



FALLING

A Not Yet story

Something startled Alex Kingsway awake. He opened his eyes, or at least tried to; one eye did not want to open. The other was not quite in focus, all he could see were little lights far away. His head throbbed, and he thought 'Am I seeing stars? What woke me up?' All was still, dark and quiet, just lying in his bunk having a nap. 'No, wait, that's not right. I don't remember getting into my bunk. I had been

somewhere else, but I don't remember where.'

'And why won't my left eye open? I must have gotten something on my face.' He reached up to brush it away and *tink* his gloved hand tapped the visor of his helmet. He could barely see it, but yes, that was his hand, in a vacc suit gauntlet, outlined by stars. That didn't make any sense. 'Why would I put on a suit to go to sleep? And why didn't I clean my face first?' He laid his hand down on the bunk again, only the bunk wasn't there. He started in surprise, and his left eye finally came open. 'OK, where am I?' he thought. 'I'm in a suit, but I don't remember putting it on.' He tried to turn over, and found that difficult, as he had nothing to push against. 'I'm not lying down,' he thought with alarm, 'I'm floating.'

At the same time, he realized that he was slowly rotating. With dread and foreboding, he watched the stars wheel slowly by, until something new came into his field of vision. Alex gasped in astonishment. There before, or below him, massive and silent, was a planet, its gray-green surface spreading out below him. 'So,' he thought, 'I'm in orbit. This can't be good.' He could feel every muscle begin to tense up, and his stomach knotted with apprehension. He peered across the star field, looking for other suits, hoping he was not alone, but there was nothing. He thought he might recognize a constellation that would tell him where he was, but didn't recognize anything. Pressure on his chest shook his mind from star-gazing - he had been holding his breath without realizing it, and suddenly exhaled. 'How long was I holding it?' he wondered. This brought another question to his mind. 'How long had I been asleep?' He looked at the reflection dimly painted on the inside of his helmet. Suddenly it was someone else's eyes staring back at him. He blinked in surprise, and saw only his own reflection again.

Fighting to keep his thoughts together, he spoke aloud, concentrating to remember the suit drills from his Space Patrol days. "Suit, access local communications network." His voice cracked and wavered. His mouth was completely dry, but not from the rising panic, so he figured he must have been asleep for a while. There was no response from the onboard computer, just the echo of his voice inside the helmet. "Suit, activate visual display," Alex tried again. This time there was a response. A small screen appeared, projected on the inside of the visor. Alex read:

Life support nominal, oxygen level at 87%, internal temperature 20C, external temperature minus 105 C.

"OK, that's getting somewhere at least," Alex muttered. "Suit, display current velocity and display continuously."

Insufficient data to calculate current velocity.

'Am I on an orbit trajectory?' Alex wondered, the thought sending a new stab of fear through him as the possibilities rolled through his brain. Then he said "Suit, display status of communication system."

Communication system inactive.

"Yes, I think we established that. Activate communication system," Alex retorted.

Communication system inoperable

"Diagnose communication failure."

Hardware failure. Communication system inoperable.

"Explain."

Transceiver not found. Communication system inoperable. External temperature minus 99C.

“Can you at least find me a suit thruster to stabilize my orientation?”

No functioning thrusters in position to counter rotation.

“Fine. I’ll manage that somehow. Suit, display status of all systems and update continuously” Alex ordered. “Let’s see what else isn’t working.” The screen obediently complied, and Alex quickly read over the available data. Everything seemed to be working except for the communication system and the ‘plumbing’, which was not attached. “What a thing to forget to do,” Alex chided himself. “What was I doing when I suited up?”

Something at the bottom of the list caught his eye. The suit’s locator beacon was also inoperable. “What was I thinking going EVA in this suit?” Alex’s worry deepened as he read the results of the diagnostic. “This keeps getting further and further from good. I’m stuck up here, with no communication and no beacon. Air’s good for a while, but that won’t last forever. Temperature is holding steady, but I can’t guess how long that will last. Think, Kingsway, think.”

Current velocity 187 meter per second. External temperature minus 92 C.

“Uh-oh. Suit, calculate orbital trajectory and display graphically,” Alex commanded. The screen showed a half-circle representing the planet, and a dashed line representing Alex’s trajectory. The line did not make it even halfway across the semicircle before it angled sharply down. “Oh no. This can’t be happening.” Alex whispered. His mind retreated from the hopelessness of his plight and for some time he let himself float, turning over and over, too frightened almost to breathe.

When his lungs again reminded him that they still wanted air, he drew in a ragged breath, and shook his head as he tried to regain focus. “All right, all right. There must be a way to get out of this. Maybe I can try to correct the orbit, or make a controlled re-entry. Of the two, I’d rather be on solid ground, so I’ll try for re-entry and hope I end up somewhere close to civilization. Suit, do we have a re-entry kit?”

No re-entry equipment located.

“Gehenna. Suit, do we have contra-gravity?”

No contra-gravity equipment located.

“Well, that’s just great,” Alex groaned. Again the question rang in his mind, ‘How did I get here?’ To keep his mind occupied and off of his seemingly hopeless situation, Alex closed his eyes and tried to remember. “Last place I remember being, was it Scarloto? No, that’s right, it was Bolingsbrook.” He opened his eyes and studied the planet. He could almost see it getting closer with the passing seconds. “That land mass there looks like the continent Bolinda, so I was right, this is the Bolingsbrook system. Not that that helps me any.”

He stared absently, lost in thought, as his motion turned him away from the planet again, looking through rather than at the lines of data glowing on the inside of the visor. ‘It’s beautiful from up here,’ he thought. ‘Too bad it won’t be so pretty when I land.’

A fragment of a song went floating through his mind. He had learned it in flight school at the Patrol, one of those silly old songs that veteran spacers would teach to the new hands just for fun. The song was about a recruit for whom everything was going wrong from the moment he stepped out of the airlock on his first Extra-Vehicular Activity training. The song was both funny and bawdy; the

hapless protagonist's refrain was "if I had listened to what Gunny told me I might have survived". It worked as a training memory aid. What had the instructors told him to do if he were to be separated from his ship while EVA? At least singing the song had gotten his mind off his predicament, and enabled him to start thinking again.

A realization came to him. "I had to be aboard a ship to get up here in the first place, but this isn't one of our suits. Jake would never leave one in this kind of disrepair, let alone allow me to exit the ship in it. So whose ship was I on? For that matter, where is the *Not Yet*, and where are Eddie, Jake and Scott? What were we doing here in the Bolingsbrook system?"

He still had no answers, but in his mind he saw the eyes again; sad green eyes that were not his own. Eyes that pleaded - but pleaded for what? Whose eyes were they? Where had he seen them?

"The suit, the suit," Alex muttered as he turned over thoughts in his mind. *Did not understand. Please restate directive.*

"I wasn't talking to you," Alex snapped irritably. At least that too was a distraction from the panic he was wrestling with so desperately.

His Patrol training took over; to evaluate one's situation. "I've got no data, so I'll have to start by speculating. Maybe I took a blow to the head? That would explain why I was out. But did that happen before or after I put the suit on? Probably before. This seems a pretty standard suit, the helmets are made roomy enough you really can't hit your head on anything once you've got it on. So that means I was unconscious and someone else put me into the suit. I'm the only one floating around here that I can tell, so I wasn't carried out by crewmen abandoning ship. If it was an emergency that might explain the poor shape this suit's in except it wasn't so it doesn't." Growling in frustration, he punched a fist into his other hand, which did nothing except put a wobble in his rotation. He turned his eyes again to the display. "Suit, report life support status," he said grimly.

Life support nominal. Oxygen level 85%, internal temperature 20C, external temperature negative 88C.

"Right; I just can't see how whoever put me in this suit was concerned for my long-term well-being. So, who were they and why did they bother putting me in a damaged suit? I'll probably burn up once I hit the lower atmosphere anyway, so what was the point . . ." He broke off as another memory came rushing back, demanding center stage.

The eyes! They belonged to a girl, a sad little girl that he had met for only a moment, and in that moment all his other thoughts evaporated as in a furnace. His breath hissed between clenched teeth as one by one the images flashed through Alex's mind.

The arrival at Bolingsbrook. Meeting the parish priest. Pictures of children who had vanished from the town. Searching nearby towns, heading inexorably for the starport. Scoping out a dodgy-looking freighter. Sneaking aboard, finding the cargo hold full of cages, cages full of children. The little girl, crying, *pleading* with him to get her back to her family. Their hands met, just for a moment. A shadow over his shoulder - the girl crying out. A big spanner swinging towards his head, rolling away. The kidnapper's look of surprise as Alex's gun caught him in the chest. More rough-looking men closing in on him. Shots fired. His gun knocked from his

hand. A searing pain in his head, then everything going black.

Alex's focus was shattered by the suit flashing a warning message that the external temperature was now above 0C and interior temperature had also risen. It occurred to him like a blow that was no longer rotating. He felt a slight wobble, and noticed a faint whistling sound. To his horror, he realized he was deep enough into the atmosphere that he could feel the wind. On the up side, air pressure has stopped his slow roll while he was facing towards the planet. On the down side, in about five minutes he would either burn up, or come to a sudden and very final stop.

The realization that he had run out of time extinguished the fire in his heart. He could see the end, rushing up to meet him. The whistling grew to a rushing, and he felt the buffeting of the air in motion around him. The suit display reported his velocity as 340 m/s, right at the edge of the speed of sound, but Alex didn't notice. His eyes stared unheedingly ahead at the onrushing planet, his arms flapping limply at his side.

Then a tiny part of his brain woke up again. The sound of the wind had changed somehow, and not just by getting louder. And it seemed like a shadow had suddenly appeared over him, but that couldn't be; he was still well above the height for clouds. Rousing his dulled brain and nerveless limbs, Alex remembered his training in atmospheric operations and positioned his arms so the wind turned him over again.

He drew in a great huge breath, and shouted 'YES!!!' in triumph for there above him was the wonderful, welcome sight of the *Not Yet*, diving out of the stars towards him. It banked away from him slightly to avoid catching him in the shockwave building up at the bow. Alex could see the cargo bay door swinging slowly outward, and two shapes appeared, dimly silhouetted against the sky. The two vacc suits jumped off the ramp and swooped downward towards Alex, hauling something between them. Alex stretched out his arms towards them as they dove, still afraid they would not reach him in time. Every second he expected to hit the ground, even as he felt the solid grip of two hands on his arms. Scott and Jake's faces beamed at him through their helmets as they held him fast. They fastened the contra-gravity harness onto Alex's chest, and Alex grabbed at it for dear life. A few seconds later, Jake gave Alex the thumbs-up sign and Alex felt his descent slowing.

Together the three men swooped towards the aft of the *Not Yet*. As he caught sight of the opening, Alex realized he was holding his breath again. "Come on, come on," he whispered, still not convinced he was really going to make it before impact. The ramp was just meters away, it was almost within reach, his feet were on the ramp and he was in the doors. Jake jumped to one side and pulled the lever to shut the cargo bay. With a tremendous clank the doors snapped shut, and suddenly all was silent again, except for Alex's heaving breath. Jake moved to another control, and the loose bits of packing that hadn't gotten sucked out the doors started blowing again as the environmental controls pumped air back into the cargo bay. Alex and Scott lay on the floor, hands clasped, watching the atmospheric indicator. It turned green with a buzz.

Scott hauled off his helmet, and started working Alex's loose, grinning with relief. Jake dropped his helmet to the deck and shouted to the comm panel on the wall. "OK, Eddie. We've got him, we're in," He sagged against the bulkhead and slid to a sitting position.

Eddie's face appeared on the comm panel. "Way to go, guys! Hang onto something, I'm pulling us out of this dive," he instructed. The weight of inertia pressed them to the deck as the ship angled away from the planet, climbing back into space.

"Hey Alex, I'll need you up here if we're going to catch these bastards, right?" Eddie yelled. Jake and Scott tore the rest of the suit off of Alex. As soon as he shook off the second boot, Alex stumbled for the hatchway that led to the rest of the ship. Arriving moments later at the cramped piloting station, Alex flung himself into his seat and began to pound away at his control console. Several times he had to go back and correct his entries because his hands were shaking.

"Good to see you, pal," Eddie said evenly, watching his friend trembling all over. He gave Alex a sympathetic clap on the shoulder, and a look of mixed worry and relief. "The ship we're after is there on the board already, but I don't have a good lock yet".

"Thanks, Eddie. Thanks for coming to get me," Alex panted. He glanced over at his friend and managed a quick grin. "If I'm reading our sensor data correctly, we should be able to cut them off before they make it to the jump horizon." He sat back in his chair, wiping his hands on his pants. "Punch it, Eddie."

"Jake, we've got our course laid in. Gimme all the extra juice you can squeeze out of her," Eddie called into the comm.

"Get us moving, you'll have the juice when you need it, Eddie. I'll let you know if anything starts to melt," Jake replied excitedly. The engine rose to an insistent growl that reverberated through the small ship, as the thrusters launched them after their quarry.

"So what the devil happened to you?" Eddie inquired with more of his usual directness. Alex was clearly alive, so there was no point in being overly emotional about it.

Alex related as much as he could remember up to his discovery of the kidnapped children. "After I found the kids, all packed up like livestock in the hold, I got into a scrap with the crew, and they knocked me out, stuffed me in a vacc suit and tossed me out the airlock."

Eddie said, "Well, that explains a lot. I was coming to find you after you snuck aboard, but it took off before I got there. I ran for the customs agent that cleared them. I leaned on him a little, and he confessed that he'd taken a bribe to let the trader load up without being inspected. He claimed he didn't know what was in the containers, but that was enough to go with. The guys and I hauled him straight to the Port Warden and explained what happened. Their take-off was legitimately recorded, so he took some convincing but they weren't long gone when he dispatched two Orbital Guard ships to cut them off. We were prepping the ship to follow after the OG's when the Port Warden called us. He said the freighter had ejected something, and asked us to check it out. We all figured it might have been you." Eddie explained. "Lucky guess, right?"

"Glad you did," Alex grinned. Then his face turned more serious. "Those bastards didn't just want to kill me. They put me in a disabled suit so that I'd be alive and awake when I hit atmosphere. They wanted me to fall, and know I was falling, and that I couldn't stop it. That is just *cold*. What really burns is the only motive they could have had for kidnapping all those kids was to sell them as slaves;

maybe to pirates, or to the Patrian Concordiat. I hope they get a few decades of prison time, or lined up against the wall; and that the Bolingsbrook government confiscates their ship. They can't hurt anyone if they're grounded."

Eddie nodded agreement, and then frowned with concern as Alex's shaking was worse. "Come on, pal. I'm taking you to sickbay. Let Scott look you over. You're running on adrenaline, and when it wears off, you'll need his help."

Twenty minutes later, the *Not Yet* flashed past the OG ships, gaining steadily on the freighter. On board, Alex was sitting on Scott's desk, which doubled as a medical exam table. Scott replaced the bio-analyzer and smiled at his friend. "Well, I don't think that whack on the head you took has done you any lasting damage, for which you should be very thankful".

Looking over a diagnostic screen he continued, "And it explains why you were disoriented and experienced the loss of memory when you woke up. All the same, I expect you want to rest a while. Eddie and I can . . ."

"Right now I want three things," Alex interrupted. He got up from the table, waving his friend aside. "I want to match vectors with that freighter, I want one of *our* vacc suits, and I want a gun. I'll be fine". He started towards the door.

"Whoa, there, pal," Scott said, catching Alex by the arm. "Jake tells me that when we catch up with these guys, we can keep them from jumping out-system until the OG's get there to make the arrest. We can't just start shooting them, no matter how much they deserve it."

"My God, Scott, this is not about me. Did you not get the part where these scum are selling *children*? Let me make myself clear: There's a little girl over there on that ship with big green eyes, and I'm going to get her back to her family. But first, one of those dirtbags is going to tell me who they were selling to; and we're going after them next. Now, are you coming?"

Scott paused for a moment, then his mouth quirked into a grin. He followed Alex out into the corridor. "I'm right behind you, Alex."