

A Dead World

by Marten Kähr

With a silent blue flash, the TF-27 class colony ship, named Prosperity by its crew, exited warp-space. The ship's autopilot moved to begin orbiting another planet in the Dead Zone that used to be Catilid space before the Ancient War. Now, all that was left of the planet was a reflective crater-scarred surface. Slowly, the ship comes to life. First the silent hum of the fusion reactor. Then the whir of the oxygen decompressors and fans starting up. Followed by the vibrations of the engines giving thrust. And perhaps most importantly, the ship's automated system makes the speakers give out a loud report, which echoed across the entire ship "3.16 AM, October 7th, 2551 AD. Entering orbit above planet five in star system KN-2123. Estimated time until stable orbit is achieved: two hours". This report awoke the command crew, each in their personal quarters. After getting dressed, they all left their quarters and headed for the bridge as the rest of the crew awoke in their common quarters. The first one to arrive, was Dr. Andrew Nick Nicholson, the ship's medical officer and the man responsible for the later stages of the terraforming. After him, arrived Captain Natalia "Nat" Ivanova. "Still like to be early, huh, Nick?" she said in fluent English. To which the doctor replied in his slightly rusty Russian "Vsegda, Natalia." Which recieved a small smirk from the Captain. "That way, you never have to apologise for being late." Nick continued, as the communications officer, Eva Nash, stumbled in through the hatch at the centre of the circular room. "You know it's impossible to be on time when your quarters are on the other side of the ship AND you don't have any coffe in your system to help out with the zero-gravity." She grumbles in her British accent. She assumes her seat and after typing what sounds like a page of text into her console, she says "Ten minutes until we're in sync with Comnet. Hey, Nick, I'll bet you ten credits that it takes longer than that for Hammer to get here and get the gravity back online." Before Nick gets a chance to reply to that, Adam "Hammer" Jones floats, or rather, flies elegantly through the hatch and says in his usual, flamboyant voice "Aww, you want the gravity back already, hon? Artifical grav takes out half the fun of working on a spaceship." Eva blushes and turns her face to the console. Adam gets to work behind his console and the Captain gives her first orders "Eva, while the computer is connecting itself, get started on making a low-resolution map of the surface. Make sure you get the coordinate grid right this time. I don't want another probe hitting the pole instead of the equator, those things are expensive. Adam, start preparing the drone for launch, I'm sure Nick will appreciate the atmosphere and soil readings." Several minutes pass with only the clicking of keyboards echoing back from the hatch. Then the Captain asks herself as she reaches for the ship's intercom "What's taking Manny so long?". Nick responds Oh, I'm sorry I didn't metion before. Manny is still the infirmary from yesterday. Jump sickness combined with what looks like a hangover. Although, he keeps saying he doesn't know anything about there being booze on board the ship." There's a short chuckle from everyone's throat, then Adam grabs the microphone next to his console and announces "Ok, crew. This is Hammer speaking, restoring gravity in sixty seconds as ordered by the ship's spoilsport. Make sure you won't fall on something or hit yerself if you know you will." He recieves a cold glare from Eve, who then turns

to the Captain and says "Three minutes until we're connected to Comnet. And about five percent of the western hemisphere has been mapped. Oh, and Nat, could you open the window panels from Manny's console? I'd like to see planet with my own eyes." The captain responds quite casually "Sure, but do call me captain while we're on the bridge.". Natalia proceeds to Manny's console and presses a few buttons on the keyboard. Then, the window panels slowly open and reveal the million-credit-view from orbit to the planet. The bridge crew gathers in front of the window and looks at the scarred surface in silence. Once, this used to be a colonized world. Maybe even a living world, since the Catilids were experts at terraforming. Now, all that is left is a surface that has been turned to almost-smooth glass by heavy orbital bombardment. Terrain can still be seen under the layer glass, but it will be years, if not decades, before the terraforming has progressed far enough for large-scale excavation to begin. The moment is interrupted by the gravity coming back and everyone unexpectedly hitting the ground. The first to break silence is the Doctor "Well, it took twenty years to make my home-planet, from a desert world to the earthlike planet it is now. I'll probably have grandchildren before this world is alive." He walks back to his seat and the others do the same. Shortly after that, Eve responds. "We're connected to Earth's Comnet. And I thought you lived on Earth before joining our crew, Nick.". "I was born on Lindsay, but I lived in space and went to a university on Terra." He replies "Oh, and this talk reminds protocol to me. Our mission is to make this planet a living world and living worlds get a female name for the terraforming paperwork. Any ideas?" The question lingers in the air, as noone replies. For almost ten minutes, everyone on the bridge is silent. Then Hammer breaks the silence "The impact probe is ready to launch, Capn'. Where do I shoot it to?" Eve decides it might be a good idea to give the captain a status report on the mapping process "The coordinate grid is in place, but only eighteen percent of the hemisphere is mapped. Here's the grid..." A transparent sphere-shaped grid appears in the middle of the room, hovering a meter above the floor "And here is the mapped area, around the equator" Several tiles of the sphere get a rough picture on them. Nothing alike to the usual high quality and definition of planetary maps. The captain sighs, then says "Hammer, the impact probe can map areas it flies over, correct? Send it to coordinates 50S 90E. That should be in range and give us a good amount of new mapping data." "Got it Capn'. Probe deploying in thirty seconds." And as foretold, the probe launched, its' black metal hull easily visible on the background of the planet as it moved away from the ship and toward the planet. Adam went on with the reports of the probe's flight. "Entering atmosphere at 29.2 degrees. Surface mapping starts...now." And indeed, patches of the southwestern hemisphere were being placed on the hologram of the planet. Then suddenly "What's this? 'Radar lock detected'... Something is aiming at the probe and the source is on the surface. Can't pin-point it. Eve, scan the surface for inhabitation signs." Eve keeps staring at Adam's screen and says "The computer already did that before we woke up. No signs of advanced life were detected on the planet." Adam looks at his screen in disbelief "Whatever it was, it hit the probe. The probe's gone way off-course and we're not going to get any more map data from it. Boom! It landed..aaand it's transmitting the atmosphere data to Nick." Nick looks at the readings and gets a rather shocked face too. "The radiation levels are over 1000rem. Nothing could survive that for long. Even those crystal aliens...the Mallkeni would die in a couple of days down there." The captain turns back

to the window panel and says "Well, looks like something can survive on that dead planet. And since we don't have the jump-fuel to get back to inhabited space, we're stuck here and have to find out what were dealing with. Just in case though..." She kneels on a small panel in the metal floor and opens it, then takes out a key from her pocket and turns something inside. A fifth console comes out of the floor in front of the captain's chair. The system makes a shipwide announcement "Warning: Fire control activated. Activating Meson Blasters."