



ÆRIUS

Jonathan Gilbert

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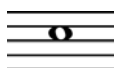
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AERIUS

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,

Pages 5-28 are omitted from this preview

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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.

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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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