



COLLAPSE
Richard Hensley

Caro woke to the sound of silence. Not the normal silence of night time hums and clicks, but the silence of absolute nothing where your heart is the loudest thing you can hear and gets louder with each beat as panic sets in. Even in the silent vacuum of space, the orbiting research station was always full of small noises. These were now absent. It was as though the thousands of inhabitants held their collective breath.

‘Bolly. Wake up,’ whispered Caro as she shook her bed mate.

‘Uh,’ was all the reply she got from him.

‘BOLLY,’ screamed Caro, ‘wake up. Something’s wrong.’

‘Uh. What. Uh.’ He rolled over and felt for his watch. ‘Eh?’ He was now wide awake. ‘Why’s it so dark?’

‘You tell me, my maintenance man,’ said Caro with a hint of annoyance.

‘The night light’s failed again, my pet biologist. That’s all. What time is it?’

‘Time you got up and checked it out.’

Bolly rolled out of bed and banged his knee in the pitch black.

‘Shit.’

‘Your torch is in your kit where you dropped it all last night,’ Caro said.

‘Turn on the light so I can see.’

‘I did.’

‘It’s still dark.’

‘There’s something wrong. Aren’t you listening?’

Bolly felt his way round the bed, desperately trying to remember where the furniture was. He found his overalls and tool belt. He fumbled for the small torch, cutting his finger on an open blade.

‘Shit.’ He turned on the torch. ‘There. Now what time is it?’

‘The clock is blank, Bolly. It’s off. Everything is off. SOMETHING IS WRONG.’

‘OK, OK. Calm down Caro. I’ll get on to Repair.’ Bolly tried his personal communicator and got nothing. He found his emergency phone and keyed in the number. ‘Damn thing’s not working. Even the emergency comms are down.’

‘Now you are hearing me.’

‘Hey. Just because the lights don’t work is no reason to get het up.’

‘The place is silent. Completely silent. Listen.’ They both held their breaths and silence was the reply. He propped the torch up to give maximum light in the room.

‘Shit. I’m going down to Repair,’ said Bolly as he pulled on his overalls.

‘Who’s on tonight?’

‘Pindy, Belter and Anna.’

‘Is that the Anna who...’

‘Yeah.’

‘You’re taking me, too.’

‘Why?’

‘Cause I don’t trust you.’

‘Shit. That’s over with. Why do you keep dragging it up? It was a drunken orgy. Nothing more.’

‘She’s just had your baby. It’s about time I met her.’

‘It’s more than you can do.’

‘That hurts. Not my choice. The docs say I can’t even surrogate a baby let alone make my own, and I do so want one.’

‘Caro. I know that. I didn’t mean...’

‘No, but you said it just the same. And it’s just as well I can’t, ’cause you didn’t even visit your child in maternity. How long has it been, two months? What sex is it?’

‘Hey. I don’t know. We don’t discuss it. Anyway, who do I live with, Caro?’ She gave him a half smile. Bolly pulled her to him and squeezed her tight.

‘Me, but I still don’t trust you.’

‘She’s with Pindy now, so I think you can. Get some sensible clothes on. We may have a disaster.’

Bolly went to the apartment door and pressed the button to open it. The lock clicked but the door remained unmoved.

‘Shit. Total power down. Even the auxiliaries aren’t on. Shit.’

Bolly’s tool kit had nothing heavy, but Caro cannibalised a work of art to provide a ferroglas rod big enough to jemmy the door open. Bolly picked up his tool kit, fixed it to his belt and stepped into the corridor. There was a dim glow from the safety lights. He sent Caro back into the apartment for his bigger torch and some food and drink. He could hear

faint noises from the next apartment.

‘Caro. Hurry with that light.’

‘Here.’ She handed him the big torch and took the small one. She adjusted the pack on her back. ‘I brought your medi-kit as well.’

‘Good. I’ve a bad feeling about this.’

‘Me too. It woke me. Remember?’

‘Can you hear noises in there,’ he said, pointing to the neighbours’ door.

‘Yeah. Can you jemmy their door?’ Bolly rammed the rod into the narrow gap and pulled hard. The ferroglas did not bend or break, such was its strength, but neither did it shift the door.

‘Help me,’ said Bolly. They both pulled without success.

‘How did you open ours?’

‘I’d pressed open. There was probably enough residual power to trip the lock.’ He banged on the door to get their attention, but got only silence. ‘Ok. Let’s get to Repair. We’ll have to use the stairs, and it’s a long way down.’

‘Lead on, maintenance man.’

With the air conditioning off, they were sweating freely by the time they got to Repair, Bolly’s workplace. The door stood open. Bolly looked in, wary of what he might find. There was a dim light on the control desk. ‘Bolly here. Anyone else?’ he shouted into the darkness and flashed his torch around the entrance lobby. There was a scrabbling noise behind the control desk and a dirty face appeared.

‘Bolly. Great. Come here.’ A hand beckoned.

‘Pindy, what’s wrong?’

‘Main power’s off and the auxiliaries in this section didn’t start up.’

I'm trying to fix it.'

'When did it go off?'

'Two hours back,' Pindy replied.

'Shit.'

'Yeah. We've only got four more at best,' said Pindy, wiping his face, smearing the dirt some more.

'What does he mean? Four hours?' Caro's voice rose in pitch.

'Cool it, Caro. I got to concentrate.' Bolly stared at the emergency screen.

'Cool yourself. What does he mean, Pindy?'

'In four hours, this place collapses.'

'Collapses?'

'Yeah. The main field dies.'

'The one that keeps us in a stable orbit?' Caro pulled Bolly to face her.

'Shit. Yeah. Now let me concentrate,' said Bolly.

'So we've an hour to get the life pods launched,' she said. Bolly nodded and turned back to Pindy.

'Tell me what you've tried.' Pindy listed all the emergency procedures in the book. None of them had worked. 'We need a bit of inspiration, Pindy. What's next?'

'The manual says evacuate.'

'Shit.'

'Yeah.'

'You boys quit joking. I'm going to open some doors, 'cause no one can evacuate till we do.'

'Caro. Take these.' Pindy handed over two large bags. She opened one.

‘What do these do?’

‘They’re raptors, molecular disruptors. They blast, short range, about one metre. Place the nozzle by the door lock and pull the trigger. It’ll blast the lock open. Look.’ Pindy demonstrated on the door to the Primary Power Generator Bay that he had failed to jemmy open.

The light metal fabrication melted like a snowflake.

‘What if someone’s behind the door?’

‘Don’t look. Do the next door.’ She strung the other raptor across her back.

‘Boys, don’t stay too long trying to be heroes. Meet you at the pods.’

‘Yeah. Don’t get caught in the rush,’ said Bolly.

The two men peered through the Generator Bay door. There was a smell of burnt metal that did not come from the wrecked door.

‘Got your respirator?’ asked Bolly.

‘Yeah. Here,’ said Pindy handing it to Bolly.

‘You stay by the door while I take a look.’ Before he descended into the pit, Bolly shone his torch over the inert equipment. They both saw the smoke rising from a ragged hole in the side of the generator.

‘Don’t look good, Bolly.’

‘No. I’ll take a closer look,’ said Bolly putting on the respirator. He descended the ladder, shining his torch over the wrecked machine and the walls of the generator bay. ‘There’s meteorite damage. The hull has resealed OK. Not much we can do here.’

‘Shall we try the auxiliaries?’ said Pindy.

‘Yeah. Hey, where’s Belter and Anna tonight?’

‘I sent Belter to look at the auxiliaries about an hour ago.’

‘Was he on his own?’

‘Yeah. I know it was a risk, but the comms died so I couldn’t raise you. Anna was called back earlier to our apartment to see to the baby. Then the lights went out.’

‘Shit.’

‘Yeah. She’s on her own,’ said Pindy.

‘She’s tough. If we need to evacuate, take a ruptor to get her out,’ said Bolly.

Caro fired the ruptor. The lock disintegrated and the door slid open. There were shouts from inside the apartment. An elderly couple came to the door. Caro quickly told them to evacuate and went on to the next door and the next. She looked back and saw the couple still standing in the corridor, clutching one another.

‘Get to the pods. NOW.’ They physically jumped at her command and hurried inside their apartment. Caro shrugged and carried on down the corridor, blasting lock after lock. As she blasted one lock, there was a noise from behind the door. She paused, remembering Pindy’s warning. She slid the door open and was instantly sick. Her stomach emptied onto the headless remains of a woman.

Caro’s torch picked over the corpse, she was thankful she could not recognise the woman.

A small bundle of bloody rags next to the woman stirred. Caro turned it over with her foot, not wanting to get too close. The rags uttered a plaintive cry. Caro opened the ragged parcel. A small face appeared from the folds of cloth. She quickly unwrapped the baby and found a few scratches on her legs, but nothing else.

‘Was mummy trying to open the lock?’ she said to the baby,

holding her close. 'I'm your mummy now, little girl.' She wrapped the baby in a clean blanket from her cot and checked the rest of the apartment. Baby food was in the cooler. Caro put it all in her pack.

Back on the corridor it was bedlam. People milling around, undirected.

'Get to the pods. You've got an hour,' she shouted. One man began to argue. Caro shouldered and primed the ruptor and repeated her instructions. The crowd complied. She picked up the baby, desperately trying not to look at the woman, then headed for the next corridor. At this rate she could free only a fraction of the inhabitants.

Caro rounded a corner and banged into two men, one muscled, the other slight. The impact knocked the ruptor out of her hand and made the baby cry.

'Hey lady. What's the rush?' She recognised them from the service gang, a bunch of roughnecks who did just about anything if the price was right.

'Generator's off. Get to the pods.' Caro and the big man bent down simultaneously to retrieve the ruptor.

'Lady, this is some toothpick.' He pulled the ruptor out of her hands. 'This'll be very useful.' He pushed her to the floor and shot at the wall, testing its power. The flimsy material vaporised. The big man smiled. 'Yeah. Very useful. Get goin' lady and don't look back.'

Caro un-slung the other ruptor bag and made as if to put the squalling baby in it. The two men bent over their ruptor, checking its settings. The baby squalled even louder.

'Sort that kid before I do,' said the smaller man, looking up from the weapon.

'Sort her yourself,' shouted Caro as the blast from her second

ruptor took his legs off. The big man swung round and grabbed her gun. He momentarily regretted the action as his stomach disappeared before his eyes.

Caro steeled herself, blindly packing her ruptor back into its bag. She picked up her original gun. The baby had gone quiet, as if sensing Caro's screaming fear. 'OK babes. It's you and me. Let's get to the pods.'

'Belter. You in there?' Pindy shouted into the black hole that was the Auxiliaries Bay. There was no answer. He went through the broken door and shone his torch over the machinery. 'Can't see him, Bolly.'

'Perhaps he's gone to the pods already. Check Auxiliary One.' Bolly joined Pindy at the control desk for Auxiliary One, having first looked around the bay.

'No life, Bolly. You look in the control cabinet, I'll look at Two.'

The pair went from machine to machine with little result. Pindy tried starting Five.

'Yeah. There's some charge left. We might be able to start this one.'

Bolly sprang round the equipment and looked at the flickering display.

'It's the hydrogen feed, the pressure's low. Can you fix it, Pindy?'

'How long have I got?'

'About fifty minutes.'

'Just. Help me on with the suit.' Pindy grabbed an exo-suit from a locker. Bolly checked him out and rushed him to the air lock.

The Pod Bay was crowded, all the worse with only emergency lighting. Thousands had got out of their apartments without Caro's help. The emergency teams had been busy releasing the inert doors. Only half the

station's inhabitants had been asleep when the meteorites struck. The power failure was not total; some of the safety circuits were still working and the life pods were self-powered and fully automatic in case of total failure.

Caro searched for Bolly. She acknowledged some of her friends and colleagues and asked if anyone had seen him. She got negative replies all round. The Pod Master directed her to a pod he had just opened.

'I'll wait for Bolly,' she said.

'You might regret that, Caro. He'll try to the last to get the power on.'

'I'll still wait. How long?'

'I'm guessing, thirty minutes. You know the drill?'

'Sure. Alarm. Doors close. Jettison. Anyone left in the Pod Bay, dies.'

'Remember that last one.' He moved on to supervise. Caro grabbed his arm.

'Take this.' She pushed the ruptor into his hands, keeping the other in its bag.

'OK. Shall I take the baby?'

'No. I'm all she's got.'

'Here. Take my phone.' He gave her his emergency phone, but she couldn't raise a connection.

