

Project Darwin

by Dan Rice

Inside the control room, Jaz Cantrell stares out the viewport window into the specialized cargo bay in astonishment that turns to horror.

Lights flash, and a siren blares from the control panel in front of Jaz.

Flames spread like a bushfire across the cargo bay, orange tongues licking at containers made to house the precious seeds, eggs, and sperm for all the remaining flora and fauna of Earth. The boxes are tough, built to protect the priceless cargo all the way to Mars, but Jaz sees the side of one crate already blackening. Stenciled on its side next to an array of barcodes is one word: honeybees.

"Why isn't the fire suppression working?" Jaz yells.

She punches a big red button, the manual override for the fire suppression system. Nothing happens. The blaze spreads and smoke billows. Jaz glances at Mike Stillwater, who sits ramrod straight on the edge of his seat next to her.

Mike gazes at an ultrathin tablet he holds in trembling hands. "Emergency services are responding. They'll be here in ten minutes."

"Not fast enough," Jaz says. "Is everything locked down? I'm going to vent the bay."

"The crates are secured," Mike says, fingers manipulating the tablet. "Maybe we should wait. The fire crew will be here in nine minutes."

"We don't have nine minutes," Jaz says and flips switches to open the cargo bay airlock. "What the hell? It isn't opening."

Brow furrowing and breaking out in a cold sweat, Jaz stares into the inferno. Dammit. This can't be happening. She had left her family and abandoned her fiancé to join the U.N. Space Force at eighteen, experienced the hell of low G and 0 G combat fighting separatists on the moon and Freedom Station, and suffered through officer training. All to be here on the Stellar Voyager, transporting everything good about life on Earth to Mars. Now, Project Darwin is going up in smoke before the Stellar Voyager even breaks Earth orbit.

"I'm going out there. I'll get to the airlock and open it," Jaz says.

She turns on her mag boots and unstraps herself from the chair and stands.

"Don't. You'll die. The fire crew will be here in eight minutes, fifteen seconds."

Jaz glances out the viewport window in time to watch the honeybee container collapse beneath the flames. She growls in sorrow as much as in anger. All the safeties are failing. That is impossible or, at least, highly improbable. Could the fire be the work of a saboteur? Had the fanatical Only Earth Movement finally infiltrated Project Darwin?

"We don't have even five minutes. There's an emergency vac suit in the airlock. I'll be fine."

Mike engages his mag boots, unbuckles himself from his chair, stands up, and blocks her access to the hatchway to the cargo bay. "Are you crazy, Jaz? Look out there. You'll never make it to the airlock. If the smoke doesn't kill you, the fire will."

"Get out of my way, Mike."

"No," Mike says and crosses his arms in front of his broad chest.

Jaz shakes her head. She doesn't have time for this. Mike might be big, but he's not military, he's a tech. Either he is going to move out of her way, or she is going to go through him.

Jaz strides toward him, mag boots thudding against the deck plating.

Mike raises his arms up like a boxer, hands clenching into fists as large as her face.

"Life ends with Earth," Mike says fervently.

"You sabotaged the mission. You're a goddamn Only Earther."

Mike charges her, boots clomping, and throws a haymaker. His movements are herky-jerky like all those who aren't acclimated to 0 G. Jaz dodges his punch and disengages her right mag boot and smashes it with its heavy metallic sole into Mike's left knee. Jaz feels something give under her foot, probably his kneecap shattering.

Screaming, Mike falls forward, kept from tumbling to the floor by his magnetic boots and the lack of gravity. Jaz grabs Mike by the head and pistons her knee into his face once, then twice. When she releases him, Mike is knocked out, his face a mushy, bloody mess. Only his boots keep him from floating away.

Jaz opens the hatch and enters the hellscape. Black smoke clouds her vision and burns her lungs. Flames crackle, and she sees an orange flash in her peripheral vision. Containers melt, becoming oozing, gooey rivulets of plastic. She crouches as low as she can, the position made

challenging by her mag boots, and shuffles down a corridor formed by the containers and the wall.

