then, we proceed with the mission as scheduled."

Kinnard looks past Isidore to the chief engineer. "Cayenne, when you're done there, get *Excalibur* prepped and ready for launch." She silently nods, and Kinnard prods his jaw with his fingertips. "Peter? How are our passengers?"

"Slow coming up, Captain," Peter's voice says in his right ear, "but they're awake."

"Good. Soon as they're able, have them report to the wardroom. I'll meet them there." He gives Isidore a sidelong glance. "You and Anna come, too," he adds. "In fact, I want everyone aboard present for the briefing."

"Copy that, Captain." A pause. "Briefing is when?"

"Soon as we hear from FLTCOM. I'll let you know." He signs off, then looks at Christ-Ortega. "Fair enough, *jefe*?"

"Straight wire, Captain."

"Copa. I'll be in my cabin if you need me."

Isidore gives him a short wave over his shoulder as he somersaults back to his seat. Another PARN commander might consider this insubordinate, but Kinnard knows better. Superiors have their own ways, as commanding officer of the only PARN deep-space vessel crewed almost entirely by a clan, Kinnard has to accept this.

The Christ family is one of the few clans that has sworn allegiance to the Pax Astra; most Superiors have either proclaimed political neutrality, or secretly aligned themselves with the Jove Resistance during the Callisto rebellion. On one hand, Kinnard counts his good fortune that his crew, as inscrutable as they often were, is willing and capable of following his orders, even during the nine long months that he had spent in the zombie tank.

On the other hand, because the Royal Navy knew that Superior allegiance is tenuous at best, NAVINT had decided not to trust *Intrepid's* crew with full knowledge of its mission. Only the captain was given the details of the rescue mission ... and, conveniently, he had been incommunicado within a zombie tank for most of the flight.

Kinnard muses upon this as he pushes himself down the gopher hole to his cabin, three decks down from the command center. As he presses his thumb against the lockplate, he checks the digital readout above the door. To his satisfaction, it reads *6.10.2069 1350Z*: the last time he entered the cabin, just before *Intrepid* left Highgate.

The tiny cabin is dark, its trapped air musty and old. Ceiling fluorescents light up as Kinnard pulls himself inside. Everything is just as he left it: the framed holos on the wall, the bookcase containing operations manuals and a leatherbound copy of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. He shuts the door behind him, folds down a desktop next to his bunk. Concealed in the bulkhead behind the desk is a safe; he unlocks with his thumbprint and a memorized six-digit code number.

An envelope floats inside the safe, sealed with a red strip of tape, dated with *Intrepid's* date of departure from Highgate. Kinnard breaks the seal and opens the envelope.

* * * *

DATE: 0810Z 11 MAR 70

FM: CHNAVINT CLARKE CO

TO: PRIME MINISTER

SUBJ: TITAN RESCUE

CLASS: TS

1. (S) UPDATE: PRIORITY ONE SCRAMBLED PADSS TRANSMISSION RECEIVED 11 0756Z MAR 11 FROM PARNVA-145, FRIGATE "INTREPID." CAPT. MARION KINNARD REPORTS SAFE ARRIVAL IN SATURN SYSTEM.

2. (TS) "INTREPID" REPORTS NO TELEMETRY RECEIVED FROM PA VS-29, ARGOSY "HERSHEL EXPLORER," OR FROM HUYGENS BASE ON TITAN, DESPITE REPEATED ATTEMPTS TO CONTACT EITHER SHIP AND OUTPOST. NO AVAILABLE INFORMATION ON STATUS OF "HERSHEL EXPLORER" CREW OR HUYGENS BASE EXPEDITION.

3. (TS) PARM 5TH INFANTRY, MARE IMBRIUM COMPANY, BRAVO SQUAD SUCCESSFULLY REVIVED FROM BIOSTASIS ON "INTREPID". CAPT. KINNARD TO BRIEF LT. COL. JULIETTE DESOTO AND TEAM, RE: CLASSIFIED ASPECTS OF THEIR MISSION AT 1000Z MAR 11.

4. (TS) OUTLOOK: "INTREPID" PROCEEDING TO TITAN FOR SCHEDULED FLYBY AT 0100Z MAR 12. BRAVO TEAM UNDER LT. COL. DESOTO WILL DEPART "INTREPID" ABOARD PARN VA-165, MILITARY LANDER "EXCALIBUR," FOR LANDING AT HUYGENS BASE. "INTREPID" WILL COMMENCE AERO-REFUELING AT SATURN BEFORE RETURNING TO TITAN FOR INVESTIGATION OF "HERSHEL EXPLORER" AND PICKUP OF "EXCALIBUR" LANDING PARTY.

5. (TS) MILITARY CENSORSHIP IN EFFECT. PRIORITY ONE COMNET SCRAMBLE OF ALL COMMUNIQUES ENACTED 11 MARCH. NO INFORMATION WILL BE RELEASED TO THE PUBLIC OR PRESS PENDING SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME OF RESCUE OPERATIONS ON TITAN.

(6.) ALL FUTURE MEMOS RE: PARN/PARM OPERATIONS IN SATURN SYSTEM TO BE CODENAMED "KRONOS."

END

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3.11.2070 1001Z

Lt. Col. Juliette DeSoto stares at the warm tray of what looks (and smells) like boiled seaweed in white sauce and decides that she's not quite so hungry after all.

Before she places the lid back over her tray, though, she glances down the long wardroom table, and notices that her team is discretely watching her, waiting for her reaction. If their CO won't eat this stuff, no one in Bravo Squad will either--and since this is probably the best *Intrepid* has to offer, that means her people will go on their mission with empty stomachs. Not only that, but the young google female--Anna, is it?--who has carried the plates in from the adjacent galley is hovering nearby, nervously awaiting their response to her culinary talents.

So, for Queen and the Pax, DeSoto pulls a pair of chopsticks from the magnetized holder next to her plate and pretends that google food is the essence of *haute cuisine*. The seven men and women seated at the table reluctantly follow her example; everyone in Bravo Squad takes their first bite simultaneously, each watching the other to see who will gag first.

Much to her surprise, it's actually quite good. Rather like asparagus in hollandaise sauce, but a little spicier. Everyone swallows and goes for more; even "Power Chuck" Clay, who is notorious for being picky about what he eats, is digging into the food with apparent relish.

Nevertheless, DeSoto is careful not to ask Anna what they're eating. She may not like to know the answer.

As she eats, DeSoto gazes around the wardroom. It's as small as those on any PARN vessel she has been aboard, but far less spartan. The table is of polished fauxwood inlaid with gold filigree; the fold-down ergonomic chairs are upholstered with soft blue velvet, hand-embroidered with intricate designs vaguely resembling google tattoos. Abstract Martian sand paintings are fastened to the bulkhead walls behind either side of the table; one features the Gaelic cross she has already seen on the faces of the crewmen, the other might be an original Milos, or at least a clever copy. Red silk curtains frame the wide square windows behind the table, and an antique brass telescope is bolted to the carpeted deck in front of the center portal. Even the chopsticks, she now notices, have been carved with scrimshaw designs.

And she had always thought googles spent their ship time having sex with each other.

They're almost finished when the hatch opens and the first Primary they've seen since awakening from biostasis floats into the wardroom, followed by Isidore, the ship's first officer, whom they met when he escorted them here from the hibernation deck. Even if his jumpsuit didn't have three stars on its epaulets, it would be obvious that this is *Intrepid's* commanding officer.

"Captain on deck," DeSoto says calmly, and her team goes bolt-upright in their seats. A chopstick tumbles upwards from the table plates, dropped by someone who forgot that they're in free-fall; Anna snatches it from mid-air with her left foot and silently returns it to Slick Nick, who mumbles apologetically.

"At ease." The captain floats to a vacant seat at the opposite end of the table, tucks his ankles under the leg bar, and sits down. "Sorry to disturb you, but I thought this was as good a time as any to welcome you aboard the *Intrepid*. I'm Captain Kinnard, and I believe you've already met my first officer, Mr. Christ-Ortega."

Bravo Squad murmurs polite greetings to Kinnard and Christ-Ortega. Since they were placed in biostasis on Highgate before their zombie tanks were transferred to the *Intrepid*, this is the first time they've met her captain or crew. Indeed, other than their ultimate destination and the basic purpose of their mission, DeSoto and her people know little about why they've been sent all this way.

Which, she reflects, is the way it should be. Bravo Squad is part of Mare Imbrium Company, an elite cadre of the Royal Militia formed as a rapid-response team to handle emergencies that threaten Pax Astra interests. Alpha Squad had quelled the Callisto rebellion a couple of years earlier; last year, her own squad had knocked down an attempted *coup d'etat* on Clarke County by New Ark Party loyalists. Indeed, just before it was dispatched to Highgate, her team had been engaged in tactical exercises at the Straight Wall on the Moon, training for combat against renegade Superior clans who had aligned themselves with the Jove movement and might conceivably launch a first-strike attack against Pax lunar settlements.

Yet because the Royal Militia was a civilian army with most of its soldiers leading private lives and careers outside the army, and because the Pax itself was rife with informants actively engaged in espionage on behalf of clients both on Earth and in the outer system, the rapid-response teams rarely knew the full details of its covert missions before they're actually deployed. Thus Colonel DeSoto knows little more about the mission than her troops. Likewise, because the Navy knew that the allegiance of the Superior clans that crewed its frigates was suspect at best, NAVINT had decided not to trust *Intrepid's* crew with full knowledge of its mission. Only the captain knew everything.

"If you're through," Kinnard says, "then we'll start your briefing." He touches his wristcom, and the multiscreen above the table lights up.

The first image is a cutaway diagram of a *Tycho*-class argosy. It's the same type of vessel the Pax has been using for deep-space exploration past the Belt for the last fifteen years, older and larger than *Intrepid*. Much slower, too; DeSoto recognizes the General Astronautics gas-core nuclear engine mounted at the end of the ship's boom as one with a considerably smaller ips-ratio than *Intrepid's* nuclear-pulse engine.

"This is the *Hershel Explorer*," Kinnard says. "It was departed from Highgate on January 20, 2068, and arrived here about fifteen months ago on March 15, 2069, almost exactly one year ago. At that time the flight crew revived the science team from biostasis. Total crew complement was twelve."

He changes the image; the multiscreen now displays still-pics of the expedition members. DeSoto notes that they're all Primaries. "The expedition was conducted under the joint auspices of the Royal University and the Navy," Kinnard continues. "Its commander was Capt. John Stephen Baylor, and his crew was the Jones clan ... a Primary family, as you may have already noticed, since there were no Superiors aboard. The five scientists from the University were led by Henri Marquand."

This would figure. The first clans were made up of Primaries who pioneered the idea of extended families crewing deep-space vessels nearly a generation before the googles founded their own clans. A few of the older Primary clans still served aboard Pax vessels.

Perhaps his tongue had only slipped, but DeSoto cannot help but notice that the Captain referred to the *Hershel Explorer* expedition in the past tense.

Another click, and the faces are replaced by an animated diagram of the ship's trajectory through the Saturn system. "The expedition spent the next three weeks conducting a flyby survey of Saturn and its moons," Kinnard goes on, "then on April 8, *Hershel* made orbit around Titan. Its shuttle, *Ulysses*, went down to the surface on April 10, where it landed near the equator on Galileo Planitia, Titan's single major continent."

A succession of images taken from Titan's surface: muggy and indistinct, shot through a dense brown fog that shallows the dim glow cast by helmet lamps and floodlights. Figures in pressure suits moving in and out of light, trudging through red snow. A small cluster of domes. The lower fuselage and landing gear of the shuttle. Blurred views of small, open-seat rovers leaving deep tracks through cranberry slush.

"After the base camp was established," Kinnard says, "the science team lived exclusively at Huygens Base. They frequently conducted sorties across the ice-pack, but never beyond a six-hour hike from the camp in case the rovers went kaput, and they always returned before nightfall. Although the flight crew remained in orbit, on at least three occasions various members of the Jones clan, along with Captain Baylor, visited the surface aboard the *Ulysses*."

"Uh ... pardon me, sir?" This from Doc Aaronvich, the squad medic. Kinnard acknowledges his raised hand with a nod. "With all due respect, sir, we saw all this during our briefing, before we left

Highgate. So, ah..."

"So when are you going to tell us why we're here?" Doc is interrupted by Patty Barnes ... "Swee' Pea," the team's not-so-sweet Spec. 2 demolitions expert.

"Like you got a date waiting back home?" Little Jimmy asks from further down the table.

Swee' Pea pretends to throw one of her chopsticks at him. Everyone else--Power Chuck, Smoker, Slick Nick, No-Shit--breaks up at this. Swee' Pea is notorious for being unable to keep a steady mate of either gender.

"Turn it off!" DeSoto snaps, and Bravo Squad freezes under her basilisk glare. "Sorry, Captain," she says. "Go on, please."

Kinnard seems unruffled by the interruption. "Sorry to bore you," he says to Doc and Swee' Pea, who contritely study the laces of their gripshoes. "Things will get more interesting, I promise."

"More interesting than this google shit, I hope." No-Shit idly poking a chopstick in his half-eaten plate of food.

Smothered laughter from around the table. Isidore glares at Howard and DeSoto is about to admonish the Spec. 3, when the hatch opens and several googles float into the wardroom.

Time itself seems to grind to a halt. Apes stare at googles and Superiors stare back at Primaries; neither side knows what to say to the other until Kinnard breaks the silence.

"My crew, ladies and gentlemen," he says, then he does his diplomatic best by introducing each member of the Christ clan by name. Brief nods and acknowledgments from all around--but no handshakes, let alone smiles--as the googles find handholds or footholds on the walls and ceilings until they hover over Bravo Squad like weird angels.

When the wardroom is filled to capacity, the captain continues his briefing. "Just as well everyone is here," he says, "because you all need to see this."

He touches his wristcomp again. The expedition footage vanishes from the multiscreen. "Daily reports were sent from Huygens Base to Mare Muscoviense via PADSS until May 29," he continues, "then there was a two-day gap during which no transmissions were sent from either Titan or *Herschel Explorer*. The Pax attempted to contact the base camp and the ship, but no one heard anything. All lines were dead, and that's when Naval Intelligence started getting nervous. Then, on June 1, a signal was received from Huygens Base ... scrambled, Priority One, code nine-niner."

He hesitates, looking around the room. "It's classified Top Secret," he adds softly, "I'm the only one aboard who has seen it until now."

He taps at his wristcomp again. The multiscreen lights once more, and they watch the final dispatch from Titan.

* * * *

RECVD: 05.29.2069 1834.32.01Z PADSS MARE MUSC

CODE 01A-99/t98101/VS-29

DECRYPTED: 05.30.69 0100 NAVINT CLARKE CO

CLASS: TS

BEGIN TRANSMISSION

Close-up shot: a man seated at a console, staring straight into the camera lens. Background image slightly unfocused; seems to be within a small compartment. His eyes are wild; face haggard and unshaven, curly dark hair mussed. The T-shirt he wears is soaked with sweat; a dark red stain, like a smeared bloody handprint, is spread across his chest.

Subscript appears at the bottom of the screen: **LD.--Marquand, Henri P., Dr. (NAVINT Confirmed).**

Marquand's lips move silently for a few moments. He abruptly stops; his face registers bewilderment as he cups his right hand against his headset. He reaches forward to some point below camera range.

"...said, this is Huygens Base, Titan, to *Hershel Explorer*. Code nine-niner, mayday, mayday. I repeat, this is Huygens Base to *Hershel Explorer*, code ninety-nine, mayday..."

The mike picks up an irregular thumping noise from somewhere in the background. Marquand looks sharply to the right.

"Shit! Does anyone hear me? Answer me!"

Right hand moves out of sight below the console for a moment; it reappears, clasping an unidentifiable piece of metal which he wields like a club. He turns and shouts behind him.

"Back off!"

The thumping stops. His gaze returns to the camera. Terror in his eyes as he takes a deep breath.

"*Hershel* AI, this Marquand, Huygens Base. Emergency comlink override. Open PADSS gateway, transmission to lunar farside, code ... oh, fuck, what is it? ... code oh-one-a, priority nine-nine, message..."

The thumping recommences, louder now. Marquand glances away again, then back to the camera.

"Huygens Base under attack by hostile ...no, I mean ... alien presence ... fuck, that's not right, I mean..."

The thumping drowns out his words for a moment. Marquand pushes back his chair, stands up, hefts the metal bar. Eyes shift toward some source behind him.

"...something we found on the surface, we brought it into the AEL, and ... I dunno, somehow it got into the base and I think it's on the *Hershel* and now just about everyone is dead and I'm..."

Loud crash from behind him. Marquand whirls around, raising the bar defensively.

"Oh, God, they're through the door! They're ...!"

He charges out of camera range.

"Goddammit, get back, get...!"

Sounds of a violent scuffle. Vague shadows show through across the console.

"Shit oh God please...!"

A loud, harsh scream.

A wet chopping noise.

Silence.

The unmistakable sound of laughter.

A vague form flits across the screen, too close and too fast for the camera to either capture or focus upon.

The screen abruptly goes dark

END TRANSMISSION.

* * * *

3.11.2070 1110Z

"So, Captain," DeSoto says, "tell us the rest."

Bravo Squad has been dismissed to its temporary quarters on Deck 5 to catch some rest before the Titan flyby. *Intrepid's* flight crew has either returned to the command deck or gone off-duty. Only Kinnard, DeSoto, and Isidore remain in the wardroom, drinking coffee as they idly watch the spider-like galley 'bots clear the table.

Kinnard glances toward the hatch, making certain that it's shut. "I don't know what you mean, Colonel. I've briefed you on all aspects of this operation, including the classified details. I don't know what else is left."

She sips her squeezebulb of coffee. "C'mon, Captain," she replies. "Someone took out the entire expedition..."

"Something, perhaps you mean," Isidore interjects.

The colonel gives him a condescending look. "You've got another theory, First Officer? Hostile aliens, maybe?"

"Said as much, doesn't he?" Christ-Ortega nods toward the blank multiscreen. "Said some things came into the base through the ambient environment lab, then onto *Hershel*. Sounds like ET's tome. Colonel ... begging your pardon, of course."

Kinnard hides a smile behind his squeezebulb. Isidore's conjecture may be wrong, but he allows DeSoto more respect than she or her people has offered her crew. The rivalry between the Navy and the Militia dates back to the Moon War almost twenty years ago, when both services were born during the Pax Astra's war of independence, and the fact that the Navy has actively enlisted Superiors while the Militia is comprised almost entirely of Primaries hasn't helped matters much. A little friction between military corps can be a healthy thing, so long as it doesn't dissolve into uncooperativeness ... or outright bigotry.

DeSoto continues the attack. "If aliens caused this," she says, glaring at Christ-Ortega, "then why did

we hear someone laugh in the background after Marquand was killed? And don't tell me an ET can laugh like that."

Isidore shrugs. She has him stumped. They have watched the transmission twice now; both times, they had heard distinctly human laughter near the end. "Nada explanation," he concedes. "But rule out ETs either, we cannot."

"Which leads us back to my first question." DeSoto turns to look at Kinnard. "You've received your orders direct from River House. I can't believe Pax intelligence has seen this disk and hasn't come to conclusions of their own. So what are we looking for? Humans, aliens ... what?"

It isn't hard to read meaning into the *what?* part of the question. DeSoto wants to know if NAVINT believes that Superiors are behind the attack on Huygens Base and the loss of signal from *Hershel Explorer*. After all, Bravo Squad aboard a vessel crewed almost entirely by Superiors much like those her troops have been trained to fight.

Kinnard idly plays with the squeezebulb in his hands. "The truth is, nobody knows for sure who or what we're up against. It could be ETs, or baseline humans, or..." giving his first officer an apologetic look, "... a Superior clan that has aligned itself with the Jove rebellion."

"No clans have sent expeditions this far out." Isidore remains calm, but his voice has a threatening edge. "This range, their ships don't have."

Kinnard quickly nods his head. "I understand that, *jefe*. I'm not accusing you or any other clans of..."

"But the possibility of goo ... of Superior involvement can't be ruled out, either." DeSoto pointedly doesn't look in Christ-Ortega's direction. "And there have been no indications of ET ships entering the system, have there, Captain?"

Kinnard rakes a deep breath. True, relics of an advanced alien race were discovered on Mars almost sixty years ago; indeed, the official record of what occurred at Cydonia Base in 2032 has remained a secret that the Earth governments involved in the incident has guarded ever since. In 2056, astronomers in North America and Europe detected what appeared to be an alien craft passing through the Kuiper belt. Attempts were made to signal to the suspected starship, but if they were received or understood, there was no indication; the vessel simply vanished as if it had fallen into a hole. Intelligent life existed elsewhere in the galaxy--that question had finally been laid to rest, at least--yet it didn't seem to be very interested in humankind.

"No," he says truthfully, shaking his head. "No one has spotted an alien ship entering the system, let alone in proximity of Titan. I would have been informed if that was the case."

"So if it isn't aliens," DeSoto says, "and if there aren't any PARN vessels out this far, and the Jovians haven't decided to take out a Pax expedition just for the hell of it..." She raises an eyebrow. "Well, it does narrow down the list of suspects, doesn't it?"

"A clan would not slaughter civilians!" The crucifix on Isidore's forehead wrinkles; his long fingers clench the chair armrests. "Insult us you do, suggesting that my people would..."

"Knock it off, both of you!"

DeSoto and Christ-Ortega are startled in silence. Isidore's hands relax from his hand rests. DeSoto takes a sip from her squeezebulb and looks away. Kinnard gives them a moment to calm down, but before he can continue, DeSoto raises her hand.

"Regardless of whoever may be at fault," she says, still avoiding Isidore's eyes, "I have an objection with the current mission profile."

"Go on."

"As it stands now, you intend to drop my people on Titan before proceeding to Saturn. I understand the reasons for doing it this way. You need to refuel as soon as possible."

"But you have a problem with it."

"From Titan flyby to return rendezvous with *Excalibur*, there is a twenty-six hour stretch. That's the time, at bare minimum, that's required for *Intrepid* to make its run and meet up with the shuttle. During that period my team will be on Titan, with no backup from orbit."

Kinnard frowns. "*Excalibur* is outfitted for a two-week stay, if necessary."

"In terms of basic life-support, sure. But the shuttle is not equipped with its own weaponry. Given the presumption ..." DeSoto hesitates, then corrects herself. "Given the *likelihood* that there are no survivors at Huygens Base, I consider it imprudent for *Intrepid* to be so distant from Titan."

Kinnard absently caresses his chin with his forefinger. She has a point. Once *Intrepid* went deeper into Saturn's magnetosphere, radio contact within the landing party would become progressively difficult, finally impossible as the ship went around the planet's far side. If Bravo Squad ran into problems, it could be several hours before *Intrepid* found out, and even longer before it could respond. More to the point, though, *Intrepid* also carries two orbit-to-surface missiles. If there is trouble on the surface, Bravo Squad can call in a space-strike as a last resort.

And without a doubt, there's something hostile on the Galileo Planitia. Leaving eight men and women down there--however well-armed and trained they may be--could be a fatal risk.

Isidore is already recalculating *Intrepid's* course on his wristcomp. "*Jefe*, can we adjust the trajectory to put us in orbit around Titan?"

The first officer doesn't look up from his work. "Burn more fuel from reserves, but that we can do, yes." He hesitates, still tapping at his wrist. "Even tweak the delta-vee a little, rendezvous with *Herschel* after we drop *Excalibur*. Give us a little time for a look-see."

"How does that affect the refueling run?"

"Like I say, takes more from the reserves. Ten-plus drain, my figure." He shrugs. "Little more, little less. May have to armstrong it down the gravwell. Iffy kinda but can do."

Kinnard considers it for a moment. "Okay," he says, "go topside and tell Jon to lay it in. We'll do the run after we get *Excalibur* back aboard. Tell Marie to alert FLTCOM of the change."

"Pitch a bitch, proolly."

"Proolly ... but it's my ship."

"Gotcha, Captain." Isidore pushes out of his seat and heads for the hatch.

Kinnard looks at DeSoto. "Satisfied, Colonel?"

"Completely. Thank you, Captain." She starts to push out of her chair. "Would you like to accompany my team down to the surface? I can ask one of my men to stay behind to give you room on the shuttle."

Kinnard catches a wary glance from Isidore. "Thanks, Colonel, but that won't be necessary. I prefer to stay behind with my crew."

Isidore's sly smile is matched by the stiffness of DeSoto's parting salute. Kinnard waits until they've both left and Isidore has shut the hatch behind him before he slowly exhales.

Looking down at his hands, he is not at all surprised to find that they're trembling.

* * * *

3.12.2070 0100Z--PARN *Excalibur*

"Three ... two ... one ... drop."

A dull vibration runs through the fuselage as the shuttle disengages from its cradle.

DeSoto looks up, catches a brief glimpse of *Intrepid's* lower hull and blunt prow gliding past the cockpit canopy, then Lieutenant Simms pushes the throttle forward and twin liquid-fuel engines mounted on both sides of the fuselage ignite.

Gravity forces her back into her couch as *Excalibur* darts forward. *Intrepid* falls away, becoming toy-like in only a matter of moments, finally disappearing entirely as the shuttle yaws forward.

She looks forward as Titan hoves into view through the canopy: a burnt-orange hemisphere, featureless except for the thin hazy-blue skein of its upper atmosphere. Saturn hovers above its limb, twice the size of the Moon as seen from Earth orbit, its vast rings now a tilted plane that bisects the planet neatly in half.

"Are we there yet?"

"Mommy, I gotta go to the bathroom!"

"Tell Swee' Pea to stop hitting me!"

"Smoker hit me first!"

Mock-childish voices and coarse adult laughter in her headset. DeSoto glances at Slick Nick; his concentration is totally focused on his instruments, but a wide grin spreads across his face. "Now, now, behave," he murmurs. "We still have eight hundred kilometers to go. If you can't behave yourselves, we'll just have to turn around and go home."

"Can we really?"

"Yeah ... I wanna go home, too!"

DeSoto finds herself grinning despite her nervousness. She can't see her team; they're in the passenger compartment on the other side of the cockpit hatch, already sealed inside the massive Hoplite combat armor suits they'll wear on the surface. They can't share the stunning view she and Slick Nick have through the pressurized cockpit windows.

She clicks on the comlink. "If you'll promise to be good," she says, "I'll let you look out the window." She then reaches up to the com panel and flicks switches that will feed *Excalibur's* forward camera into their suits' stereo-optic viewplates. Her people immediately drop the back-seat-brat routine.

"Whoa...!"

"Hey, check it out...!"

"Man, will you look at that..."

"Shit, that's better than sex..."

"How would you know?"

DeSoto lets them carry on like this for awhile, until Titan completely fills the canopy and she can see the first amber glow of atmospheric friction lighting the edges of *Excalibur's* long wings. Slick Nick silently holds up his gloved left hand and clenches his fist three times. "Okay," she says, "tighten it up back there. We'll be on the ground in about fifteen minutes, so double-check your suits, then check your buddy's."

A sudden surge of turbulence causes *Excalibur* to lurch violently, its wings wagging back and forth as they grab the first reaches of the upper atmosphere. Her stomach jumps up and down; she grabs her armrests. "This could be rough," Slick says, "so hang on."

And don't puke, she silently adds, now glad that she insisted against Anna Christ-Webster offering breakfast to her team before they left. Not that anyone was looking forward to more algae salad...

Excalibur dives through Titan's hazy blue stratosphere, wingtips leaving behind long curling streamers as the shuttle streaks over dense cloud banks of hydrocarbon smog. For a few scant moments, the roiling cloud tops are highlighted by refracted sun dogs; Saturn is a placid quarter-moon suspended in blue mist above a weird twilight. A surreal vista, as breathtaking and pure as any DeSoto has seen in her far-traveling life, easily matching an autumn sunrise over the Colorado Rockies or twilight on Olympus Mons.

Then the shuttle plummets through the cloud layer and Saturn is lost to sight. DeSoto glances at the altimeter; they're now three hundred kilometers above the surface. Nothing can be seen through the canopy except dense orange smog reminiscent of the noxious fumes that billowed out of factory smokestacks on Earth in the last century.

Slick Nick taps commands into the keypad on his yoke and a translucent heads-up display appears on the inside of the canopy: a three-dimensional map of Galileo Planitia's equatorial zone. A red spot pulses below their angle of descent. "*Intrepid*, this is *Excalibur*," he murmurs into his headset mike. "Altitude three-seventy-five klicks, downrange one hundred two klicks and closing. Huygens Base homing beacon acquired. Picking up some chop, but all systems green for go."

"*We copy, Excalibur*," replies Marie Christ-Ortega. "*Confirm your position, you are go for primary approach. Over.*"

"*Roger that, Intrepid.*" Nick cups his hand over his mike and glances at DeSoto. "Nice of her to knock off that google shit for once. I swear, I can't understand what they're saying half the time."

DeSoto clutches her armrests as the shuttle lurches again. "Keep your mind on the job, Lieutenant," she says. "This isn't the simulator."

"Naw. It's easier." But he places both hands firmly on the yoke as he returns his attention to his instruments.

It takes forever to penetrate the smog, and when they finally do, visibility is only slightly better. At two hundred kilometers, the ground is still invisible, lost beneath vast methane clouds only slightly darker than the sky around them. Yet the turbulence diminishes as *Excalibur* sweeps downward through the

reddish-brown sky.

