

He woke with a start.

Something moved.

Or shifted.

Or quaked.

He couldn't explain it.

His head hurt.

Instinctively, he placed his hand to the side of his head where he felt the pain. The hair was matted down with blood. He looked at the floor where his head had been. A small pool of thick red blood with an imprint of his hair was drying on the floor.

He pulled himself over to the wall and propped himself up.

The pain swelled, and he almost passed out again. Laboriously, he turned himself around on the floor. Looking up, he noticed just a small amount of blood on the wall above him. That's where he must have hit his head. Slowly surveying the room, he noticed three heavily padded chairs bolted to the floor. In front of the first was a control console, and beyond that, a large view port which seemed to stare into space. The safety webbing on the chair looked as though it had been broken — no, violently torn apart! What could have caused that kind of stress on the webbing?

From his first impression, if he hadn't known better, he would have sworn he was on a small spacecraft somewhere in space.

As it turned out, he didn't know better. First impressions can often be trusted, and unfortunately he was indeed on a small spacecraft somewhere in space.

"What in the heisch am I doing in space?" he thought to himself. "Where is the pilot of this crazy ship? I hope he isn't badly injured."

His rib cage hurt. His left thigh hurt. He didn't seem to have any broken bones though.

His left wrist hurt.

There was bruising, but it was probably just a bad sprain. Then he noticed the metal I.D. bracelet on his wrist. At that point, he realized he couldn't remember who he was, and decided to have a look at the bracelet. It read: Com. Ambrose X. Vail, C. A. P. I., CLASS I / Instructor, XX1-975-25-2552. In very small print, it read: Global Astronautical Defense Corps.

It must be his own identification tag, since it was on his wrist. Although he didn't yet know (or remember) what it meant. Instructor of what? Was "CLASS I" good, or bad? And what is a "C.A.P.I.?"

He must be in route to some destination to carry out what ever training he was to have instructed.

Ambrose looked at his clothing. It was a uniform. A patch on the right shoulder had a blue and gold symbol of some sort, and proudly displayed the words: "GLOBAL ASTRONAUTICAL DEFENSE CORPS." Above his left pocket were the letters "VAIL." There were other patches and symbols on the suit, but each was as meaningless to him as the next. It would seem that he, Ambrose X. Vail was a member of this para-military outfit called the Global Astronautical Defense Corps. In what capacity? What kind of instructor? He couldn't remember.

He could scarcely remember anything. His recent past, his occupation, even his family and friends were foggy in his mind.

He started to speak, but when he tried, his head swelled with pain. He stopped immediately. His vision faded for a moment while he recovered. Looking around himself, he could see no indication of other beings on the ship.

"I've got to find out what happened," he resolved in his mind.

Slowly, he stood up, and steadying himself on the railings, he made his way to the control console. It was a maze of knobs, switches, and gauges. "Better not touch anything until I find the pilot," he said silently to himself as he gazed around the small room.

There was an air lock to the port side of the ship, next to which was a closet containing four pressure suits. The room had two other chairs fastened to the floor, each at different kinds of consoles. "For other functions," he mused, since they didn't have view ports in front of them. An interior door stood opposite him across the room.

"The pilot must be in there somewhere."

Vail stood, and started straight for it. But the only place he went was straight down. Still being dizzy and dazed with pain, he found he couldn't walk more than a couple steps without holding on to something for support. Quick movements made his head swim. Fortunately, there was railing attached to the wall which went completely around the room. He made use of it.

After several minutes of work, having made it to the other side of the room, he opened the door. It opened into a short hallway with two doors on each side. There was no one in the hallway, and the doors were closed

"God, I hope the pilot isn't dead," he muttered, experimenting with his voice. It still hurt to talk, but it was reassuring to hear his own voice. Besides, he had to locate the pilot.

"Hello?" he said, slightly above a whisper. Then louder, "Hello, is anybody in here?"

Holding on to the railing, he made his way to the first door on his right. It opened automatically as he touched it. It was a sanitary disposal unit. "Head," he muttered. No one there.

The second door on the right turned out to be equally empty of living souls. It was the galley and food stores.

“Two down — two to go,” he grimaced painfully.

He noticed a small hatchway at the end of the hall that said: ENGINE ROOM — DANGER. “Surely not in there,” he thought.

Vail moved on.

Coming back up the hall, the next room had four bunks. No one in them. But then something caught his eye. Only one bunk had personal items next to it. There was only one footlocker!

A knot began to develop in his throat. “It can’t be!” he half muttered aloud. From the doorway, he could see the name, “VAIL” emblazoned on the side of the footlocker. The numbers “XX1-975-25-2552” also could be read.

This was his locker. There was no other in the room.

Backing up in astonishment, without going into the room further, he made his way up the hall to the last room. The door opened. It was the records room, the reference room, the map room, whatever you want to call it. On the desk, a log book was opened. Ambrose Vail made his way to the desk, and began to read.

## **GLOBAL ASTRONAUTICAL DEFENSE CORPS.**

### **MISSION LOG: ASSIGNMENT #1550-239**

Commander Ambrose Xavier Vail, XX1-975-25-2552

Certified Astronautical Piloting Instructor, Class I

Sunday, August 23, 2087 08:00 - Departed Earth Satellite

Station D35-RA90 for covