

Apoapsis Zero: Lancers

Chapter 1

“Warning: Ablation. Warning: Ablation.” Stoic Stella repeated as David’s Lancer fell uncontrollably into atmosphere.

David begins hearing Stella’s warnings just as his vision regains color, expanding from a pinpoint. He can feel his flight suit pulsating rhythmically, forcing blood back toward his brain. Gasping, struggling against the crushing forces pushing his lungs into his spine. “Stella... status...”

“The pilot is currently experiencing 8.5 Gs.” Stella said plainly, as if all this was just a minor data point. “Although my dampeners are offline, your flight suit is functioning at maximum capacity. Heat shielding is at sixty-seven percent. Bio-rhythms indicate seventy percent chance of panic-induced cardia-”

“Stella, display... corrected re-entry.” David said, struggling to retain consciousness.

Without a response instructions began displaying on David’s HUD.

PITCH RATE: EXCESSIVE.

REDUCE TO 12%.

“Pilot. Nose oscillation increasing. Arrest the rotation or experience structural failure in fourteen seconds. Jink left.” Stella says. “Per protocol, I am administering emergency cocktail.”

David jams the stick left. The air-frame can be heard straining — a horrific metal on metal shriek — but the lancer’s rotation is stabilized. He can hear the hiss of an injection near his hip. His veins suddenly feeling like they’re filled with ice water. The Focus-9 hit first. The cockpit becoming a higher definition and time slowing to a crawl, the screaming of the hull becoming a “fascinating” acoustic profile rather than existential threat. Then the Zenith-7 came. The impending sense of doom didn’t vanish; it just became disconnected.

AOA OUTSIDE MARGINS. THERMAL LOAD INCREASING.

“Ablation critical. Smoke detected in cabin. Fire suppression system disabled to prioritize oxygen availability.” Stella says. “Adjust AOA to 32.5 degrees.”

David pulls up until the HUD flares green. The heat of re-entry rising through the floor, but he doesn’t seem to mind. He was just “doing the work” now.

EXCESSIVE ENERGY: REDUCE SPEED.

“Pilot. You are exceeding airframe tolerances by forty percent. Bank sixty degrees to bleed.” Stella instructs.

David banks. He feels the additional 6 Gs slam into him, but his vision remains high-def. David can see the orange glow beyond the canopy fading to a dull gray as the lancer drops below mach five. David levels out the lancer and deploys his airbrake. The violent vibrations smoothing into a low, heavy whistle.

“Stella, status.” David says, his voice now as flat as hers.

“Vaporization successfully avoided. Heat-shield integrity at thirty-two percent.” Stella responds. “Propulsion systems severely damaged. Thrust factor limited to forty percent. The flaps have melted into the neutral position and the left landing gear door has malfunctioned.

“Okay. Where can we put down?” David asks.

“Crater detected one-thousand-sixty-two kilometers due north, along current flight path. Recommend emergency landing at this position. Pilot, be advised: an asymmetrical landing is expected.” she reports, adding an indicator to the HUD for the landing zone.

As David's mangled lancer drops into the crater the HUD displays an adjusted glide slope. David adjusts the engine output to prioritize the reaction control system and cuts the aft thrusters.

"Stella, further adjust the glide slope for a belly landing." David requests, beginning to prepare the cabin for a rough landing.

Stella replies, "Affirmative. Displaying adjusted glide slope." A few moments pass before she interjects, "Pilot, be advised: The surface is primarily loess sand. Visual reference will be lost after primary contact. HUD is being slaved to ground-penetrating radar."

ALT: 500 meters
IAS: 592 km/h

David activates the air brake to bleed extra speed as he descends. Without landing gears, the lancer's smooth under belly acts as a sled. Upon contact with the ground there is no bounce as David expected, instead there is a muffled thud which vibrates through David's teeth as the lancer begins digging into the loess. As Stella predicted, a cloud of tan dust, fine as flour, engulfs the lancer. The outside world completely disappears into a tan void.

Gritting his teeth against the vibrations, David can feel the lancer wanting to pitch-pole as the belly continues catching on the silt.

“Critical: Terrain. Critical: Terrain. Pilot, fire RCS and pull up.” Stella says calmly, as if reading from a grocery list.

David wrestles the nose up, using what little thrust the lancer can muster to prevent a front flip. He can feel the deceleration as the screaming of the wind is replaced by the dry hiss of silt cutting the hull. In a matter of seconds the lancer goes from three-hundred-seventy kilometers per hour to zero. David is violently thrown into his harness, feeling a rib crack. The cockpit is dark, save for the flickering red of the cockpit’s emergency lighting.

“Did we.. make it?” David asks, lungs burning, the Focus-9 starting to falter.

