



Dr. Sarah Dallas

"Are you the f**king pilot, Hair?" Boz screams at me, piggy eyes aflame in her round face.

I hate that moniker: Hair. Not important right now. The fact we're going to die is. "No, I'm not, but—"

"Then stay in your lane and shut your hole."

Breathe, Sarah. Don't punch her. You're the ship's counselor. Be professional. Do *not* punch her. The mantra rings over and over in my skull, but Boz tests every ounce of my training. There are four of us on this twelve-year round trip. Assaulting the pilot isn't the best idea.

I release a very measured breath and fix my attention on the largest planet in our solar system looming large in the viewfinder of our liner—the *Paralus*. Jupiter is enormous, its surface banded with reddish-brown and off-white clouds, rushing and crashing into one other. Its one angry red eye stares at us, at *me*.

My supposed intellect short-circuits as I try to quantify and categorize. In the face of something truly awe-inspiring my tiny human biological computer is unable, or refuses, to comprehend the sheer magnitude of this world. Yet my limbic system must have some ancient recollection of dealing with overwhelming reverence, forcing a rush of adrenaline through my bloodstream and into my trembling muscles.

Just *look* at it.

The *Paralus* shudders as we hurtle into the upper atmosphere. Jupiter has a will of its own, intent on sucking us into its gassy interior. Ironic, given we're here to grab its vapors. Helium-3 to be specific, to act as cryogenic coolant for our nuclear fusion reactors at home and space stations set out along the Interplanetary Transport Network. Jupiter has helium in spades, while Earth has precious little, and so now we risk our lives on ridiculously dangerous missions to mine the ether. In the age of interplanetary travel and colonization, profit trumps human life—as always.

Metal squeals and the hull creaks. The luminous tabs and keys beneath crystal glass control panels stutter and flicker. Even the slick white walls and soothing curves of the Bridge's interior can't muffle the complaints of the frail, human-made underpinnings.

A tear slips from the corner of my eye and my knuckles are white as I grip the armrests.

"Are you crying?" Boz yells, peeling her stare from the enormous viewfinder to gawk in disgust at me for daring to have any emotion other than anger.

"We're coming in too hot," I press, flitting a concerned frown from Boz to the planet and back again in hopes she takes the hint to watch where the hell she's going. "Can't the AI take over?"

"Which part of *shut up* isn't penetrating all that hair?" Boz clicks her tongue, then tweaks on the thruster yokes. Sweat beads on her forehead. "I got this, Dallas. Now back off."

I wriggle back in my seat and adjust the harness again. Everyone hates a backseat driver, but if she gets this wrong Jupiter will seize the *Paralus* and we'll never have enough thrust to escape. We'll either be torn to shreds or crushed like a tin can. Either one a shitty way to go.

Our freighter shakes like a rag doll in the mouth of a puppy, the nuts and bolts of this dilapidated piece of junk threatening to come loose. The *Paralus* is fragile as all hell and entirely breakable—the sort of construction a five-year-old makes out of drinking straws and modeling clay. A mile-long needle with a nuclear fusion engine at the aft end, a Scoop and transport shuttle docking bay, the AI mainframe in the center, and two spinning rings: one for cargo, and one for medbay, exercise room and living quarters. Ops, also called the Bridge, sits right in the nose.

Perfect for a front-row seat to our doom.

"Still too much speed," Boz says. "Increasing retro-thruster burn."

Will that do anything? The main retro-thrusters have been firing while we're asleep for months now, slowing us to enter orbit correctly, which sounds great on paper but—given the heap of shit we're in—means diddly squat.

“Boz, keep her steady,” Commander Chau calls from his chair.

“I'm trying, sir,” she yells back.

“Tris?” Chau says loud enough to be heard over the din of warping metal punctuated at regular intervals by the warning alarm.

“The trajectory is off, something's changed,” Tris Beckert, our co-pilot and chief engineer, replies in his Texan drawl. “Jupiter's not where we predicted. It's not a big ol' shift, but enough.”

I swear my ass just clenched hard enough to make a button on the seat. A ton of unmanned craft have slammed into their destination planet or just whizzed on by into space forever. I'm no astrophysicist, but was once told reaching a target in space like standing on Everest and firing a bullet at a pea-sized target on the other side of the Earth.

“We're comin' in a little steep,” Tris says, tapping away at his readout. “AI is helpin' Boz compensate—”

The alarm blares again.

“Warning, orbital entry path suboptimal,” says a synthetic, sonorous voice from overhead.

Only an AI could so calmly announce our deaths.

“Yes, I f**king know, Dona,” Boz spits back. “Reverse thrusters won't do it. Gotta skip over the atmosphere. Just need to burn more delta-v.”