The beacon pulses brighter now; the pilot locks the guidance computer onto its signal and a concentric grid appears on the heads-up display. As he radio-checks *Intrepid* again, DeSoto roll-calls her team through the comlink. No problems; everyone's CAS is working properly, no suit leaks or computer glitches.

Excalibur is twenty-six clicks up and fifteen clicks northeast of the target when it penetrates the lower cloud decks. DeSoto is startled by the gentle patter of rain against the canopy. Looking up, she sees fat amber droplets splattering against the dense glass. She remembers her mission briefing at Highgate: it's ethane rain. Titan is one big soup kettle of organic chemistry--nitrogen, methane, trace amounts of various compounds and acids existing in gaseous, liquid, and solid states--much like Earth itself during its primitive millennia, although Titan's atmospheric pressure at sea level is four and a half seas as dense than Earth's, and its globe-circling ocean is a sludgy mass of liquid ethane. If the pressure were to crack the shuttle's fuselage and the cockpit was flooded with gas, she imagines that her last impression of this life would be of a rank odor like an elephant fart.

Thinking of this, she reaches beneath her seat to retrieve her pressure suit helmet. Why take chances?

Ten clicks above the surface, seven clicks downrange from Huygens Base, and still she cannot see the ground. Outside the canopy, everything is cloaked in dung-colored darkness, broken only by the strobing wing lights and the geometric graphics of the heads-up display. Slick Nick no longer makes wisecracks; his concentration is totally focused on his instruments as he coaxes *Excalibur* toward the homing beacon. DeSoto wants to ask him if this is still like running the simulator back home, but decides against it; she just hopes that he's worthy of his nickname.

Five hundred meters above the surface, two hundred meters from the base; Nick switches on the landing lights, but they still can't see a thing outside the canopy. Sweat oozes down the pilot's forehead as he throttles back the main engines, hits the VTOL pods and lowers the landing gear. The jets howl bloody murder, almost drowning out the steady stream of pings sent by the sonoscope; there's solid surface down there after all, but that's the only comfort they have.

It isn't until *Excalibur* is less than twenty-five meters above the surface and forty meters from the beacon--almost dead-center in the bulls eye--that she catches the first glimmer of light through the canopy: a glowing oval of spotlights off the port wing, fading in and out of the darkness like a lost soul.

"There it is!" she shouts, pointing toward the light. Her cry is lost in the staccato rattle of broken ice bouncing off the lower fuselage. There is a loud thud as the landing gear pads stamp down upon the frozen surface. Slick Nick's hands rush across his console, switching everything off, as *Excalibur* settles on its gears and, finally, comes to a halt.

DeSoto closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and slowly lets it out. Then she tells her pilot to decompress the passenger hold and pop the lower fuselage hatch.

* * * *

3.12.2070 0234Z--PARN *Intrepid*

Herschel Explorer drifts in equatorial orbit a thousand kilometers above Titan, somehow looking less like a spaceship than an abandoned house. The windows of its rotor arms are dark and the arms themselves are still, nor is there any light shining through the portholes in its barrel-like hub. The only clue that the vessel's nuclear generator is still active is the glow of red and blue navigation beacons scattered along its hull; otherwise, the giant ship could well be one of those decommissioned spacecraft parked in

the orbital junkyard at the third LaGrange point between Earth and the Moon, awaiting salvage for scrap metal spare parts.

"Word up from *Excalibur*, Captain." This from Marie Christ-Ortega, seated at the com station. "Safely arrived at Huygens Base, preparing to send out the squad."

Kinnard nods, not taking his eyes from the windows. *Intrepid* is positioned three hundred meters from the *Hershel Explorer*; he hasn't been able to take his eyes off the silent argosy since they've arrived. "Copy that," he says distractedly. "Let me know when they've entered the base." He prods his jaw with his fingertips. "Cayenne, how's Isidore doing?"

"*Suited up, in the airlock.*" The chief engineer's voice is a mosquito buzz in his left ear. "*Decompressing now.*"

"Very good." Kinnard looks back at Marie. "Open comlink with Isidore and his 'bot. Display everything on the screens." He hesitates. "Feed everything into the flight recorder," he adds. "Audio, suitcam, telemetry from the 'bot, the works. I want everything on both disc and hard memory."

Marie's fingers twitch in midair as she follows his orders, and Kinnard revolves his chair to gaze at the multiscreen above the chart table. Two sets of images appear on the screens: the interior of the main airlock as captured by the tiny camera mounted on Isidore's right shoulder, and an external shot of the airlock hatch as seen by the spider-like repair 'bot clinging to *Intrepid*'s outer hull.

"*Comlink check, one two three.*" Isidore's voice is slightly fuzzed as it comes through ceiling speakers in the command center. He holds his left hand up to the camera and wiggles his thick-gloved fingers; the image blurs for a moment, then refocuses. "*Copy everything, Marie?*"

"Roger that," she says to her first-husband. "See you just fine. Careful now, you be."

"*Airlock decompressed,*" Cayenne says. "*Opening outer hatch.*"

Two points-of-view of the same action: inside the airlock, the hatch unseals and silently slides upward; the 'bot catches the same image from outside the ship. On one screen, the circular portal moves closer until it is filled with Titan's orange hemisphere, with the *Hershel Explorer* hovering in the foreground; on an adjacent screen, the head and shoulders of a figure in bulky EVA armor slowly emerges from the open hatch.

"Switching to manual control of the 'bot." Marie's hands spread open as if she is groping her way through a dark room. As Isidore exits the airlock the 'bot casts off the hull and follows him, its stereo-optic eyes catching tiny flares from his EVA pack as he begins his untethered spacewalk toward the *Hershel*. In one sense, Isidore is being accompanied by his first-wife; she controls the 'bot as if her mind has been transplanted into its arachnid form.

"Mark, one minute," Jon says from his console. "Dosimeter count nominal."

Kinnard nods. Here within Saturn's magnetosphere, Isidore's spacewalk is limited to a maximum REM exposure-time of twenty-six minutes; after that, Kinnard has to pull his crewman back in, regardless of whether his objectives have been accomplished or not. The 'bot can continue an external inspection of the ship, but it's not designed to fit into *Hershel*'s airlock.

As Isidore floats toward the *Hershel*, his suitcam catches a glimpse of a bat-winged shape nestled in the argosy's payload bay, above the fuel tanks and behind the rotor arms: *Ulysses*, the ship's lander. Kinnard takes note of the fact: it either means that the science team had returned to the *Hershel*, or that

some of the *Hershel's* flight crew were still aboard the ship, before the communications blackout.

To his relief, it takes Isidore just less than ten minutes to cross the void between the two ships, and less than a minute after that to locate the main airlock on the hub. It is then that they encounter the first surprise:

"Intrepid, the airlock hatch is open."

This observation is almost unnecessary; through both the 'bot's eyes and suitcam lens, Kinnard can see a dark, circular hole where an iris hatch should be. "Check the inner hatch," he says, but Marie's 'bot is already scuttling closer on its magnetized legs, its stalk-mounted eyes peering down into the black maw. A moment later, Isidore's helmet lamp illuminates the airlock interior.

Nothing reflects the light except the airlock walls. Beyond that there is only more darkness, as if they were peering into a bottomless well.

"Inner hatch open, too," Isidore says.

There is a quaver in his voice, and Kinnard knows why. Both hatches cannot simultaneously open by accident; the ship's AI would automatically prevent such a catastrophe from occurring. The only way this might occur would be if someone deliberately reprogrammed the AI to disregard a vital fail-safe routine, and that was suicidal...

"Mark, thirteen minutes," Jon says.

Kinnard nervously rubs his chin. Isidore has to begin his return to *Intrepid* now ... or he goes inside *Hershel*. Before Kinnard can make a decision, though, his first-officer does it for him.

"Going in," Isidore says.

On one set of screens, the airlock fills the suitcam's field of view; on another, the 'bot sees his spacesuited body disappearing headfirst through the outer hatch.

* * * *

3.12.2070 0246Z--Huygens Base

Bravo Squad advances on the base as a V-shaped formation, the beams of their helmet lamps quickly swallowed by the darkness around them, guided by little more than the dim ring of floodlights surrounding the habitat. The soldiers have only ventured twenty meters from *Excalibur* before it becomes invisible save for the dim glow of its wing lights; only the lights before them and telemetry from the shuttle, displayed on the heads-up screens within their CAS armor, prevents them getting disoriented and lost.

Digital gauges inside their suits inform them that the surface temperature is 93 degrees Kelvin; the only sound they hear, aside from the voices on the comlink, is the sullen crunch of methane ice beneath their boots.

Power Chuck: *"Look sharp, guys. Keep the formation tight."*

Swee' Pea: *"Look at what, Sarge? I can't see a damn thing."*

Power Chuck: *"Just follow the guy in front of you."*

No-Shit: *"Shit! I'm slippin' and slidin' all ower the place!"*

Power Chuck: *"Keep your gun pointed down. I don't want no one getting shot in the back if you fall."*

Smoker: *"Can't you just go to jump-jets? We can cover ground a lot quicker that..."*

Power Chuck: *"Negatory on that. Just head toward the lights and keep walking."*

And so they do, six tin soldiers alone in the freezing darkness, sky and ground nearly indistinguishable from one another, until they enter the ring of lights and a metal hemisphere abruptly looms before them. The flashing red beacon at its apex reflects dully off their massive carapaces. A small rover is parked nearby, empty and abandoned, like a dune-buggy stolen from a California beach by space aliens who went joy-riding before ditching it on the other side of the solar system. The airlock is surrounded by hundreds of frozen footprints; its outer hatch is closed.

Sergeant Clay opens the hatch and peers inside. The airlock is just large enough to accommodate four armored soldiers. Power Chuck orders Swee' Pea and Smoker to recon the habitat from the outside, then informs Colonel DeSoto--who, along with Slick Nick, is still aboard the shuttle--of his intent to enter the dome. She concurs, and so he takes No-Shit, Doc, and Little Jimmy into the airlock.

Cycle-through takes five minutes; a green light flashes on the control panel as the inner hatch thumps slightly. Power Chuck pulls the locklever up, then slowly pushes the hatch open.

At first, he can see nothing except the bright oval of his searchlight reflecting against a bulkhead wall five meters away. No other light to be seen; the ceiling panels are dark, either burned out or deliberately switched off. Sergeant Clay pans his lamp around the antechamber; its beam casts shadows off the empty p-suits hanging from racks, the long row of helmets arranged along a shelf.

"We're in the suit-room, Colonel," he says. "Looks normal so far, other than that the lights are all out."

"See anyone inside?" DeSoto asks.

Power Chuck shakes his head. "No, ma'am." As he steps further into the ready-room, his searchlight finds an open hatch at the opposite end of the compartment, leading off to the left.

Corporal Barnes's voice comes over the comlink. *"Nothing on the outside,"* Swee' Pea says. *"Perimeter secure. Outer hatch of the ambient environment lab is open, but we looked in and didn't see anything."*

"We copy," DeSoto responds. *"Clay, take your people further into the base. Barnes, you and Hernandez proceed to main airlock but remain outside."*

"Roger that." Power Chuck takes another two steps into the ready room, allowing his squad mates to enter the compartment. Startled by a faint metallic grinding noise from behind, he turns to see Little Jimmy shoving the inner airlock hatch closed behind him.

"Hey, Sarge," says No-Shit. *"Request permission to pop tops."*

Power Chuck checks his suit's ambient-environment panel. Atmospheric composition is oxygen-nitrogen and pressure is Earth-normal, but the temperature is nearly zero Celsius. If the base's power supply is still operational, it must have been diverted to keeping the habitat warm even this little.

Nonetheless, it would be good to stick their necks out of these damned suits. And it might help their search for survivors if they didn't have to peer at everything through periscopes or the tiny slots in their armor. "Colonel. Corporal Ballou has requested..."

"I heard," DeSoto says. "Permission granted to pop tops."

"Thank you, ma'am." Clay hears relieved sighs over the comlink as the other three men toggle palm switches which raise the oval lids of their suits. Frigid air rushes around his exposed face and neck as Power Chuck does the same. For a moment it feels delicious, after the humid warmth of his suit, then he coughs little clouds of steams as the cold penetrates his lungs. It's cold as hell in here...

And it smells bad. Beneath the iciness, there is a stench. His nose wrinkles at the first inhalation.

Sergeant Clay turns toward the open hatchway at the end of suit-up room. As he does, his lamp beam grazes a small, dark object on a shelf containing p-suit helmets, in a corner where he hadn't looked until just this moment. Something about the object catches the light in a subtle, familiar way that makes him do a double-take. He turns back and fastens the light on the object, and jerks back as a pair of eyes stare back at him.

A pair of eyes in a decapitated human head, carefully placed on the shelf so that it looks straight at the first person to enter the ready-room.

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3.12.2070 0317Z--PARN *Intrepid*

Images on the multiscreen, relayed to *Intrepid's* flight deck from both the *Hershel Explorer* and Huygens Base: The headless corpse of Henri Marquand, sprawled across a carpet of dry blood covering the floor of the base control room.

The naked man found in the central passageway of the *Hershel*, hands locked in a death-grip upon the shaft of the reactor probe that was used to impale him to the bulkhead wall.

The woman hanged from a ceiling conduit in the base galley, her bare feet charred and blistered from exposure to the stove top just below her.

The body of a man floating weightless in the argosy's command center--no apparent signs of violence, dead nonetheless.

Stark silence in the command center as the grisly pictures are displayed on the multiscreen, broken only by an occasional static-laced comment over the comlink from either Isidore aboard the *Hershel* or one of the soldiers exploring the base ... and the sound of a woman weeping.

When Marquand's severed head appeared on the screens, Marie screamed out loud. Her MINN-link with Lieutenant Clay's suitcam had relayed the image into her mind just as clearly as if she had been in the CAS herself. Disconnected from the comlink now, she is curled into a tight little ball, hugging her knees against her chest, her tears tiny spheres that float around her face. Cayenne has temporarily taken her post at the communications console; Kinnard notes that she hasn't connected her own MINN to the comlink.

"Dead ... all dead ..." Marie whispers.

Kinnard swallows painfully; his throat and mouth are dry. Three bodies on the *Hershel*, six on Titan; virtually everyone met one sort of gruesome fate or another. A woman's throat was cut from ear to ear; a man was found in the base's secondary airlock to the AEL, still trying to prize open the inner hatch with his fingertips even as the gaseous nitrogen/methane filled his lungs...

Movement behind him. Kinnard pulls his eyes away from the multiscreen. Peter and Anna

Christ-Webster have come on deck. They've watched everything from below decks; nothing has to be explained. Anna nestles Marie's head against her shoulder, trying to calm her. Kinnard catches her eye and nods toward the deck hatch. Anna says nothing; she takes her clan-sister in her arms and carries her toward the hatch. Peter watches them go, then glides over to Kinnard's seat, locking his feet around a ceiling rail.

"Okay," Kinnard says softly, "you tell me ... how many of these are murders, and how many are suicides?"

Peter's thin lips purse as he studies the multiscreen. "Tell for certain cannot, without being there..."

"Nobody leaves *Intrepid* until Isidore and the landing party come home," he says. Bravo Company has scouted the entire base; Isidore was still making his way through the *Hershel Explorer*. Three crewmembers are still unaccounted for, including Captain Baylor. Kinnard is unwilling to risk anyone else going EVA until he knows what killed nine men and women. "From what you've seen so far, give me your best guess."

Peter hesitates. "No pathologist I am, no can sure tell without autopsies..."

"Best guess. Off the record"

Peter lets out his breath. "S'okay ... most look like murder two, murder three. Nada suicides, far as I can tell. Two tortured during murder, like the woman in the galley, but suddenly most died, like caught by surprise. But see here..."

He touches his Wristcomp; the image on one of the screens blurs as it goes into retrieval mode, then freezes on an image captured by Lieutenant Hernandez's suitcam fifteen minutes earlier: a dead man sitting against a bulkhead, his head bowed forward, his arms and legs sprawled out. Near his right hand is a bloodstained knife. "Look here," Peter says. "Nada injury. No mark on him. Just sat down and died, that's all."

He taps his wristcomp again; another screen whips into the recent past, stopping to show the weightless body Isidore discovered in the *Hershel's* command center. "No marks on him either," Peter says. "Entire hub decompressed when main airlock went open, but that's not what killed him. People in a blowout don't go into fetal position, but look ... that's what happened to him. Just curled up and died."

Kinnard studies the bodies. "You think he died before the blowout?" Peter nods his head. "You think both of these people...?"

"The last ones to die, yes, I think."

They study the multiscreen for few moments. "So what are the chances of two people going psycho at the same time?" Kinnard finally asks.

Peter ponders the question, then finally shakes his head. "Bet on that, I wouldn't. Think they killed each other, until only one person was left alive on both the ship and on Titan. Then they just up and died..."

"But what killed them?"

Having no answers and apparently unwilling to speculate, Peter doesn't reply. Kinnard is about to press him for a response when Isidore's voice speaks in his right ear:

"*Captain? Found something, I think.*"

Kinnard glances up at the center screen. It displays the real-time image from Christ-Ortega's suitcam; caught the luminescent oval of his helmet lamp is a closed rectangular hatch. "What have you got?" he asks.

"Entrance hatch to Arm Two, Captain." Kinnard is mildly surprised; while he and Peter were talking, Isidore must have left the command deck and gone back down the axis passageway to the carrousel connecting the hub to the argosy's three rotor arms. *"Just tried to open it, but jammed shut it is."*

"Jammed?" Kinnard's brow furrows. "You mean the handle doesn't work, or the button?"

"Neither one. See?" Isidore's arms come into view. His gauntleted hands grasp the lock-lever in the middle of the hatch and twist it: first clockwise, then counter-clockwise. The lever doesn't budge a centimeter either way. *"Then tried the button. Look what happens..."*

His right hand moves to a panel on the bulkhead next to the hatch. His finger pushes a red button; the hatch remains shut, but a message appears on the panel's tiny LCD screen.

"Zoom in on that, please," Kinnard says. A moment later the LCD fills the center screen:

ERROR 10

ENTER CODE A-300

Something cold slithers down Kinnard's spine.

"Code A-300?" Peter is confused. "Mean what?"

Without looking away from the screen, Kinnard snaps his fingers at his navigator. "Jon! Give me a holo cutaway of the *Hershel*, Arm Two!" As Christ-Caswell moves to comply, Kinnard turns to the chief engineer. "Cayenne! Get ready to download files from *Hershel*'s primary memory buffer! Prefix code alpha three hundred!"

Peter is confused. "Marion, what are you...?"

"Hush." Kinnard begins entering a memorized nine-digit string into his wristcomp. "Stand by to transmit counter-code on my mark..."

"No can do. Captain," Cayenne says.

"What?"

Cayenne is just as bewildered as Peter and Jon. "Can't download or transmit," she says. "Still don't have telemetry with the *Hershel*. Can't download anything until we..."

"Damn!" In his rush, he has forgotten that the comlink between the two ships is still dead; the only operational radio channels were those with Isidore and the 'bot. He forces himself to calm down. "Isidore, leave that section and go topside, *mucho pronto*. Get the AI back on-line, then reactivate the com panel and open a S-band channel to *Intrepid*. Move."

"Copy that," Isidore says. The center screen blurs out-of-focus as he pivots away from the Arm Two hatch and begins moving back through the carrousel to the hub.

"What you find?" Peter asks as he follows Kinnard to the map table. The holo tank has already lit, displaying a rotating translucent diagram of Arm Two that Jon has summoned up from *Intrepid*'s AI

library subsystem. "Something important, now?"

