

Chapter 1 – Dave

“You *bleep*-ing *bleep*, *bleep*-ing *bleep*-stick. I *bleep*-ing hate you so *bleep*-ing much. You absolute mountain of steaming *bleep* with a *bleep*-ing cherry on top! *Bleep*! *Bleep*! *Bleeeeeep*!”

Dave’s words were failing to properly express his feelings, mostly because the stupid AI kept censoring him before he could get them out. The ship’s speakers were more than loud enough to frustrate his attempts at cursing even to his own ears.

Still, it felt cathartic to try.

Dave personally felt like a little emotional venting was justified, especially since he and everyone else on this godforsaken spaceship was almost certainly going to die.

He understood, deep, deep down, that he shouldn’t be angry with the AI. After all, it was just doing what protocol told it to do. But that calm part of him was deep, deep down, and his growing panic was very much on the surface.

He huffed out an exasperated sigh and tried to get back to work on the monolithic control panel in front of him. The unnecessarily harsh red of the emergency lights continued to flash in time with the warbling klaxon.

“Who in the *bleep* thought this would make a good environment for fixing complicated machinery!?” Dave screamed impotently.

He had to admit he was feeling a little worn down and it was likely affecting his mood. It turned out that working on incredibly complicated machinery with the threat of imminent death hanging over you could adversely affect your disposition. But, while the anger he was feeling was perfectly justified in his mind, it wasn’t helping him focus on the problem at hand. He forced himself to take a deep breath.

“Computer, can you *please* shut off the emergency alert system?” Dave asked the AI for at least the fifth time since he had been brought out of cryo-sleep. Admirably, he resisted the urge to end the request with another stream of panicked obscenities. He had also added please, so maybe this time it would work.

“Good morning, Mr. Samson,” the computer’s gentle feminine voice responded cheerfully. “I’m afraid protocol dictates that I am not allowed to disable the emergency alert system until the emergency has been resolved.”

Dave banged his fists angrily on the unresponsive engineering console. To his surprise, the screen flickered once, but it faded back to the black, unresponsive state so quickly that he questioned whether he had seen it turn on at all.

A glance up from the control panel revealed a blue-ish green sphere through the bridge’s forward viewport. He shuddered, regretting that he had looked up again. It was appreciably larger than the last time he had seen it. Wanting to get his mind off of the rapidly approaching planet and onto literally anything else, Dave shouted a request at the computer.

“Computer, give me an update on the Prometheus’ diagnostic status!”

“Good morning, Mr. Samson,” responded the AI. “All systems are still unresponsive, and it appears that I am locked out of the primary ship systems.”

“You are the ship’s primary *bleep*-ing computer!” Dave shouted, the AI once again effectively censoring his curse. “How can you be locked out!?”

The AI took a moment before it responded. Given how quickly the supercomputer was able to process things, a pause was never a good sign.

“That is unclear, Mr. Samson.”

“Well, that’s not very *bleep*-ing helpful!” Dave grunted angrily and turned his focus back to the console in front of him.

“My functionality is limited while I’m relegated to the auxiliary computer systems,” stated the computer, its robotic voice inflected with a mix of sympathy and pity, as if it were giving bad news to a small child.

Dave knew the AI’s voice had been specifically designed by Earth’s best psychiatric scientists to help keep crew members calm in even the most dire of situations. It was something the United Earth Forces had claimed was proven, through extensive testing, to have a soothing effect on people who were scared or frustrated. Despite being both scared *and* frustrated, Dave did not find it soothing. In fact, he was finding it infuriating. Not even artificial intelligence had a right to be calm at a time like this.

"Limited? Of course, you're limited, why not, that's just great..." Dave muttered as he removed the panel below the console's dead screen.

"I do not believe it is, Mr. Samson," said the computer. Dave found it creepy how effectively the computer was able to 'hear' anything said on the ship; he knew it 'saw' just about as much. "And I must remind you that shipboard regulation eleven point twenty-three point four dash seven expressly states that the excessive use of vulgar language is strictly prohibited. I'm afraid I must ask you to detain yourself in the brig for one hour," the computer continued.

"What!" Dave shouted, so shocked by the absurd request that he actually stopped working. "If I don't fix the ship, we are going to be nothing more than a smoldering crater in an hour."

"I'm afraid the regulations are quite clear in this, Mr. Samson; the captain could pardon your offense un..." started the computer.

"YES! Do that, wake the captain, ask her to pardon me," he yelled, interrupting the computer.

"Unfortunately, I am unable to establish a connection with her cryo-pod and thus unable to begin the process to wake her."

"What!? Why can't you connect to the captain's cryo-pod?" Dave asked, not doing a good job of hiding the panic he suddenly felt.

"I am unable to ascertain why. It appears I can no longer access any of the crew's cryo-pods," said the AI, sounding perfectly calm.

Dave let out a frustrated groan and moved away from the ship's engineering console.

Unable to help himself, he looked out the viewport again and saw that the planet was even larger.

He kicked the console in disgust. His efforts to hard reboot the station had proved useless, just like they had on the five other stations he had tried on the bridge.

Well, we're dead, thought Dave.

It was safe to say, with no working consoles, his odds of being able to save the ship were looking significantly lower.

Might as well keep trying though.

They weren't *technically* for sure going to die yet – Dave still had other things to try – but telling himself they were all dead was taking a bit of the pressure off. He manually rerouted the controls to the engineering bay like he had on the other consoles. They weren't meant to be rerouted that way, but he was a good engineer and he'd figured something out when he hadn't been able to get the first console fixed.

Of course, maybe a better engineer could have just fixed the consoles in the first place...

Using a handhold overhead, Dave launched himself from the bridge out into the corridor. The initial excitement he always felt when moving in zero gravity turned into a bitter reminder that the engine was not firing to decelerate the ship. Dave threw himself recklessly from handhold to handhold, zipping down the ship's main corridor as quickly as he could manage, picking up speed as he occasionally used his feet to push off of a convenient bulkhead. Doing so was also a violation of protocol, but apparently the AI was being selective with what rules it was enforcing today.

This stupid long hallway goes on forever in this stupid long ship, thought Dave angrily, as he continued to propel himself forward.

The Prometheus was the largest ship humanity had ever built or was likely to ever build again. It had seemed so impressive when he had been shuttled up to it. As he had explored the ship during his training, its magnitude had kept him in a near constant state of awe. The engineering behind its design was mind-blowing. Now it just seemed too freaking long.

"Good morning, Mr. Samson," the computer chirped, "you seem to have missed the corridor for the brig. Please turn around and follow Blue Corridor. From there, it will be the second door on your right."

He ignored the computer as he finally reached the engineering bay. He pulled open the panel for the manual door crank and grunted as he tried to turn the oversized handle.

The stupid engine room had stupid foot-thick blast doors, made out of stupid heavy radiation shielding. This, of course, made manually cranking the thing stupidly difficult.

As Dave strained to get the door open, he wondered what the point of even having the foot-thick door was; one foot of any material wouldn't stop a reactor meltdown. Besides, even if it could, the walls on either side of the door were way thinner.

The computer spoke up right as he finally got the crank to start turning.

“Good morning, Mr. Samson. I really must insist you report to the brig.”

Dave grunted out a frustrated, “no!” as he continued to tug at the obstinate lever. The computer hesitated momentarily before responding.

“Unfortunately, the security robots are indisposed; per UEF shipboard security regulation seventy-four point six dash two, when the Prometheus’ robotic security complement is unable to fulfill their established duty, the highest-ranking conscious member of the crew is required to escort the person or persons in violation of shipboard regulations to the brig. I will remind you that in this scenario you fill both roles. Please escort yourself promptly. I apologize for the inconvenience.” It made itself sound as if it was sympathizing with him.

Stupid AI, thought Dave. He funneled the anger he was feeling into the cranking.

Giving artificial intelligence the ability to emulate emotions had been an incredibly senseless mistake, in Dave’s opinion. They didn’t actually feel like a human, and it just made them more annoying. Even with what was supposedly the most advanced experimental ‘emotional’ technology available to mankind, no one was going to be fooled into thinking that the ship’s AI was anything other than a computer.

To be fair, Dave thought most humans were annoying too, but when you combined that behavior with the rigidity of a computer, the end effect was somehow worse.

Dave had to turn the crank two excruciatingly slow rotations before the gap in the blast doors was opened wide enough for him to squeeze through.

Dave grimaced as he flexed his stiff arms. He felt out of shape and, for the first time since he had been woken up, he wondered how long he had been in his cryo-pod.

The cryo-pods were supposed to prevent any long-term deterioration of the crew’s physical health, but the technology had been relatively new when they had left Earth. It definitely had not been around long enough to test it for a mission of this duration. To be fair, no one had been sure exactly how long the mission would be. It had all depended on how effective the engines were going to be on leaving Sol. Even a few percentage points of varied performance could result in tens of years being added to the trip. Some conservative estimates he had seen had even put the total length of the trip at upwards of 500 years.

