

The explosion threw her forward, against her flight harness, as red lights and emergency warnings began to go off around the cock pit. She struggled to get control of her pod, at the same time wondering what the hell had just happened. Punching dashboard buttons, her eyes quickly scanned flashing readouts. The steering yoke bucked erratically in her hand. Realizing that she had to land, she attempted to roll the craft into as smooth an entry pattern as she could manage.

More signals went off telling her that she was entering an unknown gravity well. She ignored them, concentrating on not bringing the pod in too steeply. She didn't want to burn up before she could figure out what was going on. The craft hit the atmosphere, just barely maintaining a trajectory that would keep her from disintegrating. She tilted the landing flaps and exhaust vents in order to slow her entry, utilizing them like a parachute on an old fashioned racing vehicle. The craft shuttered as it slowed. All she could hope for was a controlled crash.

She scanned the horizon unable to locate a good place to land. The pod grazed the tops of the trees, disrupting its already erratic course. It veered to the starboard wing, which she heard snap, and the vehicle went into a half tumble. Hit the ground. Bounced once. Then slid sideways, slamming into the side of a rocky hill. She heard the fame crunch, and the sound of buckling metal. An overhead panel came loose and slammed into the back of her head.

For a moment all she saw were bright spots of light floating in front of her eyes. Searing pain shot through her head. She felt dizzy and nauseous. Reaching her hand up to touch the back of her head, she felt sticky dampness. Her vision dimmed and part of her welcomed unconsciousness. Then her conviction took hold again and she forced herself to wake up.

She thrust her body out of the small cockpit chair. With deft movements, she released the data core from the body of the ship. She grabbed the emergency survival kit, located directly next to it and then threw herself against the hatch. The frame of the ship had warped, causing the portal to hold fast and she was forced to pry it open with a length of metal.

The force of the hatch finally giving way caused her to tumble out of the craft and onto the ground. She quickly picked herself up and ran a safe distance from the pod. She was not sure if the fuel cells would ignite or not, but she was not going to take the risk. She moved off into the direction of a stand of tall trees. A dull explosion and rolling heat let her know that she had made the right decision.

She knew that the Bona Dea would begin to look for her, when she did not return from her scout mission. She simply had to make camp and hunker down until they found her. After walking a short ways from the crash site, she found a small clearing that seemed suitable.

Opening the survival kit, she removed a small cylindrical object with a flat red button on the side. She sat it firmly on the ground, depressing the button. A narrow rod emerged from the top, ejecting three small laser projectiles that moved off in different directions. The small sensors

would triangulate her location and send it back to the cylinder, which was an S.O.S. beacon. The beacon would notify the Bona Dea of her position.

Once the beacon was erected, she removed a first aid box from the kit and did what she could to treat her wounds. The cut in the back of her head was not as severe as she had first thought, but she definitely had a concussion. Ideally, she would need to rest and stay awake for the next few hours. But there was more that she needed to do and rest was not an option. She took a packet of painkillers and set to work.

Establishing a functional defense perimeter took over an hour, and not all of the terrain was easy to navigate. Even with the medicine, her head pounded from the exertion. When she completed reconnaissance, she returned to camp and set up a small shelter that was included in the kit. She checked the tent cells and oxygen processor. All seemed to be in good order. Finally, she did a quick inventory of all of the supplies that she had, trying to gauge how long they might last her.

At last, she collapsed in the tent, exhausted from the ordeal. The thermal pads in her suit heated up her body, and she felt her muscles slowly relax, acknowledging that, for now at least, she could rest. Looking at her chronometer, she saw that it had been more than four hours since the crash. She opened a protein packet and munched thoughtfully on the chewy food bar. No longer feeling dizzy, she felt safe enough to close her eyes, if only for a little bit. The beacon had been sent, a perimeter had been erected, and all of her supplies were safe within her temporary shelter. Through the mesh of the tent door, she could see the homing beacon flash a welcoming green light, pulsing out her SOS. Soon, a search team would arrive from the Bona Dea to rescue her...

"I found the ship Lieutenant!" the young ensign shouted, picking his way through the wreckage of the crash. The other three members of the party hurried to follow his voice. One of them unslung the first aid pack from her back, ready to treat any injuries.

"Lieutenant Corner, can you hear us?" They moved rubble to gain access to the pod's primary hatch. They had to use a length of metal to pry open the port. The medic was the first one through and came up behind the pilot seat.

"She's here!" She shouted. She removed a monitor from the kit, attempting to assess the pilot's injuries. Her face sunk into a frown.

"What is the status, Doctor?" The Lieutenant asked. "How severe are her injuries?"

"She's dead, Sir," The medic said with quietness, turning off her monitor. "It looks like this panel struck her in the back of her head, during the crash. She must have been killed instantly."