The *Paralus* lurches under a burst from the engines. The horizon of Jupiter fills the viewfinder, its swirling fumes mixing like milk and coffee in a fresh latte. A fresh latte? Shut up, Sarah.

On the horizon, flashes of white light, tinged with green edges, emanate from just below Jupiter's cloud line.

Tris shoots a worried look at Boz.

“Asteroids exploding on impact?” she yells without breaking her concentration.

“I don't think so,” Tris shouts back.

“You better f**king hope not or we're about to get cratered,” Boz says.

Cratered. Great. Pebble-dashed with chunks of space rock. The spindly nature of the *Paralus* helps it to not be a gigantic target, but it only takes one puncture and we're all screwed.

Why am I here, again?

“Hold on to your pantyhose,” Boz says, perspiration running down her temples.

The *Paralus* is battered, a pathetic kite in impossibly strong winds, as we plunge farther into the outer atmosphere of Jupiter. The viewfinder is near black—sunlight can no longer penetrate the violent vapors assaulting us. Multiple feeds from external cameras cycle on and off, but offer no help.

Boz roars long and loud, heaving on the yokes while Tris taps away at his console, calculating and recalculating—pinging his very human assumptions off the computations of the AI. Chau sits, smooth jaw set and stoic, his narrowed sights fixed on some imaginary endpoint to this nightmare of an orbital entry. He looks oddly calm.

I squeeze my eyes shut and mumble a prayer, though to whom I don't know. God, Yahweh, Allah. Anyone who'll listen. In moments of extreme stress, time seems to slow, the human mind suddenly able to function on some higher level, absorbing all the information it can in hopes of averting disaster. Behind my eyelids, in a weird half-dream, half-out-of-body experience, I see myself clinging to the harness. Observing the cowardly pose fills my astral-projected self with shame, which only grows with the knowledge I'm not praying for loved ones at home who might miss me when I'm gone, but to make it out alive so I can go on ignoring them for a little longer.

Except for Dad, always have time for Dad.

The shuddering stops.

I open my eyes. The last wisps of Jupiter's atmosphere slip past revealing vast, open space. Here, unadulterated with the light of human cities, the universe is alive. The light from the smallest of stars reaches out to me from across the expanse. The feeling of relief at still being alive is replaced with nausea. The same feeling one gets when peering into a pitch-black well, wondering how far down it goes. We came so close to death, but what difference would it make? The universe doesn't care. Look at how *big* it is.

“Jesus f**king Christ,” Boz says, slumping back in her chair.

“Hey now,” Tris pipes up.

“Sorry, Tris.”

She's not sorry. Tris doesn't like too much swearing, but Boz does it anyway. Several times a day. So do I, just in my head. Isn't that what we all do? Hide a little piece of who we are to placate others. To survive society. But again, it's hard to care when you're out here knowing the cosmos really doesn't give a rat's ass what we do. The desire to let loose a string of expletives nearly overwhelms me. Nearly.

“I want to know what happened,” Chau says, his expression cold like granite. “How could our trajectory be that off?”

“It wasn’t,” Tris replies, shaking his head. “I told you, Jupiter moved.”

Chau narrows his eyes. “Not possible.”

“Engineer Tris is correct,” the AI says, its tone unchanging. “Jupiter’s orbital path appears to have altered.”

“How the hell is that possible?” Boz asks.

“Ya’ll got me,” Tris replies, tapping at his screen. “Some kinda gravitational irregularity?”

“Affecting Jupiter?” Chau says, one eyebrow raised. “Jupiter moves celestial bodies, not the other way around.”

Tris shrugs. “I’ll look into it.”

“Fine, but after the grab,” Chau says.

“I need to get us back into a proper orbit,” Boz says, already tapping away at her console. “That’s gonna take a while. We had to burn long and hard to skip over the atmosphere. It’s gonna be like turning a galactic Buick.”

“Do it,” Chau says.

“Um.” As the word leaves my lips I wish it hadn’t.

All eyes fix on me.

Shit. Well done, Sarah. Best follow through now. “Is that an aerostat in our flight path?”

“What are you talking about, *Doctor*,” Boz says.

I point out of the main window.

The crew follows the imaginary path from my fingertip out into space and to the spheroid metallic object. “If that’s an aerostat, it’ll do a lot of damage if we hit it.” Though they’re flexible, colliding with one of these weather stations dropped into the atmosphere to monitor the constant violent storms would f**k us up.

“That ain’t an aerostat, that’s a ship,” Tris says, squinting. “Too far out of the atmosphere. Wrong shape.”

“Are we going to hit ... whatever that *is*?” Chau asks.

