

There Are No Dreams in Space

Dr. David Ifiemi, shaken from nitrogen slumber in his sleeping crypt, mumbled. “It’s too dark for Landing Day.”

He was onboard *Te Punga*, “The Anchor” in Maori, the final hope of Earth’s Southern Coalition, destined for Epsilon Eridani VI, or EE6.

He blinked.

Then he saw that his acrylate viewplate was streaked with blood.

Dr. Peng Xiao, chief medical supervisor, mouthed something to him, frantic.

“Get me out!” Ifiemi yelled.

Xiao fumbled at the controls until the lid popped off. Ifiemi leapt from his crypt, nitrogen clouds swirling around his feet.

Emergency lights flashed. The monotonous voice of “Connie,” the AI control system, sounded through the ship. “WARNING. SECTION NINE BREACH. AIR SYSTEM FAILURE IN TWELVE MINUTES. WARNING.”

Ifiemi was fully awake now. “What the blazes happened?”

Xiao’s hands and face were bloody, his uniform slashed open from shoulder to navel, with fresh stains forming on his arms and shoulders.

“Liquid argon tanks exploded... We cycled them,” Xiao gasped. “Chios and Sanchez dead. Lefleur in primary regen tank... seven days... Kumar gone... Hull breach....”

The hiss of escaping air stopped, as did the klaxons. Warning panels flipped from red to amber.

Stephen Matlock

“AIR BREACH CONTAINED. SECTION NINE SEALED. CRITICAL SURVIVAL ALERT. WATER SUPPLY DAMAGED. TWO DAYS ZERO RESERVE WATER.”

“Why wake me? Why not Brandão or Sudjarwadi?”

“*Bu keyi!* Tech and directorial staff gone. Explosions took out their pod.”

His heart stopped. “The family section? Are they—?”

Xiao half-smiled, then put his hand on Ifiemi’s shoulder. “Wife Ozichi and daughter Leila sleep... As my own Aiyun.”

“Thank God! But why *me*? I’m the xenobiologist. You need a tech guy, not a forest ranger.”

Xiao wrinkled his lips, then spat out blood. “You have technical experience. You plumbed the biodome.”

“Dear God, I only put in a water line and pumps! I am not an astro-navigator—”

Sharp bangs interrupted them.

Xiao shouted, “We’re driving straight through rocky debris! Bussard ramjet failed. Six light-years from EE6. Only navigation jets remain!” Xiao coughed and leaned against the bulkhead.

Ifiemi yanked back his head. “If we hail Earth, we’re four years from help...”

“Must restart Bussard ramjet. Explosion took out water conversion system. Three days. We die of thirst. We drift without power... sleepers will never awaken...”

They will die in dreamless sleep, Ifiemi thought. He shook his head to quiet his fears.

“The others?”

“Just you and me.” Xiao coughed again, a spray of red droplets erupting from his mouth.

Stephen Matlock

Ifiemi nodded. “First thing: get water restored. We die, and the biodome dies. We need more time... You must go to your sleeper cell, Xiao.”

Xiao wobbled, then sat down, hard, on the floor. “*Aiya!* Sleep will not heal me.” He rolled back. Blood seeped from his chest wound, bright red. He gasped again and vomited.

But he was still breathing.

Ifiemi pulled Xiao to the medical bay and used a gurney to lower him into the secondary regen tank next to Lefleur. The auto-healers surrounded Xiao, the control panels displaying his status: PENG XIAO ID#G2AAW920AF8 3 DAYS 6 HOURS 42 SECONDS... 41... 40

He'll be regenned. But mother of Jesus, what do I do next?

He ran down the corridor to the biodome. The interior acrylate walls were cracked, but there were no exterior breaches. Trees tilted like drunks in the bars of Abuja, and small field animals either lay on the ground, dead or wounded, or huddled in groups. Ranger droids herded strays.

The water supply was the bigger problem. Levels were too low even for suction. The biodome pools would supply the animals for a day, but they'd soon die of dehydration, too.

The purification system was smashed by falling debris. If he got sick from waste water, there was no third regen tank for him.

Ifiemi grew thirsty just looking at the broken machinery. “Connie, how much water in food storage if only I drink it?”

“WATER FOR THIRTEEN DAYS AT CURRENT CONSUMPTION RATES.”

All right, he thought. Enough for me. But for no one else. In four days Xiao could awaken, and in seven Lefleur, but until then he was on his own.

Stephen Matlock

He ran to the flight deck to survey the damage. Air supply, adequate. Air purification system, unharmed. The 626 passengers slept, awaiting their arrival.