The thought that his muscles might have atrophied while he had slept for all that time gave him the chills, and he couldn’t help but glance down at his arms. They did look a *little* thin, but he had always been on the lithe side.

Dave shook his head; he didn’t have time for this.

Inside the engine bay, the wailing siren and red emergency lights were blessedly less intense. He hadn’t realized just how stressed that had been making him until he had entered the quieter room.

The gentle blue glow that emanated from the massive reactor in the center of the engine bay’s deck was oddly calming. Given that it was a 500-megawatt barely stable nuclear fusion reaction on what was apparently a faulty ship, Dave knew that he should probably be feeling a lot less at ease, not more. Yet, here he was, feeling better. Sometimes the human mind doesn’t make sense. Blue glow is pretty.

“Computer... how long until... we impact the planet?” Dave asked, slightly out of breath from his recent exertions. While he waited for a response, he made his way to the aft of the engineering bay and started rapidly removing the protective wall panels, tossing them into a corner of the room as soon as their magnetic locks released.

“Good morning, Mr. Samson. I am afraid I am only able to compute the exact time of impact to one one-hundredth of a second.”

Dave let out a frustrated sigh, the calm bought from the reactor glow quickly evaporating. “That’s fine. How long?”

“Nine minutes and thirty-four point two-five seconds, plus or minus zero point zero two seconds.” The juxtaposition of that horrible news and the calm tone of the computer was not amusing.

“*bleep*!” he yelled. Well, tried to yell, as the computer censored his curse with the nearest speaker. For some reason, that one made him extra mad; learning that you had less than ten minutes left to live was a curse-worthy announcement, in Dave’s opinion.

Despite that demoralizing piece of news, he kept removing panels. The vast number of wire bundles and various connectors being revealed was starting to look intimidating.

The second-to-last panel he needed to remove was stuck. Dave grunted as he tugged at the stubborn part, but despite his increasingly desperate efforts, it wouldn’t come loose.

He needed to force himself to calm down again. A mistake here would doom him and the crew as surely as slamming into the surface of the approaching planet would. Dave took a couple of deep breaths and focused. He would need a clear head if he wanted to have a chance at accomplishing anything.

He reset his feet against the beams bracketing the panel and braced himself. He yanked hard, and it ripped loose from the wall with a loud and satisfying snap. Dave let out another tirade of censored curses as he and the panel tumbled away from the wall in the zero-G.

"I'm afraid that outburst will be an additional hour in the brig, Mr. Samson," said the computer. Dave briefly considered that he might be starting to go crazy from stress. If he hadn't known better, he'd say this time the computer sounded disappointed in him.

He stabilized himself along a wall and tossed the recently unstuck panel at the nearest sensor cluster that the AI was observing him from. The last panel came free easily.

Dave floated alongside the now exposed mass of electrical components and wires. Using his armband computer to reference the electrical system's schematic, he began isolating the primary braking thrusters and reaction control systems.

Dave had a plan. He had no idea if he could get it to work, but everything that he had tried that might have qualified once as a good plan had failed, so here he was.

Whatever had gone wrong and caused the braking engine to shut down had been disastrous. None of the controls on the bridge had been working, and no commands to the computer had been effective.

He needed to restart that engine. With any luck, the rewiring he had done on the bridge would allow him to bypass any faulty controls and manually turn the braking thruster back on from here. Of course, if the problem was with the engine itself and not the controls, they were dead.

Dave didn't actually know if he could get the thruster firing from here, let alone quickly enough to stop them from crashing into the planet's surface, but it was the only idea he had left. It felt like a pretty thin hope to be betting everyone's life on.

Right as he grabbed the first wire cluster, the ship rumbled, and a brief spurt of acceleration followed. It caused him to accidentally disconnect the wire he was looking at.

"Computer, what was that?"

"It appears the reaction control thrusters are still functioning; they have corrected our course," the AI responded.

"Corrected our course? We aren't going to hit the planet anymore?" Dave asked excitedly.

"No, the Prometheus is still going to hit the planet. My most recent calculations indicate that the thrusters have *corrected* our course so that we will more precisely impact a specific location on the planet," said the AI.

"What!? Why would it do that?"

"There are emergency protocols in place that trigger automatically when a landing zone has not been selected upon reaching a certain distance from the planet," responded the AI, sounding entirely unconcerned about their impending death.

"How on earth did they devise a protocol like that but not have a failsafe check to see if the braking thruster was actually firing first!"

"Unclear... it appears that was an oversight. I shall make a note for the flight controls review board."

Dave let out an exasperated gasp and pressed his head against a bulkhead letting the cool metal ground him.

