

Chapter One

Her breathing was quick, the sweat slowly dripping down her forehead even in the confines of the air-conditioned helmet; her heart beating hard and fast. She looked around the airlock in an almost jerky motion then froze when she saw the bodies stacked like cordwood against one wall.

The bodies of her shipmates, her friends, all close to her from the many years of exploring the unknown reaches of the galaxy.

She was oblivious to anything else, trying to make sense of what was happening to her, what had happened to her friends.

The airlock door suddenly opened and she stifled a scream as she spun around to look. A helmeted figure entered pushing a cart with two more bodies for the pile.

“Emily, how are you holding up,” asked the figure in a calm deep voice.

“I...I don't know captain,” she replied. She tried to slow her breathing.

“This is the last of the crew, I made one final pass through...”

“Captain what is this,” she burst out, fighting to control the panic that was welling up within her, “what is happening to us?”

“I don't know Emily, I wish to God I did, but I don't. Dr Heslop and his team tried everything they knew before they died and couldn't figure it out.”

“And now what captain?”

“We open the airlock and dispose of the bodies like we did the rest.”

“But if a rescue team comes they would want to examine them wouldn't they?”

Commented [CH1]: An impactful, attention-grabbing opener.

Commented [CH2]: There is room to Show instead of Tell here. In the midst of all the action, we don't want to rush through the emotional development and description will add to the sense of horror. For example, the larger body bag, which must hold the body of Tom, their head engineer. And the much smaller bag atop it, their navigator, Anika, who was always the first to laugh in tense moments. Humanize in small ways.

In general, I argue against introducing characters by name that don't have a role to play in the novel, but as these characters are deceased, the reader will sense they don't need to be remembered.

Commented [CH3]: I note a slight sense of contradiction here. The characters' panic, confusion, and fear as the door opens, suggests that these deaths are so recent they're shocking. But the captain has made multiple passes and already disposed of other bodies, suggesting that people have been dying in stages over time. As shocking as that would be, the character, Emily, is acting as if she just walked into a room and accidentally discovered their bodies.

I see room to clear this up. Has this all happened over days, or in less than an hour? It changes the way we see the threat and its potential cause. It also changes how Emily might act in this moment. She has chosen to come into this room and be with the bodies. To me that suggests a greater sense of mourning, or hopeless surrender. If she was panicked and confused, I would have thought she might want to get away from the perceived threat altogether.

“We can’t risk exposing them to whatever this is. I’ve left a private log and so has Dr Heslop. If the rescuers find either they will know as much as we do...even though it isn’t much.”

“And what of us,” she whispered.

He moved closer so that she could see his face through the visor. His smile was reassuring; but his eyes said otherwise.

“Emily...,” he began, then stopped. What could he say that was different from what they both knew.

He smiled once more, his eyes softened; he was at ease now. He embraced her as best he could in the bulky suit and held on to her.

She felt safe in his grasp, her breathing returning to normal, her heartbeat slowing, she was prepared.

He slowly pulled his laser pistol from its holster, hesitated once, then fired.

She felt nothing.

He re-holstered the pistol, depressurized the air-lock, then opened the outer door. He said a prayer as he slowly slid the bodies one-by-one out into space. When he was finished he stood in the doorway and watched the bodies float away. He wished he could have given them better, he wished he knew what killed them; but he knew the answers were for someone else to figure out.

He set the timer on the door, said one more prayer, and stepped out into oblivion.

~

“Coming into orbit around Augural 3 now captain.”

“All ships systems operating normal captain.”

Commented [CH4]: Watch for repetitive sentence structures.

Commented [CH5]: I love the shock of this moment – right away we’re showing a reader that this story will be full of surprises.

Commented [CH6]: Powerful.

At 470 words, this scene is short. Potentially, too short to sustain two POVs. It could make sense to share the entire scene from the captain’s point of view. I understand the switch could be in order to preserve the shock of what the captain is about to do, but we could still keep this hidden and adopt his POV.

“Still no contact with fleet or the Science Ministry ma’am.”

Marta Donaghue sat in silence as she watched the main viewer and listened to the bridge staff issue their reports. She and the crew had been together on the Exeter for the last five months training for this mission, then the flight here; and although they were beginning to come together as a crew she still had an uneasy feeling about the whole assignment. **At least she was able to bring along some of her staff from the Trident after that ship was decommissioned; a small blessing...a very small blessing.**

“Keep a close eye out for any East-Pacific Alliance ships,” she said as she stood to stretch and look around the bridge.

“Why captain you know they all scooted back to their home ports with their tails tucked between their legs after Orion,” said Ivan Coghlan the pilot in his easygoing drawl. “None of them have ventured out since then.” He looked over at her with his kindly **green eyes.**

She and the gangly Texan had served together for over five years. “Just the same mister I want to make sure in case one of them feels a wee-bit brave...or lucky.”

“Understood ma’am...locked into orbit now.”

She smiled slightly then the burning sensation in her hands returned, not painful, not even an irritant, just there, almost in the background, but there. She looked over to her executive officer forcing herself to ignore the feeling.

“Number 1,” she said, “landing platform status.”

“Going through the last of the checklist as we speak captain,” he replied.

Lev Sokolsky was considered to be the best first officer in the fleet and the two of them had been close friends since their days at the academy. He was tall, well built with close cut black

Commented [CH7]: I’m not sure we need this detail here. I would focus more on what’s relevant to the immediate action. I.e. why she’s feeling uneasy about the mission.

Commented [CH8]: 180 words into this scene, and look at the different plot elements we’ve covered: Augural 3, ‘the fleet, the Science Ministry, the Exeter, East-Pacific Alliance ships, an Orion event, and four or five different characters. Our number one priority now is understanding Marta, and introducing the elements that are relevant to this scene.

hair and intense dark eyes that sat over a patrician nose. Quick with a smile or his fists, he was someone you wanted watching your back.