Caro walked back along the Pod Bay corridor hoping to see Bolly. She held the baby close, which the little girl took as feed time.

'You poor thing. I can't do that for you.' Caro picked a baby food tube from her pack and held it to the baby's mouth. She sucked hungrily and made grateful little noises.

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Pindy found the fault in the hydrogen feed. There was a jet of mist squirting off into space from the armoured pipe. A meteorite had punctured it. He took a patch from his suit storage and repaired the hole, holding the patch in place till the vapour stopped.

‘Must have been a big one, Bolly.’ Bolly was watching on a direct link to Pindy’s suit.

‘The meteorite defences have malfunctioned. Can you see any more holes?’

‘Only the one by the main generator. That auto re-sealed before power fail. Not a big shower then.’

‘Good. Get back, Pindy.’

Pindy climbed back to the air lock. When he was safe, Bolly hurried to the control panel and began the start-up procedure. Pindy got out of his suit and joined in. Auxiliary Five started without problem. The main lights powered up, then the communications began to crackle. All sorts of alarms clamoured for attention, deafening the two men.

‘Kill that lot,’ shouted Bolly. Pindy frantically shut off each alarm in turn. Most were obvious, some unusual, and one was critical.

‘The main field will collapse if we can’t get another auxiliary up,’ said Pindy.

‘Shit. How long?’

‘Twelve minutes. We have to try.’

‘Well, we can’t get to the pods...’

‘Caro. Last chance.’ The Pod Master opened another pod and began waving the last few people into it. There were still three pods

remaining. The Pod Master checked his tally and allowed himself a satisfied smile.

Just then the main lights flickered on and held at half power.

‘They’ve got it going,’ said Caro.

‘The Primary isn’t up yet. We’ll still have to evacuate.’

‘I’m staying. I’ll close the blast doors.’

‘OK. Keep the phone in case the comms start up.’

Caro adjusted the baby on her hip and made her way back out of the Pod Bay. She turned around at the blast doors and saluted the Pod Master who saluted back. She closed the doors and spun the lock.

‘OK, babes. We’re on our own. Let’s find Bolly and Pindy.’

The filled life pods ejected one at a time in a pre-determined order. Their trajectories would put them in orbit around the planet’s largest moon from where the rescue shuttles were already taking off. The conditions in the pods were cramped and noisy but the twenty-two hour rescue mission would soon be over.

Caro watched them go from an observation port, a sight she had never seen before and unlikely to see again; a string of orange jewels spread across the void, lit by the giant red sun.

‘There they go, babes.’ The baby took no notice. There was a sudden lurch. Caro staggered against the wall, nearly dropping the baby. She could feel the gravity weakening, the first sign of the field dying. She took the ruptor out of its bag and slung it across her shoulders. The bag made a serviceable cradle for the baby, leaving her hands free for the worsening conditions.

Caro tried Bolly’s number again. It connected.

‘Bolly?’

‘Caro? Why aren’t you in a pod? We saw them go.’

‘I stayed to find you.’

‘We’re in the Auxiliary Power Bay, trying to get some more power up.’

‘I’ll be down.’

The reduction in gravity had skewed the spin axis of the station. The down direction had moved to be some twenty degrees from the proper vertical. Caro half climbed, half crawled along the corridors and down the stairs to reach the Auxiliary Power Bay. The baby was crying continuously, the jolting and lack of attention making her miserable. Caro had no choice but to pass the two dead men. The big one had died instantly but the other had tried to crawl for help. His blood streaked the floor for dozens of metres before his strength had given out. Caro took a rest when she was well past the bodies. She got out another feeding tube for the baby and this quietened her.

The station lurched again. This was more serious. She could feel the station in a constant tumbling motion. She phoned Bolly.

‘Caro. Where are you now?’ Bolly was short of breath attempting to hang on to any fittings to hand.

‘I’m on G4.’

‘Stay there. We’ve given up. We’ll try to get to the pods. There must be one left.’

‘There is. Don’t be long.’

Bolly and Pindy found Caro wedged into a blasted doorway for support, the ruptor bag wedged tight by her legs.

‘Bolly,’ she said weakly.

‘Caro. You OK?’

‘I am now.’

