A Distant Hope

Sitting cross-legged on the broad side of a burning, smoldering space shuttle, nose completely caved in and engines still on fire from a less-than-graceful landing, I had to take several deep breaths. In through the nose, I told myself, and out through the mouth. It was partly for my mounting anger and partly to make sure I kept living out of spite.

No one else was on the ship, so there wasn't a point in checking for survivors. Honestly, if I thought about it, that crash had a hundred percent survival rate. Some pilots go their whole lives hoping for a crash survival rate of more than ninety percent! The goal, naturally, was always one hundred. But you know how people are. Especially humans. Of all the species in the universe, ours was the one voted "Most Likely To Make The Fire Worse" in an anonymous poll. So really, I was already beating the odds just by breathing.

When my breath was steady, I stood up and dusted off the broiled flotsam from the back of my pants. I followed the path back down the wing to the dirt as if the metal would shatter like ice under my feet. When I plopped down to the red, dusty surface, I kicked a couple of rocks on my way back to the cockpit. Comparable home world gravity, so I didn't have to worry about floating off into the abyss. One sun, decent temperature, and signs of grassy fields a few kilometers away from the shuttle. Hell, if I hadn't crashed, this might be a decent vacation spot. I guessed there would be human settlements somewhere, but didn't want to wait for a ship to pass overhead. I got into the cockpit, kicking through broken glass and waving smoke away from my face. The pilot's chair was hanging by a few screws and groaned as I plopped down into it. I reached under the console for the Beacon Box when static ripped through the speakers.

"—lert! Alert! Impact imminent! Impact—"

"Yeah, you're about five minutes too late!" I spat. "Stupid hunk of scrap…"

"Meteor detected! Divert course—Error! Could not reproduce trajectory. Please update your—"

"There's nothing to update!" I yelled, kicking the console screen. "Stupid spaceship!"

"You appear to be experiencing extreme stress," the ship started. "Physical, breathing exercises are recommended to maintain a calm body and mind."

"Well, if you have any breathing exercises to get us back in the air, let me know."

"Error: Engines are reading as non-functional. Suggest using Beacon Box to—"

"No kidding! We're lucky I was able to use a manual override and keep you from going into a swan dive! For all people talk about artificial 'intelligence', you're an idiot."

"Crash detected." The ship informed me. "Recommendation: Survival Scenario 1-9-Bravo. First step: keep a living record. Please state your name and rank."

"Shut up…"

"'Shut up' not found in crewman manifest. Please state your name and rank or submit yourself as a stowaway."

"Which gets me help faster?"

"Please state your—"

"Pilot Engineer Jamie Rand."

"P.E. Rand," the computer said. "Please remain calm. Your chances of survival are never 0 until you are dead. In the variably likely event of death, please state the next of kin you wish to inform."

"I don't need to inform anyone," I said, grabbing the survival pack. I switched the Beacon Box on and attached it to the backpack strap as I pulled it over my shoulder. "I'm going to go look for an outpost."

"Suggestion: Please do an atmosphere analysis before—"

"Run diagnostic on the windshield."

"Windshield…inoperable."

"Which means?" I asked.

"Alien atmosphere has entered—Alert! Alert! Please find the provided oxygen mask and—"

"I'm fine," I scoffed, pulling my pack straps tight. "I'm going now."

"Suggestion: Begin with—"

If the computer had anything useful to say, I didn't hear it as I disappeared out of the cockpit. It felt good leaving the AI behind. The most advanced flight risk in the galaxy. I was more than happy to leave it behind. Survival out of spite: check.

I walked for a long while, using the plume of smoke that marked where my ship was. I didn't care which direction I was moving in. I had a direction in mind and it wasn't the ship. That was enough. I could see hills in the distance and greenery. I figured that that was the best option to find civilization.

"See?" I told myself, kicking through the woods, "I don't need any stupid computer to guide me. I can make my way. My ancestors used to travel around with way less sophisticated technology than what I've got. This will be easy. All I have to do is…stop talking to myself, probably. Or do I only have to worry when I start arguing with myself? Only one way to know."

I entertained myself as I trudged through the dirt plains. Eventually, I found grass that grew up to my knees and I stared at the gentle waves that passed over the growth when the wind rushed by. When it grew taller, small, orange flowers started to bloom and touched my fingertips. I started naming things I saw. It was mostly already cataloged, processed, and archived, but if I was the first person to visit this world, why not name everything? If I was lucky, the Dorp-dorp Bug could become the official name of that little brown bug. What a legacy to leave behind.

I was starting to get sour again when I heard the rush of water. It was just what I needed! Not just as an excuse to go for a swim, but also as a sign of where to go. In any humanoid race that was capable of space travel, they had a history of ocean travel. That meant they needed an ocean and—even if this was nothing but a tiny river—this could lead me there! I looked behind me and saw my still-burning ship on the horizon. Then I saw another plume of smoke just ahead of me. Maybe I wasn't abandoned alone.