“Indicated air speed is zero kilometers per hour.” Stella replies. “We have stopped 4.2 kilometers short of the target though the lancer is no longer flight-worthy.”

David flips on his emergency transponder before attempting to open the canopy.

“Critical: Terrain. Pilot, sensors indicate the cockpit is submerged under several meters of sand. Recommend you await QRF.” Stella chirps matter of factly. “Pilot can override this safety alert; however, chances of suffocation are 100.1 percent.”

David releases his harness, letting out a heavy sigh. The adrenaline and the drugs are beginning to fade, he’ll have to deal

with the “debt” he owes his body now and hope there’s somebody out there to come dig him out.

CHAPTER 2

David exited the shuttle onto the flight deck of Hangar B. The Volonte was humming — the rhythmic vibration of the fusion core felt like a heartbeat — pilots and engineers mulled about discussing performance optimizations, repairs, and even their after hours plans. Looking outside the hangar shield he could see one of their screening ships, a frigate, the Vagabond. David was reminded of their controversial introduction a few years ago. “Too many missiles, not enough hull,” was the argument some warhawks touted. For their roles though — interdiction, trade protection, pirate suppression etc., — chances were low the threats they were going up against could dish out any meaningful damage. David's self-awareness suddenly snapped back after a few minutes, he realized he was stationary and gawking. This wasn't the academy, he was a voting member of the 14th Self Defense Fleet now and needed to act like it, it was time to find **his** lancer.

Having walked down and along the bays in the hangar David stopped in front of one of them, checking his orders he confirmed this was his new home — bay six. He sat his bag against a work bench and began looking around. The workstation was a bit of a mess, but David could see the method in the madness. A compressor sat half torn apart next to a half eaten ration-pack. A spilled coffee laid atop brand new manual revisions.

A socket set sat on a ravaged toolbox, the only socket missing was the 10mm by David's accounting. On second thought, maybe he only saw the madness. There in the middle of the bay though sat what he sought. David ran his hand along the surface of his new lancer. Like those back in the academy, it was unfinished save for some painted on warnings: DO NOT STEP, LIFT HERE, STAY CLEAR DURING OPERATION, etc... It missed something. David picked up a razor and some card stock. He cut for himself a stencil and grabbed a can of spray paint. Right as he prepared to add his own label to the craft a single voice cried out.

"Who the hell are you?!" the voice of a woman.

David turned. The woman confronting him was the walking personification of a grease monkey. She wore coalition overalls, top half tied at the waist and a band shirt with the arms sheared off underneath. Her arms were corded with the kind of muscles one earns by wrestling heavy machinery in low gravity. David also noted some ancient-style naval tattoos.

"David Miller," he said, voice cracking. "My orders said this was my bay — my lancer." David looked back at the lancer.

Kovacs wiped a smear of a dark lubricant across her shirt. She stepped closer, grabbing and inspecting the stencil. "Miller, huh?" Kovacs tossed the stencil into a nearby bin.

“Well you can call me Kovacs, Chief, or Chief Kovacs.” she said grabbing him by the hand and shaking it firmly. “But, until you earn it, this is my lancer and my bay.”

David was locked in place by Kovacs’ assertiveness and he struggled to blurt out anything in response. Kovacs smirked.

“I’ll take your stunned silence to be an affirmation.” She patted David on the shoulder. “Have you been on a vanguard-class before?” she asked.

“Haven’t even been off planet.” David replied, relieved with the tone change.

Kovacs let out a short, sharp laugh. “Off planet for the first time and they stick you in a combat patrol.”

Crouching down toward the aft of the lancer Kovacs beckoned him over. “The trainers all have fresh dampeners and engines that never see a spec of regolith or experience the full heat of a bad atmospheric entry. This lancer though?” She said lovingly patting it, “She’s a vet, she’s got character. By which I mean she vibrates like a drum if you push her too long; and her voice warning system is — unique.”

David stepped forward so the two were shoulder to shoulder, peering down at the exposed internals of the propulsion systems. “Unique? Aren’t they all standardized?”.

“Spec-wise, sure.” Kovacs grunted, reaching for a spanner.
“But they’re designed to work with their pilots, they learn patterns. This lancer has had three pilots in three years. Two voted to retire; one didn’t get the chance. Pilots are meant to be paired with them for years. So this ones — given up — on being polite. Statistically honest.”

The two stood there solemnly for a moment.

“Anyway, Miller, follow the blue line to reach the sleeping quarters and stow your shit.” She said, pointing out the multi-colored lines on the floor. “After that, follow the yellow line to the chow-hall. We’ve an assembly meeting in an hour to vote on the patrol route, among other things. If you don’t vote I’ll kick your ass.”