Okay, this is no time to panic; if the reaction control thrusters are still working, maybe I can do something with that.

He spun the possibilities around in his mind. The reaction control thrusters were significantly smaller than the Prometheus' primary engines. They were only meant to point the vehicle, not provide any of the main acceleration. While that meant they likely wouldn't be able to significantly slow the ship down, maybe they could shift the ship out of the planet's path.

"Computer, how long would the port or starboard reaction control thrusters need to fire for the ship to avoid collision with the planet?"

Dave would much rather have done the math himself to avoid any further conversations with the insane AI, but there wasn't time.

"Using the reaction thrusters alone would require three minutes and forty-five point three-nine seconds of continuous firing from the port side to avoid collision..."

“Yes!” Dave excitedly interrupted the AI. “Do it!”

“...however, several thrusters are damaged, and there is only enough reaction mass for two minutes and thirty-two point seven seconds of continuous firing,” continued the computer.

He let out a frustrated sigh. It would have been nice if they could have used the thrusters to avoid the collision altogether, but at least knowing they were functional left him with options.

“What about rotating the ship one-hundred and eighty degrees and using the primary acceleration thruster to slow us down?” he asked.

“Yes, that could have worked. I appear to still have access to the primary acceleration thruster. However, the primary acceleration thruster was critically damaged near engine cut off after the Sol system exit burn.”

“What, it’s broken? Why wasn’t anyone woken up to fix it?”

“The primary acceleration thruster, by design, was only required for the exit burn from the Sol system. The deceleration thruster was explicitly designed for the braking burn when entering our destination system. Risk acceptance calculations determined it wasn’t worth the chance of causing further damage to the ship or the potential impact on the crew’s health for the minimal benefit that fixing the primary acceleration thruster would provide...”

“Well, it sure as *bleep* would have been helpful to have functioning now!” Dave interrupted loudly, already back to work on the labyrinth of wires in front of him.

“Regardless, the reaction control thrusters are only sporadically responding to my commands. Any attempts on my part to alter our course that deviate from what the hard-coded protocol demands have proven fruitless. Also, Mr. Samson, your latest outburst brings you to a total of three hours in the brig. Protocol dictates that one more event like that and I will have to confine you for a full twenty-four hours. All shipboard privileges will also be revoked,” the computer warned.

Dave just shouted some gibberish, feeling entirely overwhelmed.

To be fair to the AI, the primary acceleration thruster *had* only been designed for a single massive burn. In order for the engine to operate long enough to accelerate the Prometheus to the ludicrous speeds required for interstellar travel, you had to put a great deal of strain on the engine. Still, several analyses, one of which Dave had done himself, had all predicted that the engine should survive with enough remaining life for a single restart.

The braking thruster had been built so the ship wouldn’t need to be spun around and as a redundancy in case the primary thruster was damaged. It was *supposed* to have started firing several days ahead of their arrival, gently slowing down the rapidly moving ship until it was able to park in a stable orbit around the target planet and providing time for the scientists to be woken up so they could identify optimal landing zones for the ship. Afterwards, the ship was supposed to use a combination of the reaction thrusters and braking thruster to deorbit and their hundreds of years long journey would culminate in a gentle touchdown on an alien planet.

Instead, when Dave had been unfrozen by the AI, the braking thruster had unexpectedly shut down a few hours early, leaving them going way too fast to achieve orbital insertion.

Unfortunately, all attempts by the ship’s AI to restart the braking thruster had failed, even though all the initial diagnostics had indicated that it should be healthy. When the computer’s diagnostics had turned up nothing, and no other solutions were immediately apparent, protocol had dictated that the computer needed to bring in a crew member to solve the issue.

According to the computer, that crew member had been him. Just him. He was a propulsion engineer, and by all metrics a good one, but it didn’t make sense why he had been the only one woken up from cryo.

Dave’s hands fumbled as he rapidly jury-rigged connectors and stripped wires. The shock and accompanying adrenaline he had been experiencing from waking up and having to deal with an immediate threat was wearing off.

Dave shook his head and refocused on his work. He couldn’t afford to let himself break down. It was more than his life on the line; it was possibly even more than the crew’s lives... humanity was counting on this mission to be a success.

Deep controlled breaths. Be logical. Dave tried to console himself. *If I do nothing, we all die, but if I do something we might not die.*

The admittedly halfhearted reasoning didn’t fully banish the panicked feeling – stupid emotions were so illogical – but he began to feel a little better anyway.

After a few more pulls on the correct wires, he finally had all the cabling and connectors he had been digging for floating in front of him.

“Computer, if I manually activate and overcharge the hydrogen turbopumps to the braking thruster, will that slow us down enough to survive an emergency landing?”

