

GOLIATH FALLEN

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GOLIATH FALLEN

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*To my family, friends, and those who supported me  
through this long, long journey.*

# 1

## SILENCE

Commander Viktor Larsson hadn't experienced fear like this before—a suffocating dread of failure as the future of humankind weighed on his shoulders. It constricted his chest and weakened his knees. If it weren't for the absence of gravity, he wouldn't have been able to stand upright.

He hung on the bridge of the *Zenith*, one hand anchored to his station, his exhausted sight on the holo-display in front of him. Countless hours of watching the on-screen telemetry map had engraved it in his brain. The grid over a dark background, the prompts full of data tracking nearby planets, and his ship at the center—everything about that diagram churned his stomach. As for the text at the bottom, it triggered a different emotion in the old commander.

A fire raged inside him—anger, frustration.

*Searching . . .* the text read, and it hadn't changed since Viktor and his crew left the generation starships of the Atlas Mission—their home—over a month ago. After a distress signal from the depths of space reached the fleet, High Command had deployed them with one objective: to find its sender. They had scraped twenty sectors of the Alpha Centauri system so far, yet the source continued to elude them.

*Searching . . .*

As the dishes listened to the expanse, Viktor's mind swelled with questions. How much longer would they have to keep looking? What was the source of the signal? Was there really intelligent life out there?

Thick fingers gripped his shoulder gently from behind. "Come on, bud, give it a rest. Go get some sleep," Lieutenant Casper Lund said,

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his weary voice disturbing the soft hum of ion engines on standby.

Viktor peered at his second-in-command and lifelong friend from the corner of his eye. All he could make out was a hulking frame in a maroon jumpsuit like his. Casper was right—whatever the hour was, the caffeine overflowing his system wasn't keeping him sharp anymore.

"Go. We'll try again tomorrow," Casper insisted.

"We both know there might not be a tomorrow, Lieutenant. We've been abroad for too long. Kepler will call off the mission any moment now."

"Right. We've been searching for too long." The next words came out cautiously. "Maybe the signal was just a glitch in the comms."

The thought wasn't new to Viktor. He had buried it deep within his mind, where it couldn't damage his sanity. But this was the first time hearing it from someone else, and it was like waking up to a bucket of ice water. He was the only one on the ship still in denial.

He settled into his station, resignation slowly taking over him. "Lieutenant, how long ago did the Atlas Mission leave Earth?"

Casper looked down, thoughtful. "One hundred and fifty years this year."

"Exactly. Humanity left a deceased Earth in search of another planet we could call home. Three generation starships, twelve thousand souls each, traveling millions and millions of miles."

Viktor paused.

"During all this time, all space has given us is silence. Then, out of nowhere, we get a radio signal—here, where no human has ever set foot before." His computer prompted him to sign off the mission log for the day. "We've waited this long for a sign that there's a place waiting for us somewhere, or at least that we're not all alone out here. To think our first hope in one and a half centuries is 'just a glitch'? What kind of sick joke would that be? How many more generations will pass before we get there?"

Viktor collected his thoughts for a moment before calling it a day. But as he was about to confirm that on his computer, a yell stopped him.

"No, Viktor, wait!"

Viktor turned to Casper, his heart banging in his chest. The lieutenant pointed to the holo-display, his eyes wide.

A soft beeping materialized in Viktor's ears, though it had been going for a while. A chill crept up his spine, and all the tiredness

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washed off of him, replaced by sheer adrenaline. *Searching* . . . had changed to a new message demanding the commander's attention: *S.O.S., 2,450 KM*. The call came from a nearby planet, Centauri Ab.

"Is that it?" Casper said.

Rusty cogs turned inside Viktor's brain. With his senses overwhelmed, he uttered a single sentence: "Wake up the others."

Casper was already stumbling his way through the bridge. At the middle was a column of intertwined cables, dimmed screens, and other equipment. While Viktor woke one screen to confirm the telemetry, next to him, Casper snatched an earpiece and yelled into it, "Annie, something big is going on—come to the bridge, hurry!" He threw it away and started to head somewhere else, but a faint snoring stopped him.

Viktor watched as each snore further wrinkled the lieutenant's brow.

Unnoticed until then, a figure lay curled up in the shadows, sleeping as peacefully as a child nestled in the arms of his mother. That was, until an empty meal box struck his head, hurtled by an annoyed Casper. "Wake your sleepy ass up, Farmer!"

Doctor Lucas Sundberg grunted in pain, holding his head, one eye squeezed shut and the other scanning the bridge like he had spawned in an unknown dimension. "What's going on?"

"We found your baby, that's what's going on."

Lucas's eyes opened wide in realization. "Oh, crap."

Casper grabbed the earpiece again. "Ann, for Christ's sake, where are you? Get your ass over to the bridge right—" The hiss of a door opening cut him off.

Admiral Annie Wallin emerged from the back of the bridge with an impassive stare fixed straight ahead. She stopped next to the lieutenant, whose face had gone pale, avoiding eye contact with this ancient, dormant entity he had foolishly disturbed. "Casper?"

"Y-yes?"

"You don't talk to me like that. You understand?"

He nodded, shaking.

Annie nodded back and went on. Meanwhile, Viktor and Lucas witnessed the scene in silence. Lucas's eyes met Casper's, and Lucas turned away as if he were checking something on his station.

Viktor left the back of the bridge and joined Annie at the holo-display.

"So, that's it, huh," Annie said.

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"That's it, Admiral. That's where the signal is coming from."

They contemplated their objective in silence.

"What's with you two?" Casper intruded. "We've been chasing that freaking signal for weeks, and when we finally find it, you look like your dog died. Come on, we should—" He stopped, glaring at the on-screen map. "Holy crap. We're not going in there, are we?"

"Why? Where is it coming from?" Lucas said, his voice lacking any strength or punch, emphasizing his rookie status.

"Well, Farmer, why don't you have a look yourself?"

Casper tapped buttons on his station, and the telemetry map vanished from the holo-display, clearing the view. A muffled buzz came from outside, and the shields covering the viewport retracted.

Dazzling light consumed everything.

Viktor covered his face with one hand, squinting as his eyes struggled to adjust. When they did, the scene unfolding in front of the *Zenith* sent a chill down his spine. He had seen this place before in satellite imagery, but nothing compared to witnessing it firsthand.

A giant planet took center stage. Roiling gray clouds bloated with debris obscured a surface burning with lava. Rocks swam through the atmosphere, some plummeting through the ash while others drifted off into space. From billions of kilometers away, Alpha Centauri's intense light drew a crescent on the planet. Its warmth embraced Viktor despite the viewport's thermal filter doing its best to safeguard the crew from a fiery death.

Casper introduced their foe as the holo-display augmented the scene with data on the planet's mass, distance, and composition. "Centauri Ab. The closest to hell you'll ever get. You see those clouds? Those are orbital pyroclastic clouds, millions of tons of volcanic material spit into orbit by the most absurdly powerful eruptions known to humankind."

A zoomed view popped on-screen. The rocks turned into massive boulders, cruising the volcanic waste like whales in the open sea, clashing with one another in an endless, violent dance.

"Below all that, you get the surface, burning at thousands of degrees, with entire volcanic belts blowing up nonstop."

Red flashes fired up beneath the clouds right before massive amounts of freshly baked material erupted through them.

"Not exactly the place I'd recommend for spending the holidays."

A long silence took over. Lucas had backed off from the viewport, his forehead drenched in sweat, his green eyes barely blinking.

"It'll be hard to land in there, but I'll do my best, Commander,"

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Annie said, prompting terrified looks from Lucas and Casper.

Viktor, on the other hand, expected such boldness from his pilot. “There won’t be a need for that, Admiral. The signal isn’t coming from the surface. It’s coming from the clouds.”

Annie lifted her cap and scratched her full head of brown hair, combed into a ponytail that floated in the lacking gravity. “Oh, okay. Well, I double-checked the instruments yesterday. Visibility will surely be an issue.”

“Woah, wait a second. Are you two off your heads? There’s no way we’re getting in there—the rocks will shred us to bits!”

“Ease up, Lieutenant,” Viktor said. “Admiral Wallin can handle this. She’s the best pilot I know.”

Annie went to her station and readied for departure. After Lucas, she was the second youngest in the crew, but she had spent half her life in the field. Viktor and Casper had witnessed her pilot crafts under the most absurd conditions space could yield.

Casper exhaled hard. “How far into the clouds?”

“Ninety kilometers, tops. It depends on the debris’ orbiting velocity,” Viktor said. “The mission itself is simple: get in, find whatever is sending that signal, and get out. We have coordinates and a skilled pilot, so getting there is straightforward. The issue here is—”

“Time,” Annie said. Data with the clouds’ temperature showed up on the holo-display: 950C. “We have two hours before the thermal shields give in.”

The crew knew what that meant: with the shields gone, the ship would stop responding, leaving them trapped in that inferno.

Casper glanced at the scene outside, looking hopeless, lips trembling. “Viktor, buddy”—he reached to the commander—“this . . . this is way out there, even for you. We should call Kepler and reconvene.”

The man had a point. Calling their superior was the protocol in these situations, but if they did, that would be the end of their mission. Viktor couldn’t let that happen. Whatever was in those clouds, it was sentient. And wherever it came from could harbor life. This could be the last piece of the puzzle of humanity’s search for a new home.

Viktor understood the hesitation, though.

Casper had people waiting for him back on *Goliath*. Casper’s wife and son were like family to Viktor as well. As for Lucas, he had a girlfriend, if Viktor recalled correctly. But this was beyond each of them. For their loved ones, for the future of humankind, they had to



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complete their mission.

“Lieutenant, if we don’t do this now, we’ll miss the chance. Whatever is in there won’t last in those clouds. It’s a miracle it’s lasted this long, almost as if it’s been waiting for us.” He put a hand on Casper’s shoulder and ditched his formal tone, speaking to a friend instead. “I have a good feeling about this one. I need you to help me give our people a future.”

Casper didn’t break eye contact, stress and panic mangling his expression. They stared at each other for over a minute before Casper’s countenance softened. He patted Viktor, nodding a few times as if easing himself into the idea. Then he turned to Lucas and said in a calm tone, “You were the one who first discovered the signal, Farmer. What do you have to say?”

Lucas swallowed hard, like his soul was ready to leave him at any moment. He fought to recompose himself, then stared Casper right in the eye. “We have to do this.”

Casper examined him for a moment. “All right, let’s go then. We have a mission to finish.”

A surge of adrenaline refueled Viktor. He returned to his seat and buckled his seatbelt. “Admiral, are we ready?” he said to Annie, who glanced back at him as if she had finished preparing hours ago.

“All set, Commander. We go on your call.”

Viktor’s seatbelt tightened as his station awoke and the screen filled with telemetry data. “All right, then. Let’s do this, folks.”

With the crew ready, the *Zenith’s* thrusters roared to life, rocking the whole cabin. The surging speed shoved Viktor in his seat as he beheld their destination, Centauri Ab, its merciless pyroclastic clouds waiting in the distance.

Backing off wasn’t an option anymore.

## 2

# DESCENT

The *Zenith's* thrusters roared at full power as the ship charged at Centauri Ab's restless clouds. As the entire bridge convulsed, Viktor squeezed his seatbelt, palms drenched in sweat. Their menacing destination zoomed in past the viewport, as if they were plummeting into the mouth of a whale. Floating islands of volcanic matter crashed against each other, bursting into pieces, even the smallest of which could rip the craft apart. Rock and dust erupted from the fiery depths, further sullyng the scene. Clearings revealed an inferno of desolate, sterile land besieged by magma. And against all of this, Viktor and the others were defenseless. The pressure glued them to their seats as they plunged into hell in a metal coffin.