"Damn straight, it's something important." Kinnard traces the arm's six levels with his forefinger, starting at the top: **2A/Labs; 2B/Life Support and Logistics; 2C/Hydroponics; 2D/Hydroponics; 2E/Sickbay...**

"Bingo," he murmurs as his finger reaches the lowest level of the arm: **2F/Hibernation.**

Peter stares at the holo. "Last three people are down there, you think?"

"Think so, yeah." Kinnard nods his head. "They barricaded themselves inside Arm Two, disabled the locks, then put themselves in biostasis. Decided to wait it out until someone came to rescue them."

"Then survivors there might be, *nyet*?"

Kinnard glances at the doctor and smiles. "Possible," he says, then his smile fades. "But Error 10 means that a main hatch has been disabled from the inside. The A-300 code is a security lockout ... it means that the computer can't correct an AI error unless a Pax captain enters his password. No one else aboard *Hershel* would know it but Captain Baylor ... and I'm the only one aboard *Intrepid* who knows the counter-code."

He gazes at the holo once again. "If Steven Baylor was one of the survivors and he locked himself in Arm Two on purpose, then that means he was counting on someone finding him. And if that's the case..."

His voice trails off. "So you're saying what?" Peter asks.

"That he left us a message," Kinnard finishes.

* * * *

3.12.2070 0331Z--Huygens Base

Barnes still stands outside the main airlock when DeSoto and Simms arrive at the airlock. As the two officers emerge from the darkness into the floodlighted perimeter, Swee' Pea automatically raises her rifle-arm into firing position: a twitch of her right index finger, and the soft outer garment of their p-suits which be shredded by razor-sharp flechettes fired at 500 rounds per second.

Slick Nick stops cold in his tracks, but the colonel keeps walking toward the dome. "Stand down, Corporal!" DeSoto snaps, and the gun-arm's muzzle immediately falls. "Didn't you hear me tell Sergeant Clay that we were coming over?"

"*Yes, ma'am.*" Swee' Pea's expression can't be seen outside her CAS armor, but DeSoto imagines that the corporal is properly red-faced. "*I'm sorry, Colonel. You startled me and...*"

She doesn't complete the thought, and DeSoto doesn't push her. Bravo Squad is on edge and rightfully so, considering what they found inside the habitat. On the whole, DeSoto is grateful that Barnes is high-strung right now; at least it means she's alert.

"Don't worry about it," DeSoto says. "No harm done." She looks around. "Where's Smoker. I thought he was out here with you?"

"*Corporal Hernandez has cycled through the airlock,*" Swee' Pea replies. "*Sergeant Clay asked him to come inside to assist with...*"

Again she hesitates. "With what, soldier?" DeSoto demands.

"With the clean-up, ma'am." Another pause. "I volunteered to stay outside, ma'am ... to remain on guard duty."

"What's there to guard against, Corporal? There's no one here but us."

"Yes, ma'am, I understand." Hesitation. "I preferred to remain at my post. That's all."

Now DeSoto understands. Corporal Patty Barnes--tough little Swee' Pea, the PAM lifer who has stood up to the worst hazing her male squad mates could throw at her--is frightened out of her wits. She has heard all comlink crosstalk from within the base: she knows that Huygens Base is a slaughterhouse, and has found the limits of her courage. She doesn't want to see what's on the other side of the airlock.

On one hand DeSoto is sympathetic. Were it not for the fact that she is the squad CO, she would just as soon let Power Chuck handle the nasty business of wrapping up the corpses. Yet she also knows that, just as she can't let herself off the hook, nor can she allow Barnes the luxury of distancing herself. If Swee' Pea remains outside, then eventually her squad mates will accuse her of wimping out. Their scorn, along with her own self-doubts, will eventually tear her apart. DeSoto has seen it happen before; it almost happened to her once, many years ago.

So the colonel compromises. She points toward the airlock. "Lieutenant Simms, cycle through and assist the others with the clean-up." Slick Nick silently acknowledges her with a raised hand and steps toward the closed hatch, then DeSoto turns to Barnes. "Corporal, you'll accompany me to the AEL airlock. I want to see what the lab looks like."

"Yes, ma'am." Barnes sounds relieved; escorting her squad leader isn't as bad as picking up pieces of dead bodies.

DeSoto allows Swee' Pea to lead the way to the Ambient Environment Lab on the other side of the habitat. The AEL is a small, unpressurized dome nestled against the pressurized habitat, connected to it by a sleeve containing the base's secondary airlock. Barnes opens the outer hatch, then steps aside to let the colonel enter the dome before her.

"You first, Corporal," DeSoto says. "Your lamp is brighter, and I'm unarmed."

Swee' Pea says nothing; to her credit, though, there is no hesitation this time. Bending her knees slightly so that the top of her bulky armor doesn't hit the lintel, she ducks through the hatch and enters the darkened dome.

The overhead lights are off; their suit lamps cast long shadows off metal benches, stools and shelves. An island-table is in the center of the circular room. Spectrometers, microscopes, a vacuum chamber, photographic equipment, a computer terminal--DeSoto recognizes the usual apparatus one might find in a xenoscience lab.

Everything here is neat and tidy. That's the first impression that strikes DeSoto as she and Swee' Pea make their way through the lab. Clay had told her that the main dome had been totally trashed; even bunks had been slashed by a knife. However, the AEL seems to have been unmolested. A rack containing flasks near the airlock door is intact; even a glass sample jar perched on the edge of the island table is undisturbed.

"No bodies here," Barnes says.

"Everyone in the science team has been accounted for already," DeSoto reminds her, pointing toward the closed airlock hatch. "They found one guy in there, but I think Ballou has removed him already."

"Yeah. Okay... yes, ma'am." DeSoto hears an angry sigh over the comlink. "I'd sure like to get the guys who did this in my sights."

Something about that jar... "I don't know what you mean, Corporal. Who are you talking about?"

A reticent pause. "You know ... the googles."

DeSoto looks up at her. "I don't recall anyone saying that the Superiors were under suspicion."

A short, harsh laugh. "C'mon, Colonel ... who else could it be? They're the only ones who could get out this far. And they don't seem to like the Pax very much, so ... y'know, who else is there, right?"

DeSoto looks at the jar again. "Some Superiors we know might disagree with that opinion, Barnes."

"Yeah, but they're good googles. I mean, they're different..."

DeSoto picks up the jar, examines it under her helmet lamp. It's empty, save for a red-brown stain on its bottom. Yet someone had marked the label in black felt-tip pen: **Spec. 51/Site 12. Org. Comp. SAVE!**

She bends over to flash her helmet beam across the floor. No identical stains, no spilled substances. So what happened to the sample?

"It's gotta be the googles, ma'am." Swee' Pea's voice natters in her headset. "I know they're your friends, but..."

DeSoto places the jar back on the table. "I don't have any friends, Corporal," she says, "and don't you forget it."

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am."

Enough of this. It's time for her princess to come out of her shell, whether she likes it or not. "Let's go," she says, turning toward the airlock. "We've spent enough time in here, and we've got a job to do."

"Yes, ma'am." Barnes follows her to the airlock.

* * * *

A/V LOG: PASS VS-29 HERSCHEL EXPLORER

5.30.69/2346.01.46Z

A man floats, peers into the camera lens: dark rings under his eyes, two-day beard, grey T-shirt mottled with sweat. He hovers weightless in a spaceship compartment, his right hand raised above his head, grasping a ceiling rung for support.

"I'm John Stephen Baylor, captain of the Pax Astra argosy *Herschel Explorer*. This is a supplemental log entry, recorded in Deck 2F, the hibernation bay. It is 30 May, 2069 ... Pax Independence Day, God save the Queen and all that ... and it is now ... uh, 2347 hours Greenwich...."

He glances past the lens. Someone out of camera range says something; Baylor nods slightly, then addresses the camera again.

"If you're watching this, then you already know that half of my crew is dead and that all the ship's

decks and compartments, save for this one, have been deliberately decompressed. The only three known survivors ... communications officer Sharlee Fulkerson, ship's doctor Chang Tse, and myself ... have sought refuge in the hibernation deck. Sharlee has shut down all the ship's systems except for the nuclear reactor, the backup AI system, and life support for this deck only. Once this entry is complete, Dr. Chang will place us in biostasis, in hope that a rescue party will find us before the reactor gives out and the zombie tanks can't sustain us any longer..."

Again, an unintelligible off-camera voice interrupts him. Baylor acknowledges the speaker with a curt nod.

"The most important thing is, do not ... repeat, do not, under any circumstances ... attempt to revive us until you have reached Highgate. Keep these tanks sealed until then. We don't believe that we have contracted the contagion which led to the deaths of our crewmates or those on Titan, if they are indeed..."

He nervously wets his lips with the tip of tongue.

"Look, just keep the tanks shut until you reach Highgate, and only then open them under strict quarantine conditions. This is why we've--one of the reasons, at any rate--why we've voided the rest of the ship. The contagion seems to be airborne. We don't think we've contracted the contagion--the plague, the virus, whatever it is--but we can't be too careful, and ... um, whatever. Dr. Chang wishes to speak now.

Baylor moves aside. There is a momentary glimpse of the hibernation deck--three zombie tanks in the background, their lids open--then Chang moves into view. He looks just as exhausted as Baylor, but he speaks more rapidly.

"The contagion appears to be an aerobic virus that is native to Titan. It was brought into the ambient environment lab at Huygens Base as a sample of microbiological life forms discovered on the surface by the science team, from a tide pool near the edge of the Galileo Planitia. I'm uncertain about the exact means of transmission, but I believe that members of the science team may have cycled through the AEL airlock with living samples which were then deliberately left unsterilized, in order to examine them more close in the habitat's bio lab. In a rich oxygen-nitrogen environment, the life form quickly propagated and mutated until an aerobic strain found hosts in the expedition members..."