“Good morning, Mr. Samson. Please do not attempt to rewire the turbomachinery controls. All maintenance and hardware changes must be approved by an appropriate engineering committee. Unfortunately, they are all unreachable and remain in cryo-sleep, thus you will not be able to comply with these regulations. I am sorry. Regardless, activating an uncontrolled turbopump is inadvisable as it would most likely result in the catastrophic destruction of the engine and possibly the entire ship.”

Dave had already begun activating the pump before he had finished asking the question. In reality, he wasn't so much activating the pump per se. It was more like he was hot wiring the pumps to bypass the system that controlled their speed. Thus, he would lock them into running at full power without any tuning input from the hundreds of sensors that were embedded for that purpose in the very complicated and finely tuned engine.

It didn't really matter what the computer said, he didn't have time to try anything else. Of course, the computer had been right. Not about consulting a committee, but rather that there was a good chance that he was about to blow up the engine.

There was a jolt as Dave tied the last set of wires together.

“The braking thruster is firing sub-optimally, but it has not experienced a catastrophic structural failure,” said the computer, unprompted. It almost sounded chagrined.

Dave was already aware that it was working. For one, he was alive, but he could also feel the newly earned acceleration pulling at him. His feet slammed to the floor.

Dave took a second to revel in his success.

The moment of peace didn't last long. The acceleration from the thrust was unsteady and caused him to sway as he struggled to maintain his balance.

It felt as if the ship were getting spikes between about one and two G's, which wasn't very comfortable for Dave, but he had trained for such environments.

“Computer, at the current thrust levels, will we have slowed down enough to land safely on the planet?” asked Dave.

“Good morning, Mr. Samson. Negative. Assuming the braking thruster's reactor is still running at the optimal temperature and we eventually reach maximum braking thrust, we will still exceed minimum safe landing speed by over two-hundred forty-five point two-four kilometers per second with an uncertainty of sixty-four point one-two kilometers per second.”

Dave slumped against the nearest bulkhead. That wasn't going to be anywhere near close to enough.

“Computer, if I could help you regain full use of the reaction thrusters, could we angle ourselves to slow down enough and insert into orbit instead of crashing into the planet?”

“Unclear. Thrust level is currently sporadic. Statistically, we'd be more likely to enter a heliocentric orbit than one about the planet.”

Dave straightened and dared to feel a little hopeful. An orbit about this system's star, if it was stable, would give them time to make repairs and plan a way to get safely to the surface of the planet. It wasn't great, but it was significantly better than crashing.

The computer carried on before he could get too excited, “however in that scenario, fuel reserves would be depleted, and we would be trapped in that orbit. Also, please report to the brig immediately, or I will be forced to further extend your internment.” This last part was said cheerily, and Dave had to suppress the urge to use his last minutes alive locating the AI's processors so he could smash them.

Why the computer wasn't actively helping to find a solution to their problem was an issue he'd have to look into if he lived long enough. He hadn't directly addressed the erratic behavior the AI had exhibited since waking him up; he'd had bigger problems. But it was not doing anything to lessen his growing panic that something was seriously wrong with it.

His emotions were in complete disarray, and the recent partial success in starting the engine had unfortunately helped to bring him the rest of the way down from the adrenaline-fueled panic that had been driving him up to this point.

You could only stay focused under intense stress for so long.

The whole situation was making it hard to think straight, the thrusters' inconsistent G-loads were wracking his body with pain, and the fatigue he was beginning to feel from being woken up from cryo-sleep was leaving him in bad shape.

This line of thinking is not helping. He needed to keep working on the problem.

"I will once again take this opportunity to inform you that you are required to report to the brig." The computer said over the speakers, apparently taking his silence as the perfect opportunity to remind him. Its voice was now emulating the same tone of tired patience used by kindergarten teachers the world over. Dave started to give a biting response, but cut himself off, and chose to ignore the warning. Mostly because he'd only end up hearing even more about the brig.

"Computer, assume I can restore control to the reaction thrusters so you can orient the ship for max aerobraking when we reach the atmosphere. With the additional reduction in velocity that would give us, what is the minimum speed we would achieve before reaching the planet's surface?"

"Assuming max aerobraking is achieved and estimates of the planet's atmospheric density are correct, we would still exceed minimum safe speed by two-hundred five point two kilometers per second plus or minus sixty-five point one kilometers per second." The computer responded promptly.

Dave hung his head. That was still way too fast. Even though it was technically slower than before, it wouldn't be any better when you considered the end result. Even with the Prometheus' super fancy, self-healing, shock-absorbing, hybrid metal skin, they'd be nothing more than a smoking crater at that speed.