"Stabilizing," Annie shouted through the uproar as the *Zenith* shifted from bolting toward the planet into an orbit.

A bed of dust and rubble zipped past the craft as it pushed toward the horizon, where a curtain of starlight tainted by drifting boulders stretched into infinity. The sweltering air battered the bow of the ship, scorching and skinning its coating. If it weren't for the heat shield, the crew would have burned to a crisp already. Viktor, soaked in sweat, squinted against the rising heat consuming his body.

"Hang on, we're going in," Annie said.

Alpha Centauri's sunlight waved the crew goodbye from beyond the thick debris as the ship submerged in the clouds. The hull wailed, struck by rubble as if they were drilling into solid ground.

Darkness followed, only challenged by the screens on the stations. The deeper they sped into the pyroclastic clouds, the worse the heat

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grazed Viktor's skin, as if he were rolling over an anthill. Each gulp of air burned his lungs. An urge to rip off his clothes seized him, but the pressure locked him into his seat.

"It's getting too hot. Are you sure she'll hold?" Casper said.

"She will, Lieutenant," Viktor replied. "She has to."

Ahead, a slab of rock swirled like a loose sail in the wind, cutting through another, both blowing up. A frantic beeping warned of the fragments shooting at the *Zenith*.

"Incoming!" Annie banked the ship to one side, dodging the barrage. Then to the other. More rocks. Then a barrel roll. It was another part of her body, sweeping through the leftovers of the clash, deeper into the void.

"Shit, that was way too freaking close," Casper said.

"Calm down, Lieutenant. She's got it," Viktor said.

"What are you saying? I'm calm!"

An incoming call popped up on Viktor's console. He'd expected Mission Ops to reach out eventually. His little stunt must have had his superiors going mad.

A man with a kind smile of disguised panic came on-screen. "ERV *Zenith*, this is Kepler calling from the SS *Valhalla*. Please respond."

Viktor wasn't answering. But as he was about to reject the call, Director Amelia Walker pushed the man aside. She pulled her long red hair out of her face, her green eyes glaring at the screen.

"Don't you dare, Viktor Larsson," she said before even getting any video from the commander.

Viktor tried looking normal despite the apocalypse unraveling around him. "Director, I'm afraid this will have to wait. We're in the middle of something here."

"What do you think you're doing, Commander?" Amelia stared right into his soul.

"Completing the mission, Director. We found the—"

"You found the source. We know. But as stoked as we are, this is straight-up suicide. I'm calling off the mission before you get yourselves killed."

"We've come a long way. We're not going back empty-handed. And even if we wanted, bailing out is not an option anymore."

"Viktor, this isn't even up to me—it's a direct order from AHC."

The commander remained silent.

"Listen," Amelia continued, "if you get into those clouds, you won't come back out alive, do you understand that? Even if you do, AHC is

speaking of—”

Viktor ended the call. He glanced at the screen one last time before focusing back on the viewport.

“You hung up on her?” Casper said. “Geez, man, if we somehow survive this one, Kepler won’t let us back onto a ship ever again.”

“We’ll worry about that later, Lieutenant.”

“Watch out!” Casper yelled as a huge rock emerged ahead. He hadn’t finished, and the ship was already rolling. Its belly shrilled, grazing the rock, sparks raining over the bow.

They cut through the ash and dust for a few more kilometers before the ship stabilized.

“What’s that?” Lucas said.

“Oh no! More rocks.” Casper clenched his seatbelt, bracing for more action.

Viktor focused his attention on seeing through the dust. In the distance, silhouettes materialized.

Those weren’t rocks.

“Ships.” The word escaped him.

“Ships? Where did they come from?” Casper said.

“That’s what we’re here to find out, Lieutenant.”

“Reducing speed,” Annie announced as the *Zenith* banked around their target. Far below, one more shadow was stationed against a massive floating rock. It was many times larger than the others—five hundred meters long at least.

As the *Zenith* approached, more details cleared on that monster of a craft. It looked dead—no lights or sign of its crew. Debris jettied from a gigantic hole in its side. Despite the rocks battering it, none were thick, sharp, or fast enough to cut through so cleanly.

“That’s it, Commander. That’s the source of the signal,” Annie said.

“Right, Admiral, get us closer,” Viktor replied. Then he said to Casper and Lucas, “All right, gentlemen, time to suit up.”

As the *Zenith’s* speed reduced, the three men headed to the airlock, hands seeking holds as they swam across the restless craft. Debris barraged the hull, and the clash of rocky mammoths outside distilled inside the ship as the muffled growls of an enraged beast.

The airlock had several equipment cabinets and a heavy door at the back. Small windows on it flashed as all hell broke loose on the other side.

“Cutting off main engines,” Annie said from the intercom.

Not wasting a second, Viktor handed thermal EVA suits to Casper

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and Lucas. They were designed for smooth movement, or at least as much as their many protective layers allowed. The suit's chilled interior relieved Viktor's dehydrated body. His helmet killed all outside noise, and data on his vitals spawned in his heads-up display.

"Can you hear me?" he asked the others.

"Loud and clear," Casper said, and Lucas nodded.

"All right." Viktor headed to the door and clenched a hand to the rail on the ceiling. He took a moment to try to get ahold of himself as sheer terror constricted his chest, suffocating.

"Admiral," he called to Annie, hesitant. "We're ready when you are."

"Understood. Orbital velocity of the vessel steady at twelve kilometers per second. Outside temperature is approximately seven hundred Celsius."

