

My eyes squint in the gathering gloom, trying to survey the ground as we prepare to make contact. Just before touchdown, I spy the worst-case scenario: jagged pieces of lava litter the ground, scattered at random like so many sleeping porcupines. Holy Buckets!

I sit bolt upright, gaping out the window. How can that be? What are chunks of lava doing in a crater? Then it hits me. Of course. We're five miles from a volcano. Why didn't I think of this before? Hell, our goose is cooked now.

The Bailey Voyager makes contact and bounces along until an explosion rocks its left side. The craft veers back and forth. My body jerks on its harness like a trapped lab monkey, but it's all reflex.

As if in slow motion, a compartment door over Buck's head jars open, and out drops a metal case. A crunching dull thud echoes through the cabin as the container whacks Buck's skull. The plane swerves.

Harry's eyepieces dangle as he gapes at the stricken pilot. "Buck." No answer. Harry whips around toward the rear seats. "His head is bleeding. He's unconscious."

"Do something, Harry." Fay's eyes saucer. The plane reels jaggedly.

Sheesh. I'm scared too, but stopping the plane isn't rocket science. I have to shout at Harry to be heard above the bouncing clatter. "Slow the throttle with your left hand."

Harry reaches across and eases the handle forward. After lurching back and forth for a few seconds more, the plane skids to a stop.

We all sit stunned, breathing hard.

Harry is the first to break the silence. "That bang?" He turns to me, frantic. "Keltyn?"

I glance out the left side. The ground, horizontal to us a few minutes ago, now seems to slope up. “The left tire blew.” I turn to Harry. “Know what that means, don’t you?”

“What?” His white face sweats like ice in the sun.

“You want the good news or the bad news?”

“I dunno. Bad news first, I guess.” He fumbles with his dialups, hanging off of one ear.

“Unless we can patch the tire, no horizontal takeoff. And unless Buck can fix the VLG, we can’t do a vertical take-off. Then...” My finger draws a line across my throat. It feels naughty to make the chief squirm, but he’s acting like such a wuss.

“Then *what?*” Harry tries to focus.

“We’re stuck. On top of that, we’re miles from Erebus.” I punch the back of the seat. The blood rushes to my head. I feel more worked up now that we’re out of immediate danger.

Silence. Fay leans forward toward me. “So, what’s your good news, honey?”

“We’re here. We made it.” But I keep a hawk’s eye on Harry, whose eyeballs now drift up in their sockets. I shouldn’t have baited him. He’s losing it fast. “Fay, can you get the cockpit door on your side open? Better make it quick.”

Fay reaches around the side of Harry’s seat and wrestles with the latch. She’s able to loosen it and push the door ajar, just in time for Harry to stick out his head. His dialups fall off his nose and he pukes, right on them.

When Harry collects himself, I help him and Fay haul Buck out of his cramped seat and lower him gently to the ground. He’s in no shape to help himself, which is too bad, since he’s so big. Still, judging from his mutterings, he’s coming to.

The only guy who can bring us back home is no longer in a coma. I should count my blessings, but instead, I'm haunted by the exchange between Buck and Harry, trying to explain the VLG malfunction. What did Harry mean by "human factors?" Likely a mental lapse by one of the mechanics at Chimera Space Station. Yet I know that a pilot is compulsive about his plane, and Buck would have watched the mechanics' every move like a hawk.

But there's another possibility, isn't there? The thought creeps through my mind, as silent and deadly as a viper. Sabotage. How? Easy. One mechanic engages Buck as he checks the fuel, while his accomplice on the other side of the plane loosens a few bolts. It would take less than a minute.