A very big smoking crater...

Dave could feel the G-loads increasing, which meant the engine was still ramping up. That was good news, but even at maximum thrust, the ship was going to be too big to slow down in the short time they had left.

The braking was supposed to have been done over a period of days. Although it had started that process, the unexpected premature shut down had left the ship with too big a deficit to easily overcome, even with the engine operating at full power.

With the manual bypass completed, Dave knew he was already pumping as much hydrogen through the engine as was possible. There wouldn't be any way to squeeze more thrust out of them.

He fervently tried to think of additional solutions. Briefly, he considered ejecting and then detonating the reactor core in front of the ship, but that was just as likely to blow everyone up as slow the ship down.

Firing the asteroid deflector cannons opposite their velocity vector would be an insignificant contribution to reducing the ship's speed, but it couldn't hurt so Dave commanded the computer to do it anyway.

The results were predictably disappointing as he was informed that the AI was unable to access those systems. Now he'd have to hope that there weren't any meteors or other debris in the ship's path, too.

He pressed his head into his shaking hands in a vain attempt to hold back the overwhelming stress he was feeling.

There has to be something I can do. Just sitting here isn't helping anyone.

Unfortunately, even recognizing that it was necessary to act didn't help him generate any new good ideas. He was stuck with the bad ones, but even wasting time on those had to be better than sitting on the floor and waiting to die.

Dave took a ragged breath and forced himself to his feet. He'd try to find and hotwire the asteroid deflector guns; at least it would be something to do.

After a minute of futile searching among the wiring diagrams, Dave came to the conclusion that by the time he located, overrode, pointed, and then finally fired the cannons, he'd probably have already been dead for a few minutes. He didn't even know if the controls for the deflector guns were in the engineering bay. He hadn't worked on those like he had the propulsion system.

He gave up and leaned against a wall as he worked through his limited list of ideas again, trying to decide what to try next.

Dave was grateful for the ability to lean; for some reason, floating while trying to think was frustrating. The ship's acceleration still wasn't consistent, but it was less distracting to Dave than zero-G.

After traveling 18.7 light-years over what was likely hundreds of years, they were going to crash. And they had been *so close* to their destination too! It was infuriating. Traveling for hundreds of years to get to this planet, and now that they had gotten so close they could nearly touch it, they were going to die.

Everybody in the crew had known it was a risky mission. They were aware of the stakes. Space travel was always inherently dangerous, and interstellar travel even more so. The ship could have blown up on the burn from Sol system, the cryo-pods could have failed over time, essential ship components could have deteriorated in travel, they could have missed the target destination and traveled the infinite void forever. But none of that had

happened, and now they were going to be killed by the very planet they were trying to reach. He couldn't remember if that was technically ironic or not.

Hundreds of people dead, because of a glitch.

"Grahhhhggguh," Dave shouted as words failed him.

Punching a bulkhead in anger only resulted in him splitting his knuckles, but the following pain brought him a shred of clarity.

He straightened up; there had to be something he could do. There would be no escaping from this problem, which was quite literally true since there were no escape pods on the Prometheus. Not that he would have abandoned his fellow crewmates even if there were.

Still, if they had had them, he could have at least launched the pods opposite to the ship's current vector to help reduce the ship's velocity. He consoled himself with the knowledge that the thrust from the hypothetical escape pods wouldn't have helped a lot, though the mass they'd lose in launching them would have allowed the engine to slow down the ship faster...

Holy crap! I'm such an idiot! The notion of the hypothetical escape pods helped Dave stumble into realizing something obvious that he had missed.

Force equals mass times acceleration you colossal idiot...

While he had maximized the force he could get from the braking thruster, he hadn't tried to reduce the mass of the ship. He could increase their rate of deceleration simply by making them lighter. It was so obvious now that he had thought of it.

"Computer, how much mass would we need to dump in order to improve our acceleration enough to slow to the minimum safe landing speed?" He was talking so fast he was worried the computer would not be able to understand him.

"Factoring for the time required to dump the mass, approximately two-hundred and five thousand kilograms," the computer replied promptly.

"How much can we dump?" Dave asked quickly, every second counted now.

"Ten thousand kilograms of nonessential colonization equipment can..."

"No!" he shouted, interrupting the computer "How much mass total, everything but the fuel we will use and the crew, how much can we jettison before impact?"

It paused for half a second.

"Approximately two-hundred thousand kilograms of payload can be offloaded in time but there are essential supplies for the colonization effort in that..."