The floor tilted. Ifiemi slipped, then grabbed the desk anchor.

“ALERT. ROCKY FIELD AHEAD. HOLD TIGHT. EVASIVE MANEUVERS UNDERWAY.”

The ship rumbled under his feet as it adjusted to avoid the debris. Ifiemi pulled himself into the navigator’s chair.

Where there is rock, there is ice, he thought. And where there is ice, there is water waiting to be thawed.

#

“Connie, detect field for water ice mass approximately 20m in diameter.”

“WATER ICE DETECTED SEVEN-FIFTEEN POINT FORTY-TWO KILOMETERS.”

“Connie, navigate to water ice. Match axis, momentum, and spin.”

“REPOSITIONING SHIP.”

The rocky field came into view, and the ship halted.

For a moment—only a moment—his hands shook. He opened the locker and pulled on an egression suit. He’d never done a solo walk. *They told me I’d be a ground ranger. Others would bravely face danger. Well, THAT brochure lied.*

Once in the ground access bay airlock he closed his mask. Then he attached a heavy isoline comprising a thousand carbon filaments to a hook welded into the metal floor. “Connie. Prepare for personal egress.”

The mass lay fifty meters ahead, framed by the bay, illuminated only by docking lights. The stars slowly spun around, matched by *Te Punga*.

Stephen Matlock

He fired his steering jets and soon bumped against the mass. He drove an anchor into the surface, then tied a personal line to the hook. “Houston, Houston, do you read? The Eagle has landed.”

Connie spoke into his ear. “RESTATE COMMAND.”

“Just record, Connie.”

He jettied away a dozen meters, then fired his pen laser. Rock chips and steam erupted. He kept a steady bead to form a deep, narrow shaft into the rock and ice. Then he shot an anchor bolt attached to the isoline into the shaft, and used the laser to melt the ice and let the water re-freeze to bond around the isoline.

He returned, then attached the isoline to a spool. “Connie, engage the spool.”

They had enough water now, but it was ice.

We planned to dig for minerals on EE6, he thought.

“Connie, where are the autobot mining blasters?”

“SECURED IN AISLES B AND C.”

“Connie, release a half-dozen and assemble them in the delivery bay.”

He used his suit jets to position each autoboot blaster next to the icy mass. He attached hoses from their waste vents to the reserve tank, and let the blasters at low power melt the ice, sucking the water into the tank, using the relief valve to handle the overpressure.

Steam surrounded the mass and evaporated into vacuum. The blasters attempted to drive the icy mass away from the ship, but the taut isoline held fast. Rocks released by the melt shot out, some striking the ship, others spraying into space.

But there would be water.

#

Stephen Matlock

The interior klaxons still sounded. “Connie, halt the warning signals.”

“UNABLE TO OVERRIDE SAFETY ALERT WARNINGS. WATER RESERVES CRITICAL.”

“Connie, set warning limit for water reserves to twenty-five percent.”

The warnings stopped. The tanks were at thirty-seven percent. *Not enough yet.*

Now back to the biodome. After hours of work in the familiar dirt and among the plants, he was satisfied the free animals were safe, with only a few to euthanize and dispose. He set the controls to awaken replacements. Soon the biodome was back to full complementary functioning.

At last a chance to rest. He had been working for 32 hours straight. *A sleep, maybe a dream, and then more work. And more wake-keeping,* he thought as he sipped his meal in the crew’s mess.

I am so tired. This was supposed to be a dreamless journey. He shut his eyes, only for a moment.

Mother is serving spicy chicken, Jollof rice, and sweet plantains. I’m surrounded by my family, by brothers and sisters, aunties and uncles, neighbors, all talking, with animated hands waving and touching and poking. Loud music fills the air, but the voices of the family are louder still. Father is home for lunch now, putting his briefcase on the kitchen counter, laughing and patting everyone, so the entire house is full of love. I’m working on my homework at the kitchen table, studying for the academy, frantic to complete my work before finals, annoyed by the noise and yet happy to be here. Father kisses Mother, touches shoulders or arms of the gathered family, then comes over to caress my head. He leans down to my ear, to whisper something to me, his oldest son—

Stephen Matlock

He was jolted awake by screaming klaxons.

“CRITICAL EVENT. DELIVERY BAY INOPERABLE. AIR IS VENTING. SEALING.”

Jesus Savior, help! He jumped up from his seat. “Connie, what happened?” he shouted, running to the delivery bay.

“VENTING WATER AND ROCK RELEASED STRAINS IN THE MASS, WHICH EXPLODED.”

“Connie, damage report delivery bay.”

“DELIVERY BAY DOOR CANNOT BE CLOSED.”

“Connie, are personal egress doors operable?”

“AFFIRMATIVE.”

We’ll need to patch that door before Landing Day, but we won’t be trapped.

“Connie, water reserve status.”

“WATER RESERVE NINETY-ONE PERCENT.”

He sighed. *Enough.*

“Connie, release the isoline.”

“ISOLINE RELEASED.”

#

“Connie, how long can we run on navigation jets?”

“WITH PROPER CYCLING OF OUTFLOW NOZZLES, 27 DAYS.”

And then we would no longer be a ship, but a free-floating metal shell.

“WARNING. CRITICAL ALERT. APPROACHING EXTENSIVE DEBRIS FIELD.”

“Connie, change course.”

Stephen Matlock

“MANEUVER WILL EXHAUST FUEL RESERVES. CONTINUE?”

Mtchewww! “Connie, can we re-start the ramjet?”

“RAMJET REQUIRES 1550 K.P.H. CURRENT TOP SPEED 800 K.P.H.”

Na wa o! This is unbelievable! He thought of his father and mother sending him off to “space camp,” their smiles bright, his own fears almost quieted by the knowledge he would soon be the first xenobiologist from his nation. *Courage is when you tremble but you try*, his father would say. He soon worked alongside those from China, New Zealand, Argentina, and India to escape a failing Earth.

But now the only hope of the coalition, *Te Punga*, would die in space without a functioning ramjet.

He leaned back against the bulkhead. *I am only a gardener. My mission was to manage a forest, not rescue a space ship with 600 people.* The memory of his mother stroking his head when he was cowering in fear came to mind, calming him from yet another beating for being “different” and “weird” and not “New Nigerian.” So many rules he broke, so many people he angered, but he had kept at the books and the studying, the tests and the anxiety...

Then a thought. “Connie. Assemble the remaining blasters for aft re-positioning.”

One by one the blasters awoke and lumbered to the rear of the ship. He followed, again putting on his egression suit, and then opened the aft egress bay. He moved the blasters through the hatch, then began welding them to the exterior shell, roughly aiming them in the same direction.

“Connie, set blasters to auto-start at my command.”

“CANNOT AUTO-START MINING BLASTERS. SAFETY OVERRIDES REQUIRE HUMAN CONTROL.”

Stephen Matlock

Ibanuje! How can this be? But—the next thing is the next thing I try.

“Connie, how long to ramjet speed if all blasters engage?”

“TWO DAYS, SEVEN HOURS.”

“Connie, awaken Xiao when ramjet re-engages. I’ll fire the blasters manually.”

“WARNING. 95% LIKELIHOOD OF SEVERE IRREVERSIBLE INJURY.”

“Likelihood of death is 100% if I do not try, even though I tremble.” He held his hand out. Firm.

There were 44 blasters. Each would move *Te Punga* forward faster.

But every blaster was a fiery atomic explosion contained in a ceramic shell. As each blaster engaged, the heat increased. His suit grew hotter and hotter.

“Connie, at current acceleration, when will ramjet auto-start?”

“RAMJET WILL NOT ENGAGE BEFORE STRIKING THE DEBRIS FIELD.”

“Connie, how many more blasters are required?”

“ALL REMAINING BLASTERS MUST BE USED.”

“Connie...” He sighed.

“WAITING.”

“Will I die?”

Connie did not answer.

“Connie.”

“WAITING.”

“Will I succeed in firing the remaining blasters?”

“AT GIVEN RATE, YOU WILL FIRE ALL REMAINING BLASTERS.”

“Connie. Will you tell Xiao what to do when the ramjet engages?”

Stephen Matlock

“DR. PENG WILL BE FULLY BRIEFED UPON AWAKENING.”

“Connie.”

“WAITING.”

“Will you ... tell my family I love them?”

Connie was slow to answer.

“DR. OZICHI ... AND OTHERS ... WILL BE FULLY BRIEFED.”

He welded and aimed and ignited one blaster after the other. The heat and light increased as if it were Epsilon Eridani itself before him until there was only his final whispered word.

“Connie.”

#

On the ocean shore, families gather in the afternoon sun. Some sit on benches placed under young trees rustling in the warm breezes of summer. Children laugh in the distance as they fly their kites or run up to their parents for food or trinkets or just the brief moment of touch.

The Landing Day monument, a plinth reaching into the sky like a rocket contrail, is carved with names, as if by a pen laser held by a confident hand.

Chios

Sanchez

Kumar

Brandão

Sudjarwadi

And at the end:

DAVID IFIEMI

He trembled, but he tried.

-END-