

Mission to Brimstone

PART ONE

Saad

It was just a flicker, a split-second, but we all noticed it. It had never happened before.

“Exiting hyperspace,” Captain Waldmeyer announced over our earplants.

“Look out the window, cadets,” Chief Warrant Officer Danner said.

We pasted ourselves to the portals, squealing in excitement, ignoring the ever-present bots at our feet trying to herd us back to our seats. There’d never been anything outside the ship before but smears of light. Now there was so much to see.

There was no blur. Stars were distinct points of light. A large globe, brown with patches of purple, seemed well-defined in the blackness.

“The planet Brimstone, dead ahead,” the CWO said. “We’ll be there in about a week.”

It’s one of my earliest memories.

Our holograms showed cheers and backslaps on all eighteen decks, everyone celebrating the safe conclusion of our momentous voyage. It had been ten years since The Human Race left Earth. The young hotshots on the crew – not so young anymore – had bred a new generation on the long trip.

I was one of those children. The journey had lasted longer than my entire lifetime. I was eight years old, the same age as everyone who lived on our deck, including the dozen boys and girls in our classroom.

We were captivated by the big ball that grew larger day by day as we got closer until it filled the sky. Our mission was to rescue the people on Brimstone. Our flight had been launched in response to a distress signal – as familiar to us as our own names — that showed an out-of-focus image of a humanoid, breaking up, dissolving into static and then reappearing. A nimbus of white hair on its head, its eyes full of pain, the creature moved its mouth awkwardly, as if it weren’t used to speaking.

“Nzzt! Nzzt!”

No one could decipher its words, but it was clearly desperate. Interstellar explorations had never encountered humanoids before. This would be our first contact with any being who looked anything like us.

We'd answered the call as quickly as possible, but it had taken more than a year to plan, to recruit and train crew, and to equip Earth's most advanced spacecraft to travel the farthest we'd ever gone. Our other two starships were light years away in the wrong direction.

It had taken ten years for the message from Brimstone to reach Earth in the first place and it would take another decade for us to get there. Twenty-one years since the signal originated.

We couldn't transmit or receive messages while we were in hyperdrive, so we were eager to pick up the SOS as soon as we reentered normal space.

But it had stopped. The planet was silent.

We dropped out of orbit on the dark side of Brimstone, the ship briefly wreathed in flame glancing off its heat shields as it passed through the thin atmosphere.

Captain Waldmeyer and his crew searched for one of the bodies of water that appeared mysteriously during the long night, but dried up during the day. The captain believed that water would provide a soft landing, guaranteed to protect the vessel and to minimize damage to the surrounding countryside. They found a small, deep lake that sensors reported was ringed by greenery.

The Human Race was nearly 1,200 feet long and 400 feet wide, the size of a skyscraper back on Earth. As large as it was, it was the smallest ship in the fleet. But it was still like landing a building.

Matching the ship's deceleration profile to planetary spin, Waldmeyer positioned the ship above the lake in an upright position. THR began to lower, carefully monitoring translational and rotational motions and using small, precise bursts from the thrusters to control the ship's tipping and sideways slide. At ten thousand feet, boosters kicked in to decrease our rate of descent.

For those of us who'd spent all their years at faster-than-light speed, it seemed super-slow. Torturously slow. And it felt like boulders were strapped to our chest. We'd been told to expect that. Strapped into our cushioned chairs, folded flat, we watched the big holo in the center of the classroom, which showed outside the ship in all directions. The surface of Brimstone was comprised of scorched, arid plains as far as we could see. No sign of life.

Our sensors had told us days before that Brimstone was crazy hot, but we still expected to see cities connected by highways and other clear evidence of civilization. Certainly not this blasted landscape. What had happened here? Some awful explosion? Had the entire world been destroyed? Whoever sent the distress signal – had they perished? Were we too late?

That's not how I thought of it as a child, of course. I was swept up in the excitement of arrival I could hear in the captain's voice and see in CWO Danner's eyes. All the kids picked up on it. Something important was happening and, whether we understood it or not, we were keen to join in.

As the captain cut the power, clouds of steam obscured our view. We felt the massive craft settle onto the bottom of the lake. The holo showed waves slapping the portion of the hull still protruding from the water.

Our belts released. We sat up and watched the big holo, as crew members put on their suits and headed toward the top airlock. Suddenly, a colossal cracking, a booming and a crushing like the cosmic egg had shattered – catching everyone off-guard — and the ship slipped once, twice, and then dropped.

Was this it? Disaster at the instant of our heroic achievement? We had already beamed stories to Earth about our magnificent feat and our dashing young captain. Yet here we were, plummeting through the bottom of the lake into the pit of hell, for all we knew. Children and bots slammed into the ceiling or flew against the bulkheads. Our high-pitched screams mixed with laughter at first. We thought it must be part of the ride.

We fell about a half-mile – it seemed an eternity — before we plunged into another body of water. A couple bots smashed to pieces. Kids crashed to the floor with sickening thuds. No more mirth. Groans, broken bones. Blood splattered on our clean, green uniforms. Two of my classmates, Jeremy and Estelle, lay with their eyes open, unmoving. Lights flashed all over the room.

Screaming and sobbing, we waited ten minutes before the medibots got to us. None of the adults checked on us for a half-hour. We were alone with a dozen litterbots shuffling around, tidying up. A few kids held each other. Already the least favorite playmate, I hugged myself. No one else would.

Pretty soon, the lights stopped flashing and we stopped crying. Numbly, we watched as medibots surrounded Jeremy and Estelle, pumping their chests and blowing air into their mouths. It didn't work.

The holo had vanished in a burst of static when we first landed. It sputtered once and came back on. We saw that members of the landing party had regrouped and proceeded to the exit. Expecting the blackness seen on the surface, especially now that we were underground, they switched the ship's exterior searchlights to maximum intensity. But it wasn't necessary.

Crew emerged into a dim, diffuse light that revealed that THR was mostly submerged in a much larger lake inside a vast cavern

stretching to a distant horizon. A few stones and rocks still fell from the ceiling, along with dribbles of water, but the hole in the roof we had fallen through appeared to be mending itself.

“What kind of place is this?” asked a girl named Vera.

We were still whimpering and snuffling, while the medibots tended to our injuries and carried out the sheeted bodies of Jeremy and Estelle. A special holo appeared in the center of the room — The Rescue Mission of The Human Race. I think it was supposed to make us forget how scared we were.

That didn’t work either.