



AERIUS

Jonathan Gilbert

“ A sound from behind Adam startled him, and he stood and turned around. The two women stood as well.

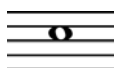
The clouds were beginning to clear, and the entire valley was shimmering in the sunlight. The air was crystal clear, but already, the opposite side of the valley was beginning to look wavy in the heat.

The trail the shuttle had carved into the side of the valley had formed a small plateau, and up over the edge of the plateau, a suited figure came running, slipping and almost falling on the clumps of sodden dirt. Adam could hear a woman's voice, and mimicked the gesture from earlier.

“Turn on your suit radio,” shouted Adam, walking out to meet the arrival.

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JONATHAN GILBERT



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*For those who have passed us by,
and those who are yet to come.*

Part 1

1

Adam came awake with a start. Awake wasn't the right word for it, really. His head hurt, like it was sculpted of glass and had been dropped, loose shards broken off on the inside. Thoughts came slowly, and with some difficulty. His eyes were still closed, and his body felt cold. There was light moving somewhere, but he couldn't focus on it. Sounds were making it to his ears, but they were muffled and incomprehensible. Suddenly, the pressure changed and there was a pain in his ears. The light got brighter, and his skin felt as though it were pricked by thousands of needles. His mouth opened reflexively, and he winced at a pain in his jaw, which in turn caused the needle pricks to move to his eyelids too.

He became aware of the fact that he wasn't breathing, and then that this was unusual, and finally that this should alarm him. His body tried to breathe, and he felt something rough in his trachea. His lungs wouldn't move, as

though they were filled by molasses, and alarm turned to panic. His back arched, and he felt his lungs collapsing. His eyes opened, causing more sparking pain and flooding his senses with blinding light. He began to thrash, though weakly, and then when his lungs felt they could get no smaller, his lungs were flooded with fresh air, cool but not cold, and the tube abruptly and smoothly retracted from his throat with mechanical precision.

He could see some detail now – the ceiling of the sleeper bay, the lights and the air vent – and he rolled onto his side and coughed deeply. He felt deeply, deeply cold, and his skin still pricked everywhere. The sleeper pod began to spray a fine mist over him, which condensed into little droplets and felt fantastically warm. He shivered slightly and slowly pulled himself into a sitting position, his arms wrapped around his knees.

The pods on either side of his were empty. The other half of the room also held three pods. Two of them were closed, glazed over, and their status panels showed green lights. The one opposite his was broken, the surface of its cover cracked through the middle. The interior was a black, unidentifiable mass. There was a blob of sealant on the wall next to it, a repair to damage caused perhaps by the high-speed impact of a particle of dust. Adam looked away; he knew – had known – the occupant of that pod, a man named Idiq.

Sound was almost normal now, though all there was to hear was the superimposed hums of the engines and the air circulation, and the sound of the spray, which came to an end. Adam rubbed his temples and looked at himself. The automatic revival cycle had left him mostly clean, though naked, but he still felt weak. He uttered a sound,

which prompted a second round of coughing, and then a beeping at the door announced a presence.

The door slid aside, and a small robot rolled in carrying clothing. It pulled up next to the sleeper pod. Adam tried his legs experimentally, and found that they worked. The pod was set into the floor, so he had to stand to get out. He stood up quickly, and then, dizzy, leaned against the wall to keep from falling over. After a moment, the dizziness passed, and he gingerly stepped out of the pod next to the delivery bot.

It took him several minutes, but he managed to slip on the clothes, after which the delivery robot exited the room. The door slid shut, and he was once again alone.

He began to recall where he was, and realized with a start that he *shouldn't* have been alone, that ordinarily, unless he were the first to awake, which the two empty pods suggested was not the case, the other crew members should have been present to assist with the process. In fact, it would ordinarily be another crew member that triggered the revival process.