Chang pauses, taking a deep breath.

"So far as I can tell--and this is highly conjectural--once the contagion is metabolized by the lungs and enters the bloodstream, it attacks the central nervous system, specifically the frontal lobes and motor cortex through the thalamus and pituitary glands. It gradually wipes out everything it infects, literally rotting out the brain, but as it does so, it drives the infected person insane. Before the plague kills its victims, it drives them into homicidal seizures."

Chang glances at Baylor, then looks back at the camera.

"No one knew that Huygens Base was contaminated until sporadic quarrels, then fistfights, began to break out among members of the science team. At this time, two members of the ship's crew were visiting the base. Then it got worse until..."

He shakes his head.

"Never mind. We now believe that they were contaminated, and when they returned to the *Hershel* they brought the contagion with them. By the time we lost contact with Huygens Base, the infected

Hershel crewmembers had killed one uninfected members of our party, and the three of us sealed ourselves in Arm Two. We then --"

An angry voice off-camera stops Chang. He glances to the left, then reluctantly moves aside, allowing a third person to enter the picture: a bespectacled young woman, sweaty blond hair plastered against her face, her features distorted by her closeness to the lens.

"Look, bottom line ... everyone down there is dead!"

Baylor's arm comes into view, as if to grab Fulkerson's shoulder.

"Fuck you, lemme finish!"

The captain retreats.

"I just wanna say ... I just wanna say ... fuck you, Captain! I just wanna say, I don't believe we left six guys ... six real good guys, I loved them all, but we left them down there to fuckin' die because these assholes ... these assholes here ... and then they blew out the airlock when they could have saved Tim, but they just left him out there and --"

Chang and Baylor try to pull Fulkerson away, but she struggles against them as she screams at the camera.

"Get away from me, you pricks! I said I didn't wanna transmit because I didn't wanna--Okay? I just don't wanna die, that's all, I just don't wanna..."

Chang gets Fulkerson in a headlock and hauls her away. A long pause, then Baylor reappears.

"I don't think she's infected. She's just under stress..."

His gaze darts aside, then he jaunts away from the camera. For several minutes there is nothing to be seen except the open zombie tanks. Scuffling noises in the background. A high-pitched scream. Silence. Then Baylor reappears.

"Look, whatever else happens, you can't let this thing get into the inner system. If it finds its way to the Pax, then everyone is screwed. This sucker thrives on oxygen and eats brain cells like candy. Just..."

He stops, glances away for a moment, then looks back at the camera.

"Just use your best judgement. I want to live, but ... use your best judgement."

His eyes rapidly blink, as if forcing back tears.

"Caitlin, Robert ... I love you. *Hershel Explorer* signing off."

Blank screen.

* * * *

3.12.2070 0347Z--PARN *Intrepid*

"Huygens Base, this is *Intrepid*, do you copy? Over."

Static. Jon Christ-Caswell waits a few moments, then tries again, adjusting the gain on the S-band transponder. On the third attempt a male voice comes over the comlink: "Intrepid this is Huygens Base.

We copy."

Kinnard hovers above the com station. "Huygens, this is Captain Kinnard. With whom am I speaking?"

A pause, then: "*Intrepid*, this is Sergeant Clay."

"Sergeant Clay, we've been trying to get through to *Excalibur*, but there isn't any response. Can you tell me where Colonel DeSoto is right now?"

A longer pause, then DeSoto's voice comes over the line: "Captain, this is DeSoto. I'm here at the base with my people. There's no one aboard *Excalibur*. Is there a problem?"

Kinnard and Christ-Caswell trade looks; this is not good. Kinnard hesitates. "Yes, Colonel, we may have a problem. I have to speak to you in private. Use channel B on the S-band transponder. Over."

A few moments pass, then DeSoto's voice returns: "Affirmative, *Intrepid*. Channel B on the S-band in sixty seconds. Huygens Base out."

Jon switches the comlink to the new frequency as Kinnard pushes himself over to his seat and straps in. He checks the chronometer: forty-five seconds to go. DeSoto must be looking for some place in the habitat where she won't be overheard by her team. At least he hopes she is...

"Tell her what, Marion?" Peter Christ-Webster has followed him to his chair; he floats upside down above Kinnard, clutching the ceiling rail with his feet.

Kinnard gazes up at this friend. "The truth," he says. "Then we figure out where to go from there."

Peter slowly nods his head. "May not have caught the contagion," he says, "even if they've been breathing the air. Viruses cannot survive very long outside a living host. Everyone on Huygens and the *Hershel* dead a long time."

"Most terrestrial viruses, you mean." The contagion had evolved on Titan, a world whose environment was radically different from Earth's: colder surface temperature, higher pressure, poisonous atmosphere. It was a miracle any form of life had developed there, let alone one which could propagate so quickly in an oxygen-nitrogen environment, spawning such lethal mutations. And yet it had ... He looks up at Peter again. "Are you willing to take that chance?"

The physician says nothing. Kinnard glances at the chronometer, then glances over at the chief engineer. John silently nods to him, then Kinnard prods his jaw again. "Huygens base, this is *Intrepid*. Colonel DeSoto, do you copy?"

"I hear you, Captain. What's going on up there?"

"We think..." Kinnard hesitates. "We think we know what killed everyone on Titan. Ditto for the *Hershel*." He stops again. "Before I tell you. I've got to know one thing. Have you or any members or your squad opened your suits after cycling into the habitat?"

"Affirmative, *Intrepid*. The first three people popped their lids after they came through the airlock. So has everyone else. The base is completely pressurized."

Kinnard purses his lips. "Does that include everyone in the landing party, Colonel? Who were the last ones to go into the base?"

"Lieutenant Simms, Corporal Barnes, and myself were the last ones to enter the base. Barnes opened her suit after she and I cycled through the AEL airlock five minutes ago. Simms and I have removed our helmets. Everyone is breathing the air inside the base. It smells bad, but that's all that's wrong with it."

"Dear God," Peter murmurs.

Kinnard hunches forward in his chair. "You said you came in through the AEL airlock?" He exchanges a dire look with Peter. "Did you discover anything unusual in the lab while you were in there?"

Before she can respond, Peter patches himself into the comlink. "Colonel, this is Peter Christ-Webster, ship's physician." Kinnard notices that he's deliberately avoiding Superior patois. "Were there any biological samples missing from the AEL?"

For the first time she came on-line, there is a long pause before DeSoto replies. When she does, her voice is even harder than usual. "Look, whatever game you guys are playing, cut it out. You're throwing questions at me, and when I give you answers, you throw more questions. You still haven't answered the one I asked you. What's going on up there?"

Kinnard looks at Peter, then at Jon. Their large blue eyes are locked on him, the expressions on their tattooed faces unfathomable. Just a few moments ago. Just a few moments ago, he had said to Peter that he would tell DeSoto the truth. Now the moment had come, and all he wants to do is lie.

"*Intrepid*, this is Huygens Base. Kinnard, what aren't you telling me?"

He wishes he could tell her that she's safe, that Bravo Squad is safe, that they can bag the bodies and load them into *Excalibur*'s cargo bay and come straight back to *Intrepid*. Ten bottles of wine await them in the ship's stores; drinks on the house, gentlemen, while we refuel over Saturn. Then everyone goes below and snuggles into their zombie tanks. Nine months later, everyone arrives at Highgate. Mission accomplished.

That option is no longer available.

Kinnard takes a deep breath, silently curses himself and his job. Then he gets back on the comlink with DeSoto.

He tells her the truth, everything he has learned, and all the horrifying ramifications of that knowledge. As he speaks, Cayenne transmits a priority message to FLTCOM.

Long before they receive a reply, they've agreed upon a solution.

* * * *

3.12.2070 0531Z--PARN *Excalibur*

From her seat in the cockpit, DeSoto watches as Slick Nick carefully maneuvers the shuttle toward *Intrepid*'s docking cradle. The frigate looms above them, the shuttle's wing lights catching the Royal Navy griffon-and-sword crest painted on the airlock. Through a porthole next to the hatch, she catches a glimpse of a crewman silhouetted against the warm light within the ship.

"Two meters ... one-point-five ... one meters," Slick Nick says. "Probe contact light..."

There is a soft thud as the docking collars connect, then a sudden jaw as the cradle captures the shuttle. "We're in," the pilot says, his hands snapping toggles on his console.

DeSoto gives him a wan smile. Through the comlink, she can hear the minded voices of her troops. In past operations, there have always been excited shouts, even the occasional war-whoop: the operation is over, and everyone has returned safely. Now there is only a collective, weary mutter. This is a mission whose outcome no one wants to celebrate.

"Roger that, *Excalibur*. Welcome back." Kinnard's voice comes over the comlink. "Before you prepare to disembark, please be advised that we have received new orders from FLTCOM regarding your mission status."

The voices on the comlink die off as the soldiers in the back of the shuttle hear him. Slick Nick groans softly as he closes his eyes. "And here I was, hoping for a medal," he says softly.

DeSoto doesn't look at him as she unbuckles her harness and pushes herself out of her seat. She alone knows what's going to happen next. "I'm sure your courage will be remembered, Lieutenant," she says softly.

Kinnard's voice continues. "In the interests of safety, both your own and our crew, FLTCOM has asked that you be quarantined inside the shuttle for the next six hours."

Outraged voices over the comlink. "Six hours?"

"What the hell are we supposed to do for six hours?"

"Hey, man, all I wanna do is get out of this goddamn..."

"I don't believe this shit," Simms says. The pilot looks straight ahead, staring at *Intrepid* as if he sees Kinnard through the fuselage. He doesn't notice that DeSoto has silently moved above and behind his seat.

"The quarantine period will last while we fly through Saturn's inner system," Kinnard is saying. "We'll release you from the shuttle just before we enter the upper atmosphere for our refueling run. I'm sure you'll want to witness this, so we've reserved the wardroom for you."

