

LANDING

Chapter II

*“The atmosphere below is of a class B sigma nine mixture which is adequate for human existence, however long exposure will cause shortness of breath and weakness,”
the CPU responded.*

Over next the two days they investigated the interior of the ship to find out what supplies they might find to help them.

“Denise, look to see if there are atmosphere suits in one of those closets,” Joseph directed her to the closets in the galley area. “They are normal equipment on all CIG ships.”

Denise searched for the suits. While she searched she made a mental inventory of the other items she found in the closets as well as in the drawers.

“Here they are. I think they might be a little big for us though,” Denise informed Joseph. “What is your plan?”

“I don’t really have one yet, we’ll just have to play it by ear for now,” Joseph responded as he moved to the back of the craft to put on the atmosphere suit.

In the locker, where she had found the atmosphere suits, she also discovered backpacks filled with survival gear. Each kit contained a metallic jar filled with dihydroxide water (a highly concentrated form of water where a single milliliter equals a full liter when exposed to air), a Phaluvian army knife (a large knife with several smaller blades folded inside), four cans of manstaka jelly (high in protein, highly concentrated, that

can also be used as a lubricant), an emergency canister of compressed air, a pocket communicator, a hand trazer, and a first aid kit.

In the dispensary she found enough food stored on the *ZX/2* to last a crew of sixteen for a month. Most of the food they found was freeze-dried packets of imitation food, high in nutritional value, but really don't taste that bad. This was a big surprise since the ship wasn't supposed to be operational for another few months.

In the drawers were some electronic parts, a few medical supplies, and some manuals. In the back of the craft she found a workstation with several components scattered about. Not knowing what any of them did, she just left them alone.

She found a C-Tablet in one of the cabinets. A C-Tablet is a pocket device that can store handwritten data for later retrieval. It can do many functions including communications, data storage, calculations, maps, etc. It can be unfolded to the size of a large monitor. It has a direct link to the CPU so any data on the CPU can be retrieved easily.

As they gathered the equipment for the task ahead of them, it became apparent that they may have chewed off more than they had bargained for. Denise became concerned, but felt that she had to go along. Actually she didn't have much of a choice.

Just then the monotone sound of the CPU's synthesized voice startled them. "Now approaching destination Reidforcia. Please be prepared to enter standard orbit. Awaiting further orders."

After adjusting their suits, and prepared for the descent to Reidforcia

Joseph went to the pilot's chair, sat down, and questioned the craft's CPU, "Computer is there a safe place to land within 100 cordons of the slave camp?" (A cordon is roughly equivalent to a meter.)

"Yes, it is in sect ..."

"Never mind where, what I want to know is, can you land there?" Joseph responded cutting the CPU short.

"Yes," replied the CPU.

"Then do so," Joseph directed the CPU.

The CPU's navigation system locked onto the landing area and immediately headed for it. Joseph monitored the progress on the screen in front of him.

Just then, the CPU reported, "Reducing speed to nominal. Entering Reidforcian atmosphere. Prepare for descent."

"What do you think we'll find down there?" Denise broke the silence.

"Your guess is as good as mine, but whatever it is, I'm ready for it," Joseph replied confidently.

"Computer, activate the anti-detection shield. Make sure it's set to maximum. We don't want to be scanned and discovered." Joseph gave orders to the CPU.

As the craft began its descent, Joseph began to explain his plan for the rescue mission.

"Look Denise," Joseph began, "I'm sorry I got you into this, but as long as you are here, we are in this together. When we get to Reidforcia we won't have much time to get in and out so listen carefully" Joseph then explained his ideas to Denise, and she listened closely.

"Are you crazy? You want to just walk into a Reidforcian fortress, and rescue your dad? You have big dreams Joseph Xelco!" Denise responded to the plan. "Do you want to die or something?"

"I can do this with you or without you, you make the choice," Joseph said matter-of-factly.

"Computer, please give me a map of the Reidforcian labor camp," demanded Joseph.

"Observe the screen to your left. A detailed map is available to you. The white dot shows our landing place. Would you like me to send a copy to your C-Tablet?" the now familiar voice of the CPU responded.

"Yes," replied Joseph.

"Computer, what is the atmosphere like on the planet?" asked Denise.

The CPU blinked and flashed and then responded. "The atmosphere is composed of twenty-six percent nitrogen, eleven percent....."

“Computer, wait a minute, is the atmosphere breathable?” Denise cut off the CPU’s analysis of the air below.

“The atmosphere below is of a class B sigma nine mixture which is adequate for human existence, however long exposure will cause shortness of breath and weakness,” the CPU responded.