Viktor peered at a message in his head-up display: *MAX TEMP: 740C*.

The others had seen it too. Casper stared at him with bulging eyes, attempting to conceal his terror, and Lucas resembled a squirrel trapped in a bag.

"We can do this, gentlemen. Today, we save humanity."

Viktor grabbed the handle on the door and pulled. Sweltering air packed with debris stormed into the airlock, thrusting the three astronauts to the back of the chamber.

"Jesus!" Casper shouted as rubble ravaged their surroundings.

Viktor fluttered his hands, seeking anything to anchor himself. A frenzy of alarms beeped inside his helmet, the temperature warning flashing in red. The press of a button killed the noise. "Is everyone okay?" he called to the others, unsure if he was okay himself.

"Yeah, I think . . . nothing broke," Casper said, grabbing Lucas.

Lucas coughed, lifting a thumb. "All good."

They fought their way back to the door. The debris had cleared enough to reveal the massive alien vessel's hull approaching as the *Zenith* banked closer.

"Sure looks a lot bigger from this close," Casper said.

As the mission progressed, it was also becoming increasingly surreal. The generation starships, the *Valhalla*, the *Goliath*, and the *Phoenix*, were the largest spacecraft humanity had ever seen, yet the alien vessel proved a fair contender to their titanic dimensions. Telemetry measured it at five hundred meters long by forty tall and fifty deep. Its crew had to number in the thousands, Viktor speculated.

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Masts rose from the bow, their lights pulsating weakly in the gloom. Dents and scratches riddled the hull, and rocks that hadn't torn on impact lodged in it.

That thing wasn't going anywhere.

"That's as close as we go," Annie radioed.

As the *Zenith* swayed above the vessel, Viktor's sense of duty wrestled with his survival instinct. He had expected the urge to run back home to seize him eventually, but instead of submitting, he patted Casper on the shoulder, and with a head full of second thoughts, he let himself go into the abyss.

Viktor's stabilizers fought the wild currents of hot air as ash and cinder flogged him on his descent. The radio stayed mute as the crew, hearts stopped, witnessed their leader plunging toward what might be his own death.

The hull came hard at Viktor. A cry escaped him as his knees absorbed the impact. His feet clamped to the surface, the soles frying on the searing ground, exposing the inner material. Every ounce of liquid in him steamed out of his suit. He gasped for fresh air, but all he got was fire. More alarms and warnings flared up in the faltering visuals of his heads-up display.

"Viktor? Holy crap, man, are you okay?" Casper radioed.

Viktor killed the alarms. "It's all right. The suit can take it." He looked up at the *Zenith*, almost unable to open his eyes in the heat. "The wind is too strong. Be careful, or it will drag you away."

From this distance, the *Zenith* seemed close to coming apart. It steamed in the blaze, swaying as the debris pounded its scorched hull. It wasn't designed for these extreme conditions, and it showed.

Casper's quick breaths came through the radio. "Okay, here I go."

Viktor's hefty friend dived with arms open, his legs dangling as his stabilizers led the way. It was good overall, except for one thing.

"Lieutenant, you're going too fast," Viktor radioed.

The impact was too much. "Shit!" Casper shouted, his legs faltering as he fell to all fours, his kneepads and gloves sizzling and steaming on the surface.

Even weightless, helping the man back upright while he desperately flailed his arms proved daunting.

"It's okay, calm down," Viktor said.

"Geez. That was a close call," Casper said, shaken.

"Is your suit still good?"

Casper showed his palms. The outer layer was gone, exposing the

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inner fabric. "Yeah—no leaks so far."

A broken whisper followed through the radio. "Come on, Lucas, you can do this."

Viktor's heart sank into his stomach as Lucas hopped off the airlock. In an unexpected surge of courage, he was airborne and diving to the vessel. For it being his first time in outer space, he was performing exceptionally.

"You're doing good, Doctor—keep it up," Viktor radioed.

Lucas flung forward like Casper, but the commander was there to keep him from falling. Compared to Casper, helping the lean boy was effortless.

"Heck yeah!" Casper shouted.

"Nice," Annie radioed.

"Well done, Doctor." Viktor patted Lucas. Like a rite of passage, that stunt had cemented the rookie's place in the crew. But he had probably heard none of that, terror clutching his expression.

Viktor gave a thumbs-up to the *Zenith*. "We're good here, Admiral."

"Understood, Commander. Stay safe."

With those words, Viktor and the others witnessed their only way out of that place withdraw into the dust.

Debris poured down around the three astronauts. The hull stretched into the distance, ending on the plume of material erupting in slow motion from the giant hole. The rocks lodged on the surface loomed tall like spikes on the spine of a dinosaur. Above and around, floating isles clashed, the impact shaking Viktor to the bone.

"All right. Where to now?" Casper said.

"Well, this craft shouldn't be too different from ours. The crew must have had a way in."

"Don't know, bud. It's an alien ship. We can't assume the crew is humanlike. Maybe they simply appeared inside."

Viktor pointed to a yellow square on the ground. "There."

Casper glanced in disbelief. "Or maybe there's an access hatch just lying around somewhere—of course."

"I told you, Lieutenant, I have a good feeling about this."

"Yeah, not like we've been close to dying like three times already."

If it weren't for its color, the crew would've spent hours looking for that hatch—one more dent in the vastness of the hull.

Casper pointed at the inscription on it. "I guess that means 'entrance.'"

Those weren't random scribblings, Viktor reckoned. It resembled

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Arabic, but with blockier and more symmetrical characters. "You're taking humanity's first contact with an alien civilization too lightly, Lieutenant."

Casper shrugged. "We're on an alien ship in what might be actual hell, looking for its crew. We're way past being in awe."

Viktor chuckled and reached for the handle on the hatch.

"Commander?" Lucas radioed, nearly giving him a heart attack.