Boz shakes her head. “We’re headed out. Seems it’s geo-synched, in orbit.”

“You’re eyeballing it?” I ask.

Boz glares at me. “How about you let me do my job, Dallas?”

Chau holds up his hand. “Enough. What do we do about it?”

Tris clears his throat. “ITN protocol says we have to prioritize the grab, but ... this is a little unorthodox. There’s no precedent for an alien ship.” He shoots a nervous glance at Chau.

Chau sniffs hard. “There’s no evidence to suggest it’s an alien ship. How close will we come to it?”

Tris’s fingers flit across his console at lightning speed. Then, with a dramatic swipe, he sends the flight path file from his panel to Boz who looks it over.

“Within a hundred feet,” Boz says. “Just like I said.”

Yes, Boz, I get it— you’re a genius and I’m an idiot. Seriously, Sarah, hold it together. “Do we need to adjust?”

“If we try that, we’ll push ourselves further out,” Tris says, “and it’ll take longer to re-enter synchronized orbit.”

“At a hundred feet we can get a pretty good look at it, though, right?” I say.

Tris nods. “I’d get a window seat now, because we’re about to zip by.”

We, of course, aren’t going to unbuckle and float over to the large window, so we all just fall into a confused silence and fix our attention to the small vessel that is fast approaching—or rather the one that we are fast approaching.

Could this really be alien? Are we the first humans to encounter other intelligent life? Finding microbes on Mars some fifty years ago was a little anticlimactic, especially at a time when humankind had finally started to pay consideration to our own dying world. Too little too late. But a spaceship? Maybe this crappy trip was worth it after all.

The alien vessel is now large enough in the viewfinder to study it a little better. Too damn close if you ask me, but hey, I’m just the shrink right?

Boz glances over her shoulder at Chau. The two of them don’t cross words, but exchange an unspoken question.

They’re right to be confused. What the hell *is* going on?

The ship, or pod, is roughly egg-shaped, and in the outer lights of the *Paralus* seems to be grey in color. No windows. Small rear thrusters. And an ITN insignia.

“Holy shit,” Boz says. “It’s an escape pod.”

“Did the last liner report a pod ejection?” Chau asks.

“Not to my knowledge,” Boz says. “Tris?”

The Texan shakes his head. “I got no record of that.”

“Those markings, they’re old,” I pipe up. “See the logo? Saturn is included now, since the expansion. This is pre-rebrand, done more than twenty years ago. Actually, that looks

even older. Museum old.” That tidbit of information only serves to remind them who I am, how I’m here, and that they really don’t like me or my family. Shit.

“Chief,” Tris says. “We gotta see what’s over there. I can take a Scoop.”

Chau looks to Boz.

She just shrugs. “I have to swing her around Jupiter to get us into orbit. I can use the gravity to catapult us ’round and come up on the pod again. Give us time to gear up.”

Chau tents his fingertips. “How will that affect the grab?”

“Well, it’ll delay it,” Tris says, rubbing at his square jaw. “But Jupiter isn’t going anywhere.”

“Didn’t you just say it moved?” My lips try to hang on to the last word as if I can suck back the regrettably snarky remark.

Tris pinches his lips together and gives a subtle shake of his head.

You’re right Tris; *shut up*, Sarah.

“Oh man, we best still be haulin’ when we return,” Boz says, and shoots me a look as if this whole thing is somehow my fault. “Only get paid if we have a load.”

Hauling back Helium is all anyone gives a shit about, because it means getting paid. Helium is this century’s gold rush. This is hilarious, given I’ve listened to enough company speeches to know that helium is the second most abundant element in the universe. The problem is, while God was handing out the element, He—or She or It—seemed to skip Earth. Our planet’s crust is probably not even in the parts per billion range. In the Earth’s atmosphere, it’s only 5.2 parts per million per volume. So, Jupiter is our reservoir, our lifeline. Still, the ITN has protocols for situations like this. The pod could pose a threat to continued mining. Though no idea what kind of threat, not my wheelhouse. “I think the ITN are gonna call this one,” I add. “Something like this will trump a helium grab. The AI has probably locked all systems anyway. We won’t get to do the job yet.”

Boz tuts again.

“You are correct, Dr. Dallas,” the AI says. “Current mission suspended until investigation completed.”

Chau tents his fingertips. “The faster we clear that pod, the faster we get back on mission.”

Everyone unbuckles and swims out of the only door in or out of the Bridge. Boz gives me a long, hard, disapproving stare, but Tris flashes a grin. Chau doesn’t even bother to acknowledge me. For him, a shrink has two jobs on these freighters: make sure the crew don’t lose their minds in deep space, and stay the hell out of the way.

So far, no-one's lost their marbles, yet.