That was the most marginal rating for life support, but at least it didn’t include any harmful particulates. During the next few minutes the two went over their plans using the map in front of them. They located the prison camp, its exits and entrances, as well as the overall layout of the compound. Parts of the prison weren’t on the map. Perhaps the intelligence reports were not completely accurate

“It appears that the entrance over here would give us the easiest access to the holding cells,” Joseph said as he directed his finger towards the lower corner.

“This map isn’t very complete about what’s inside,” Denise said as she was more interested in what the interior of the building was like than the exterior. “How are we supposed to find our way around?”

“Computer, is it possible to get a more detailed map of the interior of the Reidforcian prison?” Joseph asked the CPU hoping for a positive response.

“No, that information is not available at this time,” the CPU’s monotone voice responded.

“OK, so if we do get in, what then?” Denise asked Joseph.

“I’m not sure. That prison down there has a lot of prisoners. Perhaps I should ask the CPU what our capacity is.” Turning to the CPU he asked, “Computer, what is the capacity of this craft?”

The CPU responded, “Seventeen average sized adults.”

Joseph then asked, “Computer, is there any possibility of controlling other vessels from on board the ZX/2?”

The CPU answered, “Yes, if the triaxial dimento is engaged while the thrust diverter is in reverse, then the out bound directional filters become active.....”

“Thank you, computer, that will be enough,” Joseph cut off the CPU.

As they approached the surface, the two stared out of the small observation windows. Never before had they seen such a sight. There was a thick greenish mist covering the land, and pieces of metal reached to the sky like stalagmites. Debris spread across the ground rising above the milky mist below. It was a junkyard of confusion without any plant life.

Denise and Joseph reviewed their plans one last time.

The escape ship hovered over the designated spot and then settled slowly to the surface. After a soft thud, the thrusters let off a final blast, and the landing was complete.

They gathered as many of the items that they could carry.

“Get the C-Tablet or we’ll get lost for sure,” Joseph ordered Denise. They had almost forgotten to get the C-Tablet with the copy of the map.

“Where did you leave it?” asked Denise.

“It’s over there on the table. Hurry up! We’ve got to get out of here before we’re detected by the guards,” Joseph directed Denise.

“I’m going as fast as I can. Hold your pants on,” Denise responded.

Joseph opened the door of the ship and lowered the hatch. The mist that covered the planet oozed its way inside creating a green glow in the cabin. They climbed down the ramp into the unknown.

“Turn on your beacon light so I can find you,” Joseph’s voice came over Denise’s headset.

Denise turned on her beacon to see if she could find Joseph in the murky mist. Joseph’s light flashed directly into Denise’s eyes and startled her.

“Hey watch it, those lights are bright,” Denise yelled out at Joseph.

“Thank goodness these atmosphere suits are equipped with these lights or we wouldn’t be able to find each other,” Joseph said.

Then with a sense of urgency he continued, “We’ve got to be careful. I don’t want to get separated.”

“If we follow the directions on the map we should be able to reach the labor camp in a matter of minutes,” Joseph directed.

“This mist is great because it provides us cover and protects us from detection,” Joseph went on to say.

The door of the ZX/2 slowly closed behind them. Now they were committed to the rescue of Joseph’s father.

They moved slowly away from the ship using the map as their sole source of information. Fortunately, the ground was somewhat level. The soil was soft; almost like walking on sponges. They had to avoid the debris lying on the ground that made the going very slow. From the amount of junk they walked through, it was obvious that this was the garbage dump for the prison. As they got closer, they decided to turn off the headlamps. They didn’t want to give themselves away.

“How far do you think we have to go before we get there?” questioned Denise.

“It can’t be too far. According to the map it should be just about....” THUD. “I think I found something,” Joseph replied. He seemed a little shaken up.

“Are you OK?” asked Denise.

“Yeah, I think so. Boy that wall is hard,” Joseph said still a little wobbly.

“Where are we?” asked Denise.

“I think we are about ten cordons away from the main entrance, if my calculations are correct,” answered Joseph.

The two of them crept along the wall to their left until Joseph felt an indentation in the wall. He ran his hand up and down the hard smooth surface. He found a crack. Through the crack came a very small beam of amber light.

“This must be it!” Joseph said under his breath. “Open my backpack and get out the Phaluvian knife. I think I can pry open the door if I can get it in just right.”

Denise opened Joseph’s pack, removed the knife, and gave it to him. He took it and wedged it into a very small fissure in the hard surface. As he pried the door, the two external metal doors began to slowly open. At first just far enough to allow a stream of light from within to escape, then as he put more pressure against the knife the door opened farther and farther until it opened enough for Denise to fit. Once inside, Denise took her knife and held the door as Joseph slipped through himself.