The ISV Aerius was a deep space exploration vessel, one of the third generation to leave Earth. Its fuselage, two kilometres long, housed a mass of semi-organic circuitry that, when operating, set up a field that greatly reduced the energy required to accelerate. Its surface was dotted irregularly with various sensors and maintenance panels, and near the middle, a ring of discs encircled it. Each disc was a small shuttle/reconnaissance vehicle, tightly packed. At each end of the cylinder, a small fusion drive was in charge of moving the vessel, and at one end, like a giant hammer head, the living area crossed perpendicularly,

reaching out three hundred and fifty metres in either direction, spinning to create an artificial gravity.

Near the centre, eight sleeper bays, four on each side, housed a crew complement of up to forty-eight people. The technology could almost halt human aging, so that over the course of a trip many centuries long, those on board aged a month or two at most. The process worked well and could be repeated a number of times with no apparent side-effects, but that was not to say that it was pleasant.

Further out, in the areas with gravity closer to Earth normal, were recreational facilities, observation rooms, work areas and control rooms. At the front of one arm, dubbed “North”, was the main bridge.

The Aeries was not elegant or streamlined in appearance, but it was not meant to travel through atmosphere. At a cruising speed of two percent the speed of light, the sparse hydrogen in interstellar space packed into a pressure wave across the front of the ship. Strong electromagnets shaped the wave and kept it, mostly, from coming into contact with the hull, and the wave provided some protection from stray dust particles.

When accelerating, the hammerhead was positioned at the leading edge, splitting the vacuum and protecting the fuselage. When decelerating, the fusion drive at the leading edge provided this protection, with a needle of thrust expanding out into the space in front of the ship, and the fuselage enveloped thinly by cooling drive plasma. At the midpoint of the trip, after the rear drive was extinguished, the hammerhead would slowly slide the length of the fuselage, in lock-step with gradually increasing

forward drive output, to isolate the crew from the radiation released by the drive.

After the Great Unification, Earth stood under a single government, but that did not mean it spoke with one voice. The driving issue was whether to expand or to focus developments at home on Earth. Logic suggested that the planet's resources would not last forever, but many held a strong attachment to home, especially sites held sacred. Before the construction of the Aerius, expansionists had been in power, and they had managed to set up a successful mining operation within the belt, extracting various metals, both common and rare, and delivering them home with some regularity. This success bolstered their position and eventually lead to the approval of the third wave. The Aerius was built, its crew selected, and then it set off in the direction of Epsilon Eridani.

If it had made the distance, then more than six hundred years had passed since the Aerius left. Humanity might have become fabulously advanced, or might no longer exist. Either way, the Aerius was on its own, immensely distant from home.

Adam stumbled down the hall, the life returning to his body. He felt hollow, a sensation that was slowly turning into hunger. He smiled to himself; of course, he hadn't eaten in six hundred years. He was on his way to an observation room, where he could look at a terminal and answer some of his questions, such as how much time, precisely, had passed, and why he had woken up alone.

The door to the observation room hissed open, and Adam pulled himself inside. He felt heavy, even though he knew that at this level, he weighed less than twenty

percent of what he did on Earth. He was breathing heavily, and it was a relief to drop into the chair in front of the terminal. The terminal was a large glass surface at least a metre to each side, slightly tilted, with a high-resolution screen behind it. Several people could sit at the same terminal at once, though of course Adam was the only one at this one. He tapped the surface, and the display sprang to life, acknowledging his presence. He placed his hand flat on the surface for the biometrics scanner to identify him, and then entered his password to unlock his console.

Adam's position gave him unrestricted access to most of the ship's systems, but the first thing he brought up was the calendar. The display read: **January 7, 2832 (Z+614.2 years)**. He sat back in the chair and considered this. It meant they were almost certainly successful; if they had encountered something on the way, a shorter duration of time would have passed, and if they had missed their target entirely, an eventuality requiring significant failure of the computer systems, he probably would never have awoken. It also meant that, apart from the others on the ship, everyone he had ever known was dead.

A status icon in his console was blinking red. The ship's heuristics had identified a situation that was likely important – urgent – for him to know about. He tapped the icon, and several video windows appeared and sprang to life. He saw a suited figure exiting the airlock, attaching the umbilical, floating out along the main fuselage of the Aeries. In another window, the umbilical was stretched tight as the figure performed maintenance on a distant panel. A faint jet of air was escaping the umbilical. He watched, horrified, as the jet became more

pronounced, and then a gaping hole, and finally the umbilical snapped. The suited figure lost its grip and began to float away. A third video sequence showed another figure suiting up, wearing a rescue suit equipped with thrusters, and jetting out to intercept the first figure.

He stood up and peered out the window down at the fuselage. The area shown in the videos was out of view, rotated away. As the hammer head rotated slowly around, two suited figures came into view. The person in the rescue suit had one arm hooked around the other suited figure's arm and the other wrapped around an exterior pipe running along the fuselage.

Adam brought up the communication console and tapped All Channels Broadcast. "Adam here, is anyone out there?" he said.

The radio crackled to life, and he heard heavy breathing, and then it clicked off.

2

Adam was still weak, but adrenaline made it easier to move. He scrambled up the ladder to the axle. The closer he got, the more his momentum carried him. In his haste, he forgot to slow his course before reaching the hollow cylinder. The artificial gravity was essentially nonexistent here in the centre of rotation. He shot off the end of the ladder and soared across the space. On the other side, he crumpled inelegantly but avoided injury, and then pushed off more lightly.

He looked down the length of the room. It appeared to be rotating slowly around him, and the effect was disorienting. Of course, it was Adam rotating and not the axle,

Pages 9-24 are omitted from this preview

big loops in the sky. Clouds began to form, and he flew up through one, momentarily blinded, then burst out into the deep, clear blue above. The setting sun played with the clouds on the horizon, setting them on fire. He dropped back down and led the others, chasing the sun. Faster and faster they moved, until the sun was once again overhead.

They were overtop a beautiful valley. Trees covered the sides of mountains rising to majestic peaks. Streams coursed down the sides of the mountains, forming waterfalls here and there.

As he flew over a small river, he saw his love standing on the bank, waving to him and smiling. He smiled back, and then rose back up into the sky, twisting and turning acrobatically, putting on a show for her.

Suddenly, a snake of pure white light began to unfurl at the edge of the valley. He could see its fangs and its evil beads of eyes. One of the flyers shouted in alarm, and they dispersed, trying to escape.

The snake rose into the sky, watching the flyers, selecting its victim, and then with inexorable slowness, and yet faster than they could react, it reached out and plucked one out of the air. Its cry was instantly silenced. The serpent grew in size, and reached for a second victim. One by one, it caught the flyers, and little by little, it grew in size and in strength, until soon it was fighting its own strength, thrashing and coiling back and forth, great lashes against the sky.

Adam could see energy coursing its length. It no longer had a head, and it was no longer eating its victims. It was simply swatting them where they flew, and they disintegrated at its touch.

The great coil began to reach for him, and time slowed down as Adam pulled back, trying to escape. Closer and closer the rushing, coursing energy loomed, and Adam could hear it hissing and roaring. He began to feel its burning heat, and his skin began to glow white—

Adam awoke abruptly and sat up. It was dark, but he could see the interior of the shuttle. There *was* a roaring sound, and it took him a second to identify it as rain, heavy rain on the hull of the shuttle, and wind. He took stock of his situation. He felt very hot, and dehydrated — he was drenched in sweat. His right knee felt badly bruised, but he could find no other injury. He was still strapped into his seat in the cabin.

All of the shuttle's systems were out, or at least off, but he had air to breathe.

"Hello?" he called out. "Anybody?" No reply.

He looked around at the other seats. They were all empty, except for one. The shuttles had been mostly pre-programmed for their flights, but all on board the Acrius had flight training, and in each shuttle one of them had taken on the role of pilot. Richard had been sitting at the very front of the craft, in charge of the controls in case the automated systems failed. He had also been in the weakest part of the inertial multiplier field. There was blood around the cockpit area, and Richard was lying completely motionless, slumped across a control panel.