Viktor spotted the man a few meters away, looking at the ground. "Jesus. What is it, Doctor?"

"Come on, Farmer, you shouldn't wander off," Casper said.

"But those marks," Lucas said, "did you see them?"

Among the scratches riddling the hull, some were grouped in triads. Trails of these extended toward the hole that was erupting debris.

"Oh god. Those are scratch marks," Casper said.

"Something crawled over there," Lucas added.

Casper's breathing paced up. "Maybe that's what made the hole, and it's waiting inside to feast on us."

"Calm down, Lieutenant," Viktor interrupted. "Out of everything that could've made those marks, you settle on monsters out of a horror movie?"

Casper and Lucas looked at their commander as if he'd pulled them back to reality.

"Are we done here?" Viktor said, heading back to the hatch.

"All right. Open that thing already," Casper said.

Viktor grabbed the handle and pulled it hard. Air hissed from the sides—he couldn't hear it, but he felt it. At last, he slid the door open, revealing the darkness waiting for them below.



## 3

# ENCOUNTER

Darkness embraced Viktor and his crew as they descended a metallic throat with no visible end. Their flashlight beams vanished before reaching the bottom. Only the hissing of their stabilizers upset the silence.

Strips of dull blue light guided them deeper into the guts of the alien vessel. Contrary to the outside, it was so cold in there that Viktor could feel it through his suit. After a few meters, the light strips branched into squared spirals, creeping along the walls like neon veins. An expansive, semi-spherical room welcomed the crew, dust dancing in their flashlight beams.

The silence amplified Viktor's heartbeat, pounding in his temples. Such calm was like emerging on a different world, light-years away from the violence of the pyroclastic clouds of Centauri Ab.

One glowing vein developed into a small screen with inscriptions and a button.

"Should we press it?" Casper asked.

Viktor hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

A thick finger bashed the button, and vents on the ceiling hissed and coughed dust, making everyone flinch. "Oh god, no. It's . . . toxic." Casper hyperventilated. "We're in a containment room. We're going to die!" He grabbed Lucas and urged him back the way they'd come. "Hurry, to the exit!"

"Lieutenant, calm down," Viktor said.

But by then, Casper's panic had already infected Lucas. Both tumbled back to the passage, flailing their arms instead of using their

stabilizers.

"Hurry, Farmer, we have little time," Casper yelled to Lucas.

Viktor witnessed the ridiculous scene in dumbfounded silence. "You know you're wearing your suits, right?"

The lieutenant and the young doctor shared a look, then looked at the commander.

"Yeah, I was just fooling around with the boy." Casper patted Lucas. "Come on, don't be scared, Farmer."

Lucas only glanced at Casper, confused.

The vents stopped hissing, and a prompt in Viktor's heads-up display read, *AIR: OK*.

"Oxygen," Lucas said.

"They breathe oxygen, and the hatches require opposing thumbs to open," Viktor said.

"They have an oddly coherent writing system too."

Viktor nodded. "Their ships follow our design basics as well. We're in an airlock."

"How do you do it?" Casper said. "How can you both take this so calmly?"

Viktor quoted his old friend: "We're on an alien ship stranded in what might be actual hell, looking for its crew."

Casper lifted an eyebrow. "Okay. You're funny, all right."

Another hiss startled the party as a door opened next to the panel, the light veins creeping down the revealed passage.

"After you," Casper said to Viktor.

The three astronauts followed the light through corridors inhabited by dust and drifting debris from the battered walls: insulating material, cables, panels. All the doors they encountered were locked, making Viktor theorize that the ship was in emergency lockdown.

"We're getting close," Casper said, the source of the signal blinking in their heads-up display map.

They reached a massive chamber shaped like a vertical cylinder, traversed by a suspended walkway. Along the circular wall, dozens of slots lay empty. The rails beneath the structure hinted that it could rotate.

"Looks like a cannon or some other kind of weapon," Casper said.

"A battleship? Stuck in here?" Viktor said.

"Maybe Centauri's gravity field trapped it here."

"Escape pods," Lucas said. "They realized they couldn't get out and jumped ship."

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"To where? Centauri Ab? That'd be suicide," Casper said.

Viktor checked the time; they had already spent half an hour. "All right. Double down, gentlemen."

More passages and corridors followed. The farther they went, the less likely backtracking to their ship seemed. Soon, a sturdy door obstructed their advance. According to the map, the source was on the other side. It was unlocked and cracked slightly open.

Without hesitation, Viktor shoved in both hands and pushed against the frame. The wall rattled, moving but a hair. Then Casper joined the commander, and the door didn't have an option but to oblige.

Their flashlights revealed a walkway inside. As Viktor entered, a glowing strip extended down the floor until it reached what seemed like a command station. It forked left and right, stretching downstairs into a lower level. Branches of light infested the walls and ceiling, contouring a vast room around the crew.

As the party continued down the walkway, a metallic groan stormed the room. Intense light forced Viktor's eyes shut. "Watch out!"

Casper yelled. "What's that?"

Viktor could only see white smudges over a dark canvas. The brightness shaped into an energy stream flowing from a pyramid jutting from the ceiling to a socket below. Holographic displays floated over the command station. The walkway split the room in two, the stairs leading to corridors below with pods filled with a gleaming liquid.

"I think we found the bridge," Viktor said.

"Seems like nobody's home. What a letdown," Casper said.

A disembodied, metallic voice stormed the bridge, taking the three men by surprise. "*Aperu khem ama. Fam merut babakh,*" it bellowed.

"W—what's that?" Casper said.

"Language profiling complete. Accuracy up to thirty percent. All critical systems online," the voice continued.

"Language profiling?" Casper continued.

Lucas went ahead of his superiors. "Impressive. The ship's computer somehow analyzed our speech. What kind of algorithm could do that?"