They crouched low against the wall and crawled slowly to the left until they were behind a stack of crates.

As soon as their eyes adjusted to the amber light inside, they were able to make out faint shadows lurking around the corners of the courtyard and above them on top of the walls surrounding the courtyard. The murky green mist, that was so thick outside, was gone.

Tall columns reached upward all around them. Balconies surrounded the structure.

A series of animal cages were stacked one upon the other. Each one filled with various animals from around the galaxy. Joseph pointed out to Denise that he recognized a Monstal from Coronthia (a horse sized creature with a head like a lion and the body of a mule), a Galad from Bignol (a small animal about the size and weight of a deer with horns that wrapped around its body providing a protective shell), and a Londata from Bristus (a tree dwelling sloth with huge front legs powerful enough to crush an elephant).

“Come on Joseph, we can’t admire those animals, we need to get out of here,” Denise whispered to Joseph.

They hugged the wall as they moved slowly around the courtyard looking for a better place to hide. Different stacks of crates were piled high around the courtyard. There were many places to hide, but getting from one stack to the other was a challenge. Surprisingly, they hadn’t been detected yet, or so they thought...

Suddenly, an infrared light from above scanned down to the floor of the courtyard as they crouched in the corner. Because of the photo sensor overlay on the visor of the hoods on the suits, they were able to see the infrared lights scan back and forth.

“Quick, pull down the shield on your helmet!” Joseph shouted to Denise.

“You don’t have to yell,” responded Denise. “I already did it.”

The second filter provided an enhanced view of the courtyard. After pulling down their filter visors, they could see the figures above on the walls surrounding the courtyard moving closer. From the way they were scanning the area it became apparent that they knew something had invaded the prison.

“Get your trazer out and set it for wide dispersion,” Joseph ordered Denise.

“Gosh Joseph, you don’t have to get so bossy, you know,” Denise quipped.

“Alright, just do it or we won’t be around to argue about it,” Joseph retorted.

“What should we do now?” questioned Denise.

“Get behind those crates over there. We can hide there while we figure out what to do next,” Joseph suggested as he was already moving that direction pulling Denise behind him. They stayed low to the ground moving quickly from one stack of crates to the next trying not to disturb the animals inside.

“We’re going to have to move quickly. According to the map there should be an entrance to the slave holding cells about fifteen cordons across the court yard to our left,” Joseph said as he pointed the direction given him by the C-Tablet.

“Do you think we can get there without being seen or fired upon?” Denise asked looking from side to side trying to detect any guards who might be trying to shoot at them.

“I sure hope so,” responded Joseph. He motioned for Denise to follow quickly.

They darted across the courtyard going from crate to crate ending up at a large metal gate. The recessed gate provided a little bit of cover. Behind the gate was a massive door. Upon inspecting the door, they found a triangular design on the right side with a strange insignia on it. The writing reminded them of hieroglyphics although it had no apparent order.

“It must be Reidforcian,” commented Denise.

“I think that may be the code to open the door. I don’t have any idea what it says. Unless we can figure a way in, we’ll be sitting ducks,” Joseph answered. “Maybe we can use the Phaluvian knife again.”

“I think I can figure it out,” Denise quipped. “Let me try to read this.”

“You can’t read Reidforcian, nobody in the galaxy can read Reidforcian,” Joseph said not believing what she had said.

Denise studied the symbols. In the middle was a big key hole with a triangular knob. She took out her Phaluvian knife and began to draw in the dirt.

After a few minutes she said, “I think it says ‘To open turn key two turns left, then three turns right.’”

Denise turned her head to the right and then to the left as she slowly deciphered the writing. She stood up, pulled the gate back, and reached for the key in the center of the door.

“Let me try this,” she said as she turned the big key twice to the left and three times to the right.

C-R-E-A-K, the big doors swung open to reveal a long corridor, dimly lit, with several small doors on each side. Each door bore a triangle with a different set of symbols on it.

“How’d you do that,” Joseph questioned; shocked.

“I’m not sure, I just figured it out. I’ve always liked learning other languages. For some reason it just made sense to me,” Denise responded as they moved through the door into the long hallway..

Leaning against the wall and squatting low they surveyed the hallway in front of them.

“Nobody in the galaxy has ever been able to learn Reidforcian. It’s too complicated,” Joseph spoke out loud.

Turning and looking at Joseph, Denise responded matter-of-factly, “I can’t explain it, I just figured it out.”

As they sat in the long hallway, their eyes slowly adjusted to the low light coming from the small round light fixtures attached to the walls. They suddenly realized that they had managed to escape one situation, but now were they were in the middle of another.