Jaz hangs a left, and it's a straight shot between containers to the airlock along the back wall. Fire dances across the smoke-choked pathway. The damn smoke clogs her nostrils and tastes like industrial solvents on her tongue. She blinks her eyes in a vain attempt to clear her blurring vision. Her head feels like she's taken one too many spins on a merry-go-round. Mike was right about one thing; she's not going to make it to the airlock before passing out from smoke inhalation. Unless...

Jaz clamps her boots against the wall and bends her legs. If she can kick off with enough force, she will rocket between the containers to the airlock. The only problem is she risks careening into the crates like a pinball. If that happens...best not to think about that. Jaz disengages her boots and kicks off the wall like a competitive swimmer.

Coughing on smoke, Jaz hurtles up the path. She screams when flames sear her left hand. Tears and smoke obscure her vision. She must be close to the airlock now, but she can't tell how close. Then the unyielding airlock door is right in front of her. She spins in the air to keep her head from slamming into the solid metal. Instead, her shoulder crunches into it. She sees red, but manages to grab a handhold with her right hand and forces her feet to the floor and engages her boots.

Dizzy and hacking, Jaz opens the outer hatch and leaps inside the airlock. She jabs the button to close the door before smoke inundates the room.

Jaz gazes out the airlock window in dismay. Flames engulf all the containers now. Every few seconds, another box fails. So many precious plants and animals lost. Project Darwin is about saving plants and animals. That's what Mike doesn't understand. It's not about saving humanity

or humanity's worthiness to survive. It's about giving all the plants and animals human activity has put on the brink of extinction a second chance. That's the dream, the creation of a paradise where humans live in balance with nature instead of trying to conquer it.

Jaz glances at her burned hand, which she keeps pressed against her chest, and grits her teeth. The skin is bright red and covered in puffy blisters. Moving her hand causes her so much pain she whimpers, and unbidden tears leak from her eyes. How can she put on the vac suit with such a terrible injury?

"There's no time."

Duty. Service. Sacrifice. That's what she had been taught in the service. That's what her mother had taught her by raising three kids while working four jobs. Jaz realizes her whole life has been leading to this, the brink, the tipping point. Only her sacrifice can save Project Darwin.

Jaz takes a deep breath and opens the airlock hatch into the cargo bay. Smoke and heat rush inside. She reaches through the doorway and sets the manual override to keep the hatch open while the outer airlock door opens.

She doubles over coughing, her chest rattling. Lurching through the compartment, she claws at the controls to open the outer door. Her vision goes black at the edges. Concentrate damn you. Concentrate. She squints, the button to open the outer hatch coming into focus. She punches it.

Nothing happens. What the hell? She survived that firestorm only to fail at the very end? There's nothing she can do. The heat is too intense, and smoke permeates everything. It's only a matter of time before she loses consciousness and either dies from the smoke or the flames. Then there is a mechanical boom of heavy latches sliding out of place. Hope blossoms in her breast as joyous as she's ever felt. She's doing it, she's saving the dream. She might die, but Project

Darwin won't die with her. There is a roar of rushing air and smoke. A gust of air slams into her, pushing her backward, but her mag boots hold her in place.

Jaz smiles. Starved of oxygen, the inferno is dying just like she is dying. Her lungs ache and mind dulls until there is nothing. No pain and no dreams.

The docent leads schoolchildren who have never set foot on Old Earth through the vast hallways of the Jaz Cantrell Biological Specimen Repository in Olympus Mons City, Mars. On the walls are photographs and artist renderings of the multitudinous flora and fauna that will one day live side-by-side with Martians.

Occasionally, they pass a live exhibit inlaid in the wall, a plant or animal in a carefully controlled enclosure. The docent stops at each and recites a pedagogical speech, and answers any questions the children have. Most of the live specimens on display are small and fragile and often die. When the children see the living organisms, their eyes go wide, and their voices rise octaves. They dream. They know their purpose as Martians. It is to create a green and blue paradise on a planet of red dust. An Eden where the flora and fauna of Old Earth can live in harmony with the bipedal primates once known as Earthlings and now as Martians.