"Let's not worry about that, Doctor. We have less than an hour to find something useful and head back," Viktor said.

Casper pointed at the command station. "That seems like a good place to start."

Viktor turned to Lucas. "Doctor, have a look around and document

everything. I'm sure Kepler will find it useful."

Lucas hesitated at first, but then gathered his courage and accepted the challenge with a nod. He gave his superior a conflicted but determined stare, and he was off to the lower level. Whatever he was trying to prove, either to himself or the commander, the rookie was doing an outstanding job so far.

"Thirty percent my ass. I can't make a single sentence," Casper said.

Viktor joined him in examining the contents of the holographic displays, a stir of English and alien glyphs. If that was all the otherworldly vessel would give them, the mission was as good as failed.

Frustration wrapped its dirty fingers around Viktor's neck, constricting. "There has to be something we can use."

He fought thoughts of defeat. But the more he read, begging for a miracle, the more cryptic the data turned. He tried inferring the meaning of the glyphs in context with the English words, but it was futile. It was all gibberish.

Things only worsened when distant explosions roared into the bridge, shaking it like an enraged beast, metal bending, suffering from an unseen force.

"We need to get out of here," Casper said as his terrified glance scanned the chamber.

The stream of energy past the control station died, and then the holographic displays. Then the rest of the bridge. Absolute darkness fell upon the crew, the strips of light once again their only company. Whether the data on the displays was useful, it didn't matter anymore—it was gone for good.

"Commander? Commander, can you hear me?" Annie radioed. "We have a situation out here."

"Come in, Admiral, what's the situation?" Viktor answered.

"We must leave right now. Telemetry is reporting multiple eruptions going off on the surface—lots of material is coming up to the atmosphere. It'll hit us at any moment."

"ETA?"

"Ten, maybe fifteen minutes."

Powerless, Viktor witnessed the worst-case scenario unrolling in front of him. His heartbeat battered his temples, the back of his brain stinging.

"A pyroclastic storm," Casper said.

Viktor calculated all outcomes, but none ended with them finding

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the data they had come for: the origin of that godforsaken ship. The thought of all that effort in vain was too much to stomach. He bashed a fist on the dead console, finally losing his cool. "Dammit."

The vessel shook once more, tornadoes of fire and dust battering the craft.

"Viktor, we need to go, man." Terror mangled Casper's voice.

The commander didn't move. He picked his next words, unsure how Casper would take them. *I'll stay*, he planned to tell him. *Return to the ship. I'll send any useful data I can find.* Not a chance in hell that Casper would agree, but he didn't have to.

But before Viktor put his head through the noose and kicked the chair, Lucas came on the radio. "Commander?"

"Farmer, where are you? We're getting out of here. Come on," Casper said.

"But I just found this back there." Lucas emerged from the lower levels, holding a box in his hands. His doubtful sight shifted between his superiors and his newfound acquisition.

"And what exactly is that, Doctor?" Viktor asked.

"It's a . . ." Lucas turned the box over, looking for something. The shell was made of small panels. "Wait, it spoke just a second ago. I wonder if . . ."

"Spoke?"

"Yeah, just—" Lucas shook the box, seeking a response.

And then, as he said, the box spoke.

"Greetings, Commander Larsson," the apparatus voiced in a dull, modulated tone. "I am Designation U-257, second Khasut in charge of this craft. I request you to take me to your leader. There is information of critical importance I must deliver."

Viktor's dazzled brain could barely process its words.

"Holy crap. That thing just spoke to you," Casper said.

Viktor hadn't even considered that it was sentient speech. He'd assumed it was a recorded message—if only the box hadn't called him by name. "D-doctor? Where did you get that?" he whispered, as if trying to prevent the device from hearing.

"It was near the pods back there. It spoke to me," Lucas said.

"And you just grabbed it? Have you lost your mind?" asked Casper.

"But it said it was in charge of the vessel. It can probably tell us where it came from." Lucas's usual vacillating tone showed determination, as if he was trying to convince himself that he was onto something.

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Needlessly so—the boy *was* onto something, Viktor reckoned. Moreover, Lucas might as well have been holding the whole future of humankind in his hands.

Viktor snatched the box and sifted through it. A glow pulsated weakly between its panels, the whole thing resembling a failing heart. “Is it true? Can you tell us where your people come from?”

“I...” The box seemed to drift in its thoughts. “I have no recollection of any previous events. My memory is on emergency lockdown, currently rendering its contents inaccessible.”

“Screw that. We’ll bust the damned thing open if necessary,” Casper said.

The same thought had crossed Viktor’s mind.

The box glowed faintly again. “I have a message to deliver. I have a—a message? No.” The more it spoke, the more its tone showed traces of emotion. “No. Don’t listen to them, Commander. Don’t—” It sounded flustered, panicking. “You’re not supposed to be here. You are in danger.” Its voice faltered, glitching, then went back to its former stiff tone. “Please... Commander. I have a... message. Please.”

At last, the box wheezed, and it spoke no more.

And as its glow died, the three astronauts only glanced at it, perplexed. “What the hell was that?” Casper said.

“I—I don’t know. What happened?” Viktor shook the box, any hope washing off his troubled soul.

“Back there, it said it was running out of power,” Lucas added.

An explosion roared, and the entire bridge quaked, worse than the last time. The craft wailed, metal twisting as if it were being sucked into a black hole.

“Commander, we’re out of time! The storm is already on us,” Annie radioed, the racket in the background building up.

“Look, man, that robot thing is as good as it gets,” Casper said as the bridge shuddered like it would tear apart any second. “Let’s get it back to Kepler—they’ll know what to do.”

Viktor glared at the dead box in his hands, weighing the options. There were none. Time stacked on his shoulders, heavier with every lost second. It might as well be too late already. Maybe they were going to die in that ship along with its secrets.