Raising her hands, DeSoto notices that they're slick with sweat. She holds her breath and wills them to be still, then she reaches down to Simms.

"And although it's against regulations for liquor to be stowed aboard a Navy vessel, we happen to have a small supply of lunar wine in our stores..."

DeSoto doesn't hear the rest. "It's been an honor to serve with you," she whispers under her breath, then she swiftly wraps her left arm around his neck and grabs his chin with her right hand.

Slick Nick has no time to react before she breaks his neck.

Kinnard keeps talking, telling necessary lies to her team, as she cradles Simms' head against her chest. She cries softly, feeling his muscles reflexively twitch, his heartbeat gradually subsiding, until at least he is still.

Bravo Squad is still bitching about being cooped up inside *Excalibur* for another six hours when she finally unstraps the pilot's body. DeSoto gently places him in her own couch and secures him, and takes another moment to close his sightless eyes. Then she climbs into the left seat and switches the comlink to the same frequency she used on Titan.

"It's done," she says.

There is a short pause, then she hears Kinnard. "I'm sorry, Colonel," he says. "I wish it didn't have to be this way, but I --"

"Shut up. I don't want to hear it." Strangely, she feels no anger, no remorse. She simply feels dead inside. Her eyes flit across the airlock control panel. It tells her that the hatch is secure and cannot be opened by anyone in the aft compartment. Her team is trapped. "I'm keeping my side of the agreement ... now you keep yours. Understood?"

"We'll keep our side of the agreement, I promise."

Almost a minute goes by--enough time for DeSoto to reflect upon all that has gone before, and all that is yet to come--before the captain's voice comes over the comlink again, perhaps for the last time.

"Is there anything we can do for you?"

She almost laughs out loud. She's tempted to tell him that, yes, she would be delighted if he and his goddamn crew of googles would go straight to hell. Instead, she surprises herself with her calm reply.

"Music," she says. "Classical ... I don't know. Beethoven. Bach. Hoist. Glass. Whatever you've got, just put it on for me and my crew. Give us something to listen to while we wait." She swallows. He voice is raw. "Then leave us alone."

She switches from the secure channel to the main band, where she can hear the voices of her teammates. After a few moments, the first movement of Beethoven's "Fourth Symphony" drifts over the comlink.

DeSoto pushes the seat back into a reclining position, closes her eyes, and begins her final mission.

* * * *

DATE: 0614Z 12 MAR 70

FM: CHNAVINT CLARKE CO

TO: PRIME MINISTER

SUBJ: KRONOS

CLASS: TS

1. (TS) UPDATE: PRIORITY ONE SCRAMBLED PADSS TRANSMISSION RECEIVED 0535Z MAR 12 FROM PARN VA-145, FRIGATE *INTREPID*. CAPTAIN KINNARD REPORTS RETURN OF PARN VA-165, SHUTTLE *EXCALIBUR*, FROM TITAN. ALL MEMBERS OF PAM BRAVO SQUAD REPORTED IN SATISFACTORY CONDITION FOLLOWING PROLONGED EXPOSURE TO POSSIBLE BIOCONTAMINANTS IN HUYGENS BASE. BRAVO SQUAD QUARANTINED WITHIN SHUTTLE.

2. (TS) EMERGENCY MEETING OF FLTCOM, CHNAVINT, AND ROYAL SURGEON HELD AT 0500Z MAR 12. CONCUR WITH ASSESSMENT PROVIDED BY CAPTAIN KINNARD; TITAN CONTAGION PRESENTS CLEAR THREAT TO SAFETY OF INHABITED SOLAR SYSTEM AND PAX SECURITY. APPROPRIATE MEASURES SHOULD BE TAKEN IMMEDIATELY TO PREVENT POSSIBLE SPREAD OF THE CONTAGION.

3. (TS) *INTREPID* HAS BEEN ORDERED BY FLTCOM TO ELIMINATE ALL POSSIBLE

SOURCES OF CONTAMINATION.

4. (TS) UNDER THESE CONDITIONS BRAVO SQUAD CONSIDERED EXPENDABLE.

5. (TS) MAIN AI SYSTEM OF PASS VS-29, ARGOSY *HERSHEL EXPLORER*, HAS BEEN REPROGRAMMED TO RETURN SHIP VIA AUTOPILOT TO ASTEROID BELT UNDER ESCORT BY *INTREPID*. UPON ARRIVAL, SURVIVING VS-29 CREW WILL BE REVIVED AND BROUGHT ABOARD VA-145, WHERE THEY WILL REMAIN IN QUARANTINED BIOSTASIS UNTIL *INTREPID* RETURNS TO HIGHGATE. VS-29 WILL THEN BE SCUTTLED.

6. (TS) AT 1200Z MAR 15 NAVINT WILL LEAK INFORMATION TO NEWS MEDIA FOR PUBLIC CONSUMPTION, RE: FATE OF TITAN EXPEDITION. *INTREPID* RESCUE MISSION, BRAVO SQUAD. INFORMATION WILL REPORT ONE HUNDRED PERCENT CASUALTY RATE AMONG THOSE EXPOSED TO LETHAL CONTAGION DISCOVERED ON TITAN. INFORMATION WILL ALSO SAY THAT ALL MEMBERS OF BRAVO SQUAD PERISHED ON TITAN.

7. (TS) RECOMMENDATIONS: HER MAJESTY ISSUE POSTHUMOUS MILITARY COMMENDATIONS FOR ALL MEMBERS OF BRAVO SQUAD AND CIVILIAN COMMENDATIONS OF TITAN EXPEDITION, INCLUDING PENSION FOR SURVIVING FAMILIES. ALSO RECOMMEND THAT HER MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT PLACE TITAN OFF-LIMITS TO ALL FUTURE LANDINGS BY PAX VESSELS (MILITARY, COMMERCIAL, AND/OR SCIENTIFIC) UNTIL MORE KNOWLEDGE OF TITAN CONTAGION IS ACQUIRED.

END

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3.12.2070 1340Z--PARN *Intrepid*

And now here is Saturn--the old god, the guardian of time, Kronos--seen not as a distant ringed orb but as a flat, banded plain lying beneath a dark sky. Cumulus thunderheads of off-white ammonium scurry across pale reddish-orange cloudtops which shine faintly from within, as storms of metallic hydrogen and helium perpetually rage in the trackless depths. A planet in constant cyclonic motion: serene from the distance, a spiralling vortex up close.

Intrepid races through the uppermost reaches of Saturn's atmosphere, its main engine driving toward the cloud band just above the equator. The aerobrake already glows with friction; the angelic figurehead has gained a halo. Behind the shield hatches along the engine module are already open, ready to scoop the previous helium-3 into the ship's reserve tanks.

Within the command deck, crewmembers are strapped into their couches, feeling the mounting acceleration as it gradually pushes them even further into the cushions. Jon Christ-Caswell's hands are locked onto the helm yoke; beneath the tattoos on the back of his hands, his skin is white with the strain of keeping the ship on course. Behind him, his first-wife Cayenne stares straight ahead; like John, her MINN-linked eyes are filled with electronic hieroglyphs as *Intrepid's* AI feeds processed data straight onto their irises.

Everyone else is entranced by the view through the forward windows. Here is the most awesome sight of all: Saturn's rings as seen from below, rising from the vast horizon as an impossibly huge arch, a gateway to eternity. Massive clouds are dwarfed and insignificant by this seemingly solid structure. Weak sunlight filters through the Cassini division between the B and A rings, but everywhere else the spinning

snow, hail, and icebergs of the rings form an immense rainbow that towers above them like the scimitar of the gods.

"Do you see?" Kinnard says softly.

"Yes." The woman's voice in his ear is quiet. "I see it ... oh my God, I see it..."

Several alternatives had been made available to DeSoto. She could have waited on Titan for the missile that *Intrepid* sent down to Huygens Base; at ground-zero, she and her team would have instantly, painlessly vanished within the one-megaton nuclear flash that consumed the outpost. Or *Intrepid* could have destroyed *Excalibur* with a ship-to-ship missile after the shuttle ascended to orbit; all she would have had to do was close her eyes when the missile homed in on her craft, and death would have come to her as a last moment of panic, nothing more. She might have even done the job herself: after she killed her pilot, she could have opened all the hatches and voided the shuttle, blowing herself and her squad out into space.

She had chosen another option.

Kinnard tries to find the right words, then realizes that anything he might say would be trivial, perhaps even insulting. "Are you ready?" he simply asks.

A short pause. "We're ready." A moment passes. "They know, Captain. I've told them."

He shuts his eyes. Unexpected, but perhaps it shouldn't be. In the end, DeSoto wouldn't lie to her people, however comforting that lie may be. They had earned the right to be told the truth.

"I understand, Colonel," he says. "I hope they do, too."

No reply. The equatorial band moves closer, its pastel swirls and eddies more discernible than they were a few minutes ago. Down there are winds in excess of two thousand kilometers per hour.

Around him, his crew murmurs to one another as they make ready for the lowest point of the dive. He glances over his shoulder at Isidore. The first officer's hand is poised over a toggle switch on his console. He nods once, his face expressionless. The executioner is ready to drop the trap-door.

"Do it," DeSoto says.

He doesn't feel any motion as the docking cradle releases *Excalibur*, nor does he look up at the multiscreen to watch the shuttle as it falls away from his ship, beginning its long, swift plunge into the maelstrom below. An annunciator rings, signaling the shuttle's departure, but John quickly silences it.

Kinnard swivels his chair around until he cannot see the windows, deliberately ignoring the last sight of Kronos. From his pocket, he pulls out his copy of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, which he had been reading in his cabin during the long journey from Titan. He opens it to a page he had bookmarked earlier, and silently rereads a passage written by a Persian astronomer in the 11th century.

Up from the Earth's Centre through the Seventh Gate

I rose, and on the Throne of Saturn sate,

And many Knots unravel'd by the Road;

But not the Knot of Human Death and Fate.

"Let's go home," he says to no one in particular.