

Chapter Eight

“Whoa. Is it always that rough?”

She nodded, her black face bobbing inside the helmet of her environment suit. “Well, the old man likes his comforts. He’s the only prospector out here who has a gravity generator. It takes some getting used to, coming down through the threshold of it.”

Jon looked up through the windshield of the cockpit. Some fifty meters above them, there was a dance of static lightning at the limit of the field. Tholin, the brownish dust created by the interaction of UV radiation with the moon’s nitrogen-hydrocarbon atmosphere, constantly precipitated out. Where this particulate matter hit the AG field, it caused friction, and static flashes. “Well, thanks for getting us here in one piece.”

“No problem.” She nodded to the other two passengers, the monitoring team, in the seats behind her and Jon. “See you guys in four.”

Jon watched over his shoulder as the two went through a small door, into the airlock. The pilot looked at him. “They’ll just take a moment to cycle through. Now, be careful moving out there. This atmosphere is thick.”

“I’ve been here before.”

“Yeah, but not inside the Dutchman’s AG field. Oh, the rest of Titan’s atmosphere is almost 60 percent thicker than Earth normal. But with his generator, it’s considerably thicker than that. Not as bad as walking in water, but you’ll definitely notice it.”

Jon nodded. A light flashed above the airlock door. Jon slipped between the seats, through the door of the airlock. Locking it, he started the cycle. He felt a crinkling of his environment suit as it compensated for the increasing pressure, then the indicator light turned green and the hatch opened. He looked out into a thick, dull red fog. In the distance a strobe flashed. That’d be Sidwell’s compound.

Jon went out the hatch, down a couple of steps to the ground. The two monitors were standing there, waiting for him. “Doing OK there, sir?”

The voice hit him twice: nice and clear inside the suit, on his phone; muffled and shifted to the bass from outside. For anyone used to wearing a suit in the silence of vacuum, it was an odd thing to hear sounds conducted by the thick atmosphere.

“Yeah, fine.” As he cleared the small craft, his pc connected to Sidwell’s datastream broadcast. An overlay appeared before his eyes, pale lines of light outlining buildings in the distance. Nodding to the two monitors, he followed them toward the compound.

“He has his micros keep the path between the landing pad and his buildings free of tholin. But if you decide to go exploring, you’ll need snowshoes.”

“Got it.”

“See the small dome to the left? That’s where the artifact is. The big dome over on the right is his place. The other beyond it is just an equipment shed.”

They walked toward the buildings, the two men in front of Jon looking back occasionally to check on him. The air was noticeably denser than he was used to on the surface of Titan. And with the almost full gravity, he was breathing hard by the time they approached the first, smaller dome.

Jon touched a control on his suit, linked to Sidwell’s expert. “Sidwell? Thompson. I’m here. Where should I meet you?”

There was a brief moment of delay, then Jon heard the crackle of Sidwell’s voice. “I’m at my place. Come on over.”

They stopped in front of the smaller dome. It was a standard inflatable structure, meant to give effective temporary protection. Brownish tholin dust hid whatever the original color had been, and piled up on the sides of the dome, where it met the ground. Since this was during the moon's brief 'dry' season, the tholin just accumulated. Come the 'wet' season, ethane rain would probably wash the tholin away. The cycle repeated every 16 days, the time it took Titan to orbit Saturn.

"I'm going on over to Sidwell's," Jon said to the two men, who just nodded as they stepped into the airlock. Jon made his way toward the larger dome some sixty meters away. The way was clear, the ground beneath his feet solid and smooth. Even so, he was again breathing hard by the time he made it to the dome. He cursed himself, vowed to remember to exercise more on the trip home.

Darnell Sidwell's 'home' was a large, rigid geodesic. While significantly less mobile than the smaller inflatable models, the old man insisted on using it. Jon made his way around to the small airlock, opened the hatch and climbed inside. With a touch to the control panel, he started the cycle. First Titan's atmosphere was sucked out, then a spray of water started from all sides, washing away the tholin, the trace hydrocarbons, and warming Jon's environment suit. Then breathable air was pumped in. The light turned green, and the inner door clicked open. Jon stepped through onto a metal grating, the last of the water dripping off him. He popped the helmet, took a deep breath of the warm, moist air, and looked around.

It was a large space, with work area and living area intermingled. About halfway around the dome were a couple of benches, near the large equipment airlock. Here there were bench lights on, pieces of equipment in the process of being repaired or cannibalized. Closer, on the left, was a galley, a simple table and a couple of chairs, dishes pushed off to the side to accommodate a pile of papers and books. Real books, and real paper, not notepads or readers. To the right of where he stood was a small cubicle, the bathroom, the only enclosed space in the dome. In the center of the dome were a large unmade bed, a couch and several chairs, one of which held the ghostly image of a large Cheshire cat, another which held Darnell Sidwell.

"Toss yer suit on one of the hooks there, and come on in."

Jon sat on a handy bench, and started to extract himself from his suit. "It's good to see you."

"Yeah, yeah." Darnell turned to the image of the cat beside him. "How 'bout you run and get us some coffee, Pal?"

She just looked at him, jumped down from the chair and disappeared. He laughed, "Pal doesn't like me makin' fun of her. So, you want somethin' to drink? Bit of coffee? I started a pot when yer shuttle came down."

Jon paused to sniff the air, could separate out the aroma of the coffee from some of the other rich smells: the sharp whiff of methane, a pungent hint of mildew, and the almost sweet odor of old man. "Yeah, some coffee would be good. Thanks."