Another blast went off outside. Then another, and another, like a furious mob of giants banging fists on the door.

“Viktor, it’s now or never, man,” Casper shouted.

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Seeking for a way around was useless. Viktor stared at his old friend, who looked back like a captive animal begging for release. "All right, then. Let's head back to the ship."

## 4

# SACRIFICE

Viktor's hopes of surviving the soaring rage of the pyroclastic clouds shrank with each turn of a corridor as he and his men raced for their lives. The whole spacecraft bawled around them, racked by the storm, crashing like a car rolling downhill.

"Watch out!" Viktor said.

The crew recoiled as pellets blew through the walls, oxygen flushing in an abrupt decompression.

"Holy shit!" Casper shouted.

The wall was blasted to pieces as a huge rock crashed through, panels, cables, and rubble shooting all around. Viktor and the others grasped whatever they could before getting sucked out of the craft.

"Keep going!" Viktor yelled. He climbed the exposed structure of the corridor to the door ahead. Behind him, Casper and Lucas fought the sweeping debris. Viktor gave Casper a hand. "Here, Lieutenant. Come on!"

Despite the absent gravity, the decompression returned Casper's weight, rendering him into ballast. Viktor pulled him as hard as his adrenaline-fueled body could muster, but Casper had to haul himself the rest of the way.

Viktor reached Lucas next, overestimating his weight and pulling way too hard. The commander fell on his butt, and Lucas crashed into the wall behind, showering insulating material and panels all over.

Without a second to recover, the party fought through more corridors. A mist consumed the atmosphere until seeing was almost impossible.



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"What's this?" Casper said.

A busted pipe gushing gas above Lucas was the culprit. Noticing the sparking cables dancing to the huff of the gas, Viktor's eyes almost popped out of their sockets. "Move—it's going to blow!"

Firing up his stabilizers, he rocketed into the young doctor. They both rolled and crashed into Casper before the gas combusted into a fist of flames, jabbing the three astronauts into the next corridor. They rolled and tumbled in complete chaos. Alarms went off inside Viktor's helmet, increasing in volume as he recovered his hearing.

"Commander?" Annie radioed. "What's going on? The feed went down."

"Admiral—" Viktor almost coughed his lungs out, feeling like he'd taken a knee to his gut. "We're still in one piece somehow. A pipe blew up." His map disappeared from his heads-up display. "I lost telemetry."

"I can guide you. The airlock should be close."

Casper grabbed Lucas like a rag doll and approached Viktor. "Don't worry, he's alive."

Lucas coughed, giving the commander a thumbs-up.

"I've got a route," Annie said. "Continue for fifty meters, then make a right, and keep up for another twenty. The airlock should be right there."

"Any obstacles we should worry about?" Viktor asked.

"Hard to tell, Commander. It's hard to trace the interior of the vessel accurately with all this noise."

The crew raced through Annie's route until they reached the corridor before the airlock. The door had been open last time, but now it was locked. Viktor squinted to see past the window on it. It wasn't his imagination—water had submerged the corridor, and the door had sealed to contain the flood. Viktor bashed a fist on the door in frustration. "Dammit—Admiral, we need another route."

Viktor waited for a response, but he only got static.

"Admiral?"

No reply.

"Can you hear me?"

Annie responded this time, shouting, "Commander! Brace for impact! A large rock is about to—"

The entire corridor shook and cried with the churning of metal. Then it heaved forward, and the astronauts rolled into a blob of limbs, crashing against the closed door.

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Viktor struggled to recover. "Admiral, what the hell was that?"

The bellow of the *Zenith's* engines at full power saturated the radio. "A large rock hit the vessel, Commander. Shit—that was the biggest one yet. The vessel is sinking into the clouds quickly. I'm trying to keep up, but if I don't pull out soon, I'll run out of fuel."

Right when Viktor was wondering whether things could get worse, he peeked at the locked door. "Damn."

Casper joined him. "The water . . . it's flushing."

Past the window, bubbles sprouted from cracks in the walls of the flooded passage. The water level dropped slowly at first, then quicker. Hope flooded Casper's visage; once the water drained, it seemed the door would open.

But Viktor knew better.

"Back. Turn back. Hurry!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

The cracks spiraled through the passage, spreading rapidly.

"What the hell?" Casper said, backing off.

Lucas was already stumbling in the opposite direction when the corridor turned into a bent metal throat, decomposing into cables, panels, pipes, dust, water, fire, pressure—the whole place crumbled around the astronauts. The subjugating depressurization sucked everything out of the vessel as it ripped in half, submitting to the damage of the last impact.

Casper and Lucas made it to the back of the passage, but Viktor fought an unseen force pulling him as the air escaped the vessel. A fraction of a second later, he was dangling from the edge of the destroyed passage.

"Holy crap, Viktor!" He could barely make out Casper through the fuzz. The man grasped onto a bent rail in the wall, trying to reach the commander. "Hang on, I'll get you." He overextended an arm and grabbed Viktor by the suit, then pulled him back inside.

Viktor struggled to satiate his lungs, adrenaline drowning his system. The other half of the alien vessel strayed into the clouds in the background, like a dead leviathan sinking in the ocean.

"You all right, man?" Casper asked him.

Viktor said nothing, his senses overwhelmed.

"Come on, man, say something. You still there?"

"I'm sorry," Viktor muttered, his sight on the ground. "This was a terrible mistake. I shouldn't have brought you all into this mess." He coughed. "We—we won't make it."

The lieutenant and the young doctor remained silent while the

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pyroclastic clouds raged outside, eating the other half of the vessel.

Viktor didn't dare to look them in the eyes, wondering how pathetic and weak he appeared now. The future of humanity didn't matter anymore; the universe had disappeared, and it was only them.

Casper grabbed the commander by the collar, their helmets pressing against each other. The reddish hue of the scorching clouds reflected in his pupils. "Don't you dare give me that crap, Viktor—not now that we're so close." He pushed the commander away, pulled a harness from one side of his suit, unrolled it, and offered one end to Lucas. "Buckle up, Farmer." Instead of asking Viktor, he latched the other end himself, then headed to the edge of the corridor.

"Where are you going, Lieutenant?" Viktor asked without the energy to argue.

"Well, Commander, we can't go back, and we can't go forward, so we're going up."

Viktor realized he not only looked pathetic and weak, but also dumb. They didn't need an escape route. They were outside already. Casper grabbed a beam and pulled himself up, and the others followed his lead.

They fought the punishing currents of sweltering air as they climbed the coarsely slit cliff of metal. Countless sharp beams, pipes, and edges threatened to puncture their suits along the way. When they reached the summit, Casper pulled himself up, and the others with him. Panting his lungs out, Viktor stood up before his suit fried on the hull of the vessel—which would take only seconds with the temperature peaking with the storm. He helped Lucas up, sheer terror seizing his expression.

"Hurry, folks. We still have a ways to go," Casper said.

Ahead, in the distance, the *Zenith* swayed above the alien vessel, fighting the storm as debris trashed it.

The crew trudged back to their ship, covered in ash and cinder. Then a giant boulder from above ambushed them, crashing a few meters ahead. Viktor didn't realize it until the blizzard of debris hit them. He shielded himself with his arms by reflex. If it weren't for their magnetic boots, he and the others would've meandered off to a certain death.

Viktor checked his suit for punctures. No alarms fired in his helmet—he had survived.

"Is everybody okay?" he asked the others.

"Crap, that was close!" Casper shouted.

A.C LOUIS

"Doctor? Are you okay?" Viktor asked Lucas.

No reply.

Viktor searched around for him. "Doctor?"

It had been a close call for Viktor and Casper, but for Lucas, his life was on the line. He gasped for air, bulged eyes almost popping, grasping his neck to breathe as oxygen wheezed out from his suit. "H—help. I can't breathe."

"His suit's leaking," Viktor yelled at Casper. "Go get him. Don't let him touch the ground, or his suit will fry!"

The lieutenant was already trudging toward Lucas, radioing Annie. "Ann, quick, shut off his boots so I can carry him back to the ship."

"You got it," Annie replied.

"All right, Farmer, stay with me." Casper grabbed the young man. "No one's dying today." He continued to the *Zenith*, surprisingly fast, considering his feet were magnetically clamping to the ground.

"Admiral, we need you to get closer. We're still too far," Viktor said, slogging to catch up.

"Negative, Commander—the debris is too dense. I won't be able to pull back."

"Request Kepler for rescue. We'll burn the rest of the fuel to get out."

"Commander, we don't—"

Viktor glared at the *Zenith* as if staring right into Annie's eyes. "Do it—now!"

The ship's thrusters boomed at maximum capacity, banking closer. Way too close.

Its belly hit the vessel hard and kicked back, almost crushing the astronauts. Viktor shot a hand at the edge of the airlock and pulled himself up. After securing his harness, he reached for Lucas on Casper's shoulders. As his friend handed the boy over, Viktor secured him and threw him inside. It was Casper's turn. But the *Zenith* bashed the vessel once more and kicked back.

Casper was now a good twenty meters away, his hand still extended, looking at the ship in desperation.

"Shit. Hang on, Lieutenant," Viktor said. "Admiral, get closer!"

"I'm on it, Commander—but the current is too strong."

Standing on the alien vessel's hull, Casper lowered his hand, his sight fixed up past the ship with a lost expression.

"Lieutenant, we're almost there." Viktor wondered what had stolen his attention from the hell unraveling around him.

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Casper looked at the commander peacefully, as if in his mind, he had returned home, back to his family. In his charred suit, he gifted the commander a smile and one last salute.

Then, in a split second, Viktor's lifelong friend was gone, consumed by another boulder exploding into a million pieces.

The *Zenith* banked away from the impact, barraged by the debris.

Viktor's body didn't respond.

His brain used his remaining energy to digest what had just happened. He slipped away from reality, plunging down into a black void. Casper's wife, Eli, and his son, Liam, were the only ones on his mind until a burning sensation towed him back to reality.

He was back in the *Zenith's* airlock, debris bustling around him. He held his torso, crimson leaking off of him and drifting in the microgravity. Paralyzing pain should have been crushing his nerves, but warmth embraced him instead. Alarms fired in his helmet this time, and data flashed red in his heads-up display.

He was dying.

The conclusion to his story didn't surprise him. He accepted it. There was one last thing to do, though. As Viktor's remaining air wheezed out from the bleeding cuts in his suit, he searched for Lucas.

The doctor was at the back of the room, secured by a harness. Viktor grabbed Lucas, pulled him closer, and said with the last breaths of life left in him, "Take this, Doctor." He pressed the alien device against his chest and helped his arms around it. "Make sure this gets home."

Viktor coughed, the taste of iron staining his mouth.

Lucas didn't move, but his arms tightened weakly.

That was enough acknowledgment. "We're counting on you—don't let us down," Commander Viktor Larsson tried to say, unsure how much of it left his mouth as his eyelids started closing.

Coldness seized him, and at last, everything faded into nothing.

# END OF PREVIEW

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Thanks for reading!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A.C. Louis is a Costa Rican writer and software engineer who's committed to giving his readers absorbing, fast-paced storylines with high stakes and memorable heroes. During his long career in information technology, he became increasingly interested in space travel and exploration. Unable to shake the possibilities of what could exist beyond our lonely planet, he finally resolved to put this interest to paper in the form of science fiction stories. When he's not writing code or fiction, you can find him creating content for his blog, learning new languages, or cycling around wherever in the world he's calling home at the time.

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