Adam felt the need to get out and groped for the seat belt release. He popped it off, and promptly fell off the front of the seat. The shuttle was on an incline. For a moment his head spun, until he reoriented his sense of direction.

He climbed up to the rear of the main cabin and thumbed the door release for the rear compartment. The door panel lit up briefly and the door slid open, then the panel went dark again. A small trickle of water came in across the floor at the base of the door.

The rear compartment contained cargo storage areas, a rack of tightly-folded light memory-polymer pressure suits, several dozen small canisters of oxygen, worth at least twelve hours each, and a small airlock integrated into the docking mechanism. In the absence of a docking port to which to attach itself, the shuttle could open out onto wherever it was landed, providing a short ramp for disembarkation.

Adam panted in the heat and searched through the supplies. Some of the water was missing, but there was still a significant amount left. The water purifier unit had also been removed.

He tore open a bottle of water and drank greedily until it was empty, then drank half of another bottle. He splashed some water over his hair and face and then made his way to the facilities to relieve himself.

The washroom was completely black with the door closed, but with it wide open, enough light reflected in for his eyes to eventually adjust.

Feeling better, but still uncomfortably hot, Adam made his way back to the rear compartment and slipped into a pressure suit. It was far less sophisticated – and less capable – than the maintenance suits from the Aeries, but it would protect him from the outside air, and it was light enough to walk in. They had not yet had the chance to sample the planet's atmosphere, and for all he knew, it might kill him.

He activated the suit's power supply, and the memory polymers sprang to life, forcing the suit out into solid shapes providing some structure around joints. The helmet, which hung off the back of the collar, popped out into a dome shape with a large glassy bubble to see through.

The suit was containing his heat and making him feel even hotter. As heat was a common problem in space, the suits were equipped with modular air conditioning units, which were stored separately onboard the shuttle. Adam slid one into the compartment on the side of his suit's pack and switched it on. After a moment, cool air flooded in, and he began to feel able to breathe again.

He went back to the supply area and found a proper backpack, and threw an assortment of solid food packs and half a dozen water bottles into it. He tore open another food pack – an energy bar of some sort – and wolfed it down. Then, he double-checked that the food and water tubes in the suit were reachable, put the suit's helmet over his head and carefully sealed it in place. He hefted the backpack onto his back, and finally made his way into the airlock.

The door closed behind him and left him in pitch blackness. The suit puffed out as the shuttle reclaimed what clean air it could, then sagged again as outside air was let in to balance the pressure. Finally, the outside doors opened and Adam saw out onto the planet. The light could have been that of an early morning or late evening. Torrential rain was gushing down around him, and wind howled across the entrance to the shuttle. Off in the distance, there was a flash, followed after some seconds by deep, booming thunder.

8

The ramp from the back of the shuttle was hanging straight down. The rear end of the shuttle was some ten feet above the level of the ground. Adam looked down and thought he saw a flickering light emanating from beneath the shuttle.

He sat on the edge to shorten the fall, and then slipped off, thudding into the ground. He stood up and turned around into a flashlight pointed at his face. He covered his eyes and turned away.

The flashlight was swung away from him, and in the darkness under the shuttle, Adam thought he could see two figures. One of them was gesturing. He put his arms up in a gesture of confusion, and stepped closer. Over the roar of the wind and the rain, he vaguely heard a voice yelling. He moved closer.

“Turn on your suit radio,” he heard Chali yell.

He reached for a button on the side of the helmet and pressed it in. Immediately, he heard Chali and Sam talking over each other to him.

“Hold on a second, wait,” said Adam. “Where are the others?” There was a brief silence before Sam replied.

“Well, you saw Richard.”

“The others were gone when I woke up,” added Chali. “I woke up Sam, but we couldn’t get you to wake up. We’d never have been able to drag you out and get you into a suit, so we left you sleeping.”

“This is some weather,” said Adam. “I wonder why we didn’t see anything like this from space.”

"It was much worse earlier," said Sam. "The winds were so strong we'd have been blown over. We sat in that cabin with you snoring and Richard..." She paused for a second. "With you and Richard until the wind calmed down a bit."