"Do it now!" Dave yelled, once again interrupting the computer. After doing some quick calculations on his armband he shouted at the computer again. "Also eject the primary reactor behind us as soon as I'm clear of the engine room."

The computer blessedly complied quickly as Dave felt the shudder of the cargo bay doors opening. He felt a pit grow in his stomach as he thought about the precious payload they had carried for millions and millions of miles being unceremoniously slung out the sides of the ship and into the cold emptiness of space, but there was no avoiding it. This would at least give them a chance of landing safely.

Dave began pulling himself frantically through the engine bay towards the exit to the corridor. Every foot he covered now would be that much less he'd have to do at the higher G-loads.

The cargo must have been dumping fast, though, because he was already feeling the stronger, but still erratic, G-loads. It was getting hard to move before he had even reached the exit from the engineering bay.

By the time Dave reached the bulkhead leading out of the engineering bay it was getting harder to breathe. A terrifying thought occurred to Dave that he had failed to consider.

"Computer, what will our new peak acceleration be?" Dave asked hesitantly.

"Seven point one-one G's plus or minus zero point six-two G's. Of course my calcula—"

Oh crap, oh crap, crap, crap.

Dave stopped listening as the AI continued to drone on, qualifying its 'imprecise' calculations. He thought back to his experiences during the high-G training that the crew had been forced to undergo. He had passed out around 4.5 G's.

"How long do I have before we hit four G's?" Dave asked, interrupting it again, panic growing in his voice.

"I have staggered the dumping of the payload to maximize the odds of the ship's survival. We'll reach accelerations beyond your capability to move or stay conscious within the next sixty-five point nine seconds," the AI said. Miraculously, this time it had seemed to know what he was getting at.

Dave waited for a lull in the inconsistent thrust and quickly pulled himself the rest of the way up and out of the engine bay. He was grateful for the handholds that had been installed so the crew could move around under thrust in either direction. He heaved a breath of relief as he laid atop the blast doors. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to rest. As soon as the next dip in thrust came, Dave started cranking the manual lever to close the blast doors.

Even though it was going faster than when he had tried to open it, it still felt painstakingly slow as the doors inched shut. Making matters worse, the thrust kept picking up in spurts, awkwardly wedging Dave against the bulkhead each time it did. With one last grunt of effort, the doors closed. The accompanying hiss of the door sealing was music to Dave's ears.

He heard the magnetic locks release from the other side of the door as the process to eject the core began. It was followed by a whooshing noise as the engineering bay depressurized and then a loud mechanical thunk as the heavy reactor was ejected into space. Everything happened far faster than he thought it would.

The lights in the corridor immediately dimmed and the sirens cut out altogether as the ship switched over to emergency power. Dave took a brief second to appreciate the quiet before yet another new and terrifying thought occurred to him.

"Computer, are you there?" A small amount of desperation crept into his voice. "Computer?" Another long second passed before the computer responded.

"Good morning, Mr. Samson. I am here... though my processing power has been further limited in this state of reduced power. For some reason, I am now able to affect the reaction control thrusters." It paused before adding, as if an afterthought, "Also, please report to the brig."

"Are you still able to continue to dump the payload?" he asked, ignoring its request. A pit formed in his stomach at the thought of the massive mistake he might have just made. His hasty decision could have just killed everyone.

"Yes, there is enough residual power in the energy banks to complete the payload offload. Now please report to the brig, Mr. Samson," said the computer patiently. The relief Dave felt was so immediate that he wasn't even angry at the computer for still trying to arrest him.

Normally, he'd have been able to count on the AI to alert him if any order he gave would contradict or complicate another. Like, for example, if ejecting the power core would have affected the dumping of the cargo.

It should warn him about such things, but given how oddly the AI had been acting since he had been woken, he wasn't sure he could rely on that.

I should have been more careful, Dave admonished himself.

He could feel his weight increasing further still, but the acceleration wasn't yet consistent. The G-load would dip back down on occasion as the thrust would wane. That inconsistency would actually work in his favor, because at the peak levels of acceleration, he was already feeling like he could hardly move. And it was only going to get worse.

If this rate of acceleration kept up, Dave knew from his training that he would black out soon. Passing out in the hallway prior to a crash landing would assuredly mean his death. He needed to get somewhere he could weather the increasing acceleration.

A new wave of even higher G's crushed down on him. Dave coughed out a heavy breath and felt as if he had been punched in the gut.

He didn't have enough time to get back in his cryo-pod. The crew would be fine as the pods could compensate for high G-loads. He needed to get to a maneuvering couch if he wanted any chance of surviving this. The ship shook violently for a second and he panicked, thinking it was coming apart, until the computer calmly reported that the core had detonated a safe distance from the ship.

"Computer, I need to know where the nearest emergency maneuvers couch is." Dave wheezed out.

"Please report to the brig," was the only response from the AI.

Dave likely would have screamed a particularly vitriolic stream of words at the computer, but even the thought of shouting right now made him dizzy.

Besides, it would just censor me anyway, he thought cynically.

He coughed as he failed to chuckle at his own thought.

Dave had already been using every break in the thrust to pull himself along the hallway, inching away from the sealed engineering bay. He had no idea where any of the maneuvering couches were — he had never thought he'd need to use one — but he knew there weren't any behind him.

"Computer, please for the love of all that is good, where... is the... closest..." Dave had to pause to suck in a breath as a particularly strong lurch knocked the wind out of him again. "... couch." he managed to finish.

"The nearest emergency maneuvering couch is in the brig, as I have already informed you," responded the AI.

"Oh."

That was a lucky break. Dave had just reached the corridor containing the brig. He wasn't sure if he could have hauled himself up the hall any farther if he had needed to. The thrust from the engine had ramped up to the point where now even when it was at the lowest lull in the fluctuating acceleration, he felt an aching pain all across his body. He managed to lever himself up and into Blue Corridor.

Dave army-crawled along the wall, stopping as he saw a large 1 painted on the door above him.

"Computer... what side of the hall.... Hnnnggghh.... was the brig I was assigned to on?" Dave asked.

The computer paused a second and must have determined his dilemma. "I have reassigned you to brig two, this was accomplished using regulation one-three point four-five point two allowing for, in extenuating circumstances, a change in the assigned brig for offenders with minor offenses. The door will be below you shortly. Keep going, Mr. Samson." Dave had continued dragging himself forward while the computer prattled on. Finally, after making it a full two meters farther, he reached the large imposing door with a black number 2 stenciled on it.

With an excruciatingly difficult thrust, Dave reached his hand out to the door control and pressed the button. Nothing happened. He levered his head to the side only to see that the thumbpad used to open the door wasn't powered.

Enraged at this latest injustice but unable to get enough air into his lungs to shout, he banged his fist impotently into the thumbpad. It was a pathetic effort; Dave was barely able to lift his fist more than a couple inches above the door for the attempt.

"One moment..." said the Computer.

The door below him slid open, and before Dave could grasp what was happening, he fell heavily into the room. Luckily for him, the emergency maneuvers couch had been placed in a way that he mostly landed on top of it.

Dave grunted as he adjusted his position on the couch, centering and turning himself around as he fought against the strong gravitational forces. He swung his hand trying to hit the button to activate the gyroscopic positioning device but missed. His arms felt leaden and he was so tired. Dave managed to lift his arm again, but a particularly strong jolt in the thrust sent his arm crashing back into the couch. He needed to hit that button; if he couldn't, the maneuvering couch wouldn't activate, and the G-loads or the crash would kill him as certainly as if he had stayed sprawled in the hallway.

Dave marshaled himself, and with a grunt, reached out again. He was so close... he could feel his fingers grasping the edges of the button's impression. The thrust waned momentarily, and Dave lurched the last fraction of a centimeter he needed, his finger sat atop the button.

"The landing will be rough; we are just outside the parameters for the worst-case landing conditions. The maneuvering couch will medicate and restrain you to improve your odds of survival." Dave couldn't help but think it was unfair how easily the computer could talk.

Was there anything else I needed to do? Feel like there was... oh yeah.

"Orient... ship to... protec... the crew," he wheezed out.

"Of course, Mr. Samson. However, by doing so, you will be left unfortunately positioned for the crash landing."

"Fi-nnnnnne." The last part got squeezed out of him as the acceleration picked up again.

"I predict your odds of survival to be significantly lower than that of the crew."

Gee, thanks for pointing that out.

With the last bit of strength available to him, he hit the couch's activation button. Straps automatically constricted around his chest, legs, and arms. A breathing mask was placed around his face by a robotic arm. Two small needles poked from the straps into his arm and began to pump him full of a drug designed specifically to relax the body for high-G maneuvers.

There was a light squealing noise, and Dave looked up to see the door above him had slid shut. He could hear the lock actuate even over the groaning of the ship.

Guess I won't be able to escape.

Dave couldn't even try to laugh.

His vision blurred as he heard the computer begin to talk again, its voice seemingly fading as Dave slipped from consciousness.

AI. "Thank you for reporting to the brig. You will be released in three hours... pending your survival," said the

How comforting.