“Let me know when the platform is ready to be launched,” she said as she sat back down and looked at the main viewer screen again.

The northern half of the planet seemed to be completely encased in an angry swirling mass of dark gray and dirty white clouds. Popping up everywhere in an uneven order where bright spots indicating enormous lighting strikes.

“Bloody hell I hope that storm isn’t some sort of an omen,” she thought as a slight involuntary shiver went down her back. She touched a button on the control panel on her chair. “Mr. Yar’Adua,” she called to her Science Officer, “what’s the status of the storm below us?”

“Our best estimate is that the storm will dissipate in approximately three hours captain,” he replied in a deep baritone voice.

“Very good, keep me up to date, I want to launch the landing platform as soon as the storm clears,” she said before switching off the intercom.

She looked around the compact bridge of the Exeter. There wasn’t much room to move around the twelve stations that helped keep the ship operating; the light color scheme attempting to give the illusion of a larger space without much success. Yet the cruiser was of the latest design with enlarged work and crew spaces and outfitted with the improved Jemison faster than light engines.

“Bloody hell,” she thought, “how did they do this in the smaller ships and before ftl?”

“Captain still no contact with fleet or the Science Ministry,” said Lieutenant Bartolome Guerrero, the Communications Officer. “I...I can’t explain it...there is no reason we shouldn’t be able to contact them and yet...”

Commented [CH9]: The formatting here suggests this is spoken dialogue. For interior monologue, many writers choose to use italics. I.e.:

Bloody hell I hope that storm isn't some sort of an omen, she thought as a slight involuntary shiver went down her back.

Or even better, try avoiding long internal thoughts altogether. People tend to think in fragments, not sentences. For example:

Bloody hell, she thought as a slight involuntary shiver went down her back. Hopefully the storm wasn't some sort of omen.

We're in her point of view, so even if the sentence isn't formatted as a line of internal thought, the narrative can still do the job of conveying what she's thinking.

“Keep trying mister,” she said as she looked once more at the main viewer. “That’s got to be one hell of a storm down there,” she thought again.

“Captain, Lt. Commander Yar’Adua here.”

“Go ahead.”

“We have an update on the weather ma’am and I am afraid that the news is not good.”

“Give it to me mister.”

“We have revamped our estimates and it now looks like it will be four hours before the landing platform can be safely launched.”

“You told me three...”

“I understand captain,” he interrupted gently, “but this is a new phenomenon for us and we are trying to understand the nature of it as quickly as possible.”

“Very well, four hours then?”

“An 80% chance probability captain.”

“Try to make it 100% Sekou, captain out.” She closed her eyes for a moment and leaned back in her chair. “Bloody hell, now I’m going to have to listen to our two passenger’s piss-and-moan about the wait.”

She stood and stretched once more. “Number 1,” she said, “you have the con, I’ll be in my ready room, let me know immediately if there are any changes no matter how minor.”

“Aye captain.”

She walked over to a door on the left side of the bridge and as it swooshed open walked into the cramped room.

Commented [CH10]: Avoid redundancies, or stating the obvious. You might even allow unspoken communication to pass between them. For example:

“We have revamped our estimates and it now looks like it will be four hours before the landing platform can be safely launched.”

Marta frowned. They couldn’t afford an additional hour. “I understand captain...” So we’re showing that he knows her well enough to respond, from an expression alone.

Commented [CH11]: Every line should show us that she’s thinking three steps ahead of her team. This is our chance to introduce Marta and create a strong impression with the reader.

Commented [CH12]: I love dialogue when the language or tone tells us something about the characters. If they’re simply passing on practical instructions or information, it can be more effective to employ summary. For example:

She stood and stretched, telling her second in command to update her of any developments, no matter how minor. For now, it was time to get some rest.

This helps us train the reader to anticipate that the dialogue we do choose to share will be significant in some way. If you see those quotation marks, pay attention.

The room had barely enough space for her desk, which did double duty as a conference table, and four chairs. But her chair was comfortable enough for the quick naps she would take from time-to-time and the room boasted a rather large portal that afforded her magnificent views.

She sat in her chair and buzzed the galley.

“Yes captain,” said a voice at the other end.

“Please send up a pot of tea.”

“Yes ma’am, right away.”

She leaned back in her chair and stared serenely out the portal and the massive storm on the planet below.

It wasn’t long before there was a quick knock on the door.

“Enter,” she said.

“Your tea captain,” said the young orderly as he hurriedly placed the small tray containing the tea pot and a mug on her desk. “Can I get you anything else ma’am?”

“No that will be all, thank you,” she said as she poured the hot liquid into the mug.

As the young man left the room, she brought the steaming mug up to her nose and took a deep breath, savoring the aroma, before gingerly taking a sip of the hot liquid.

She placed the mug back down on her desk, closed her eyes and thought about the events that brought her here. It was six months ago on Earth and she was called into a meeting by Admiral Zolnerowich, head of fleet intelligence...

~

Commented [CH13]: Another example of summary being a more concise option. For example: She buzzed the galley and ordered a pot of tea.

If we want to make a point about how powerful she is, we might say,

She buzzed the galley and ordered a pot of tea. Piping hot, and strong.

“Yes, Captain!”

Commented [CH14]: Final thoughts on this chapter:

- We sense that Marta is respected, but why is this mission personal to her?
- What are her strengths, and weaknesses? How might we foreshadow problems to come?
- We have a lot of insights into the crew, storm, and operations. But the key points of intrigue are to be found in presenting Marta as a compelling character, who is heading towards a problem of some sort that carries personal risk.