The wind was still whipping around Adam, and he moved in and sat down next to Chali, forming a rough triangle.

Nobody said anything for a minute or two.

"I thought the planet was uninhabited," Adam put forth finally.

"It was. I mean, there was nothing but plants. I double-checked all the scans," replied Chali. "I don't understand what happened. Are they – I mean, they're all gone, aren't they. Everyone is dead."

"We're not dead," said Adam. He put his suited arm around her, and she leaned into him. Sam said nothing.

The rain was beginning to abate.

"Did you eat?" asked Chali. "You're not hurt, are you?"

"I ate an energy bar. I'm okay for now," replied Adam. "My knee is a bit banged up, but I'll live." He paused, and then asked, "What are we going to do now?"

"Well," said Sam, "we could have set up a base here, but I checked the shuttle. Its conversion machinery is damaged beyond repair, and its power cell is cracked. The in-atmosphere vehicles were at the edge of the inertial field and got sheared off when we hit. The only thing I've got is that I think I saw one other shuttle escape the beam. If it came down undamaged, it could be our only hope."

As if on cue, the rain stopped, and the sky began to brighten. The wind was no longer howling against the side of the shuttle. Some of the clouds parted, and a ray of bright light shone through.

“What time is it?” asked Adam.

“That’s a good question,” said Sam. “I did some calculations earlier using my suit computer. By my estimates, from where we are, the star – the sun, I mean – should be visible for about twelve hours each day. If those clouds hadn’t been in the way, I think we would have had line-of-sight to it for about five hours now.”

“When you said ‘sun’ there, it sounded almost like it might anger some sun god back home,” said Chali. It sounded like it ought to be funny, but it came out sounding ominous. “Sorry,” she added.

“It was day here when we left the Aeries. I guess I wasn’t out that long,” said Adam.

“You were out for about thirty hours, give or take,” said Sam.

A sound from behind Adam startled him, and he stood and turned around. The two women stood as well.

The clouds were beginning to clear, and the entire valley was shimmering in the sunlight. The air was crystal clear, but already, the opposite side of the valley was beginning to look wavy in the heat.

The trail the shuttle had carved into the side of the valley had formed a small plateau, and up over the edge of the plateau, a suited figure came running, slipping and almost falling on the clumps of sodden dirt. Adam could hear a woman’s voice, and mimicked the gesture from earlier.

"Turn on your suit radio," shouted Adam, walking out to meet the arrival.

The other suit was covered in streaks of mud. Its occupant reached up and pressed the switch, and immediately heavy breathing filled the channel. Adam was close enough now to see Jane's face. Sam and Chali had arrived and clustered around. They waited for her to catch her breath.

"You've got to help- They fell- Adam, Sam- David, he's- he was trying to save Lynne," said Jane frantically.

"Slow down," said Sam. "Tell us from the beginning."

"Er- right," said Jane struggling to control her breathing. "I- we were trying to find water. We brought the purifier with us. It was David and me, and Lynne."

"Why were you trying to find water?" interjected Sam. "We have plenty of water in storage here."

"I don't know," sobbed Jane. "Lynne said it was important, and David said we couldn't let her go off alone. We found a river, except it was a raging torrent at the bottom of a ravine. We tried to stop her, but Lynne was climbing down. She slipped, and tore her suit, and landed on some kind of ledge. David tried to go after her, but he slipped too and fell into the water, and now he's- he's gone."

Jane was crying openly, and Chali moved to her and put her arms around her.

"David is probably alright," said Sam. "He was wearing a pressure suit too, wasn't he?"

Jane looked up and sniffled.

"I've got water and food in my backpack," said Adam. "If it's not too far, we can leave right away."

A trillion kilometres from home and eight hundred years in the future, two ships from different eras are in orbit around a planet with a mysterious secret. One group came to start a new life, the other to escape a war – and somebody is quietly plotting to murder them all.

Aerius is a tale of hopes and fears, of human faults, and of the dangers we could pose to ourselves.

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