‘Give Pindy the ruptor, he’s going to get Anna, but I said she’s probably in the pods.’

‘I wouldn’t have recognised her. Here. Good luck.’ Caro un-slung the ruptor and handed it to Pindy. He lurched on down the corridor.

‘I see you used it.’

‘Yeah. I blasted a couple of the service gang that tried to take one.’

‘Where is the other one?’

‘Gave it to the Pod Master.’ Just then the baby whimpered, loud enough to be heard over the noises of the wobbling station.

‘What’s that?’ said Bolly, looking at the ruptor bag.

‘A baby I collected on the way,’ said Caro. She began to sob. ‘I killed her mother blasting their door open. She must have been working on the lock.’ Tears streamed down her face, sobs racked her body. Bolly grabbed her and buried her face in his chest.

‘Hey. Bad luck. Not your fault. Keep it coming, Caro.’ He tried to quieten her sobs by sheer strength of will as all her pent up emotion released in a flood of remorse. ‘Least the baby’s OK. Let’s get to the pods and call the rescue.’ He put his arm around Caro as much to comfort her as to support her against the erratic spin.

‘We’ll go a different way. The spin will be less this way.’ Bolly did not want to see the carnage on Caro’s original route.

The journey back to the life pods was difficult. Bolly opened the blast doors after securing the Pod Bay from space. They opened a pod and strapped themselves into the flight seats. Caro clutched the baby for mutual support, rocking her and humming to comfort her. Bolly tried to get Pindy on the emergency phone, without success.

He raised the moon base and reported there would be at least one more pod. His phone buzzed.

‘Pindy. Where are you?’ The connection was bad. The station’s infrastructure was literally falling apart with the abnormal forces. ‘Can’t hear you Pindy.’ Bolly shouted slowly and deliberately, hoping Pindy could hear him. ‘We are in one of the pods. There are two pods left.’ The reception suddenly cleared. ‘That’s better. WHAT? Shit. Get out of there. You can do nothing.’ He looked at Caro cuddling the baby. ‘Yes. She’s OK.’ He leaned over and checked the baby’s ident bracelet. ‘Caro’s got her.’ Bolly saw that Caro was oblivious to all that was happening, totally absorbed with the baby. He unstrapped himself and climbed out of the pod.

‘I can’t talk, Pindy. You get here now.’ He listened to Pindy, his eyes moistening with futility. ‘Pindy. Of course we’ll look after her, but you’ll be with us too.’ Bolly’s frown deepened. He clutched the pod door for support. ‘Don’t talk like that. We’ll both get over it. I can help you. Shit, we can help each other.’ The phone link went silent. Bolly keyed Pindy’s number. ‘Shit, Pindy. Answer, damn you.’

He left the phone channel open in case Pindy called back. Wiping his eyes on his overall sleeve, he climbed back into the pod and strapped himself into his seat.

Caro looked up at him and smiled. Bolly waved the phone aimlessly.

‘It’s no use, Caro. I don’t think he’ll get to the pod.’

‘Poor Pindy. Did he find Anna?’ said Caro, looking back to the baby.

‘Yes. Dead. Blasted.’ Bolly looked at the baby in Caro’s arms, fighting back the rising anger and the churning sickness in the pit of his

stomach. He fought the spectre of doubt forming in his mind. 'Tell me that you didn't know Anna's apartment.' Caro looked up sensing the turmoil in his body, just realising what he had said. She silently mouthed the words 'Oh no, oh no' over and over, staring helplessly into Bolly's tortured eyes.

Pindy held Anna's hand tighter than ever as if he could force life back into her body. His tears had gone. His throat was raw with the screams of anguish, also gone. The uncontrollable convulsions were just leaving him. He finally let go of Anna's hand; the remains of her body half floated, half bounced to the opposite side of the apartment in the direction that the weak gravity was pulling at that moment.

He un-slung the ruptor and primed it for use. He knew he could rely on Bolly to cover all the angles. The ruptor's blast spun Pindy's remains across the apartment where he joined Anna in a macabre tumbling heap.

The life pod ejected from the station, its orange hull marking it out from the darkness of the void in which it travelled.

The void inside the pod was darker still.

Three lives depended on the pod's security. Only one of them was totally innocent. Only one of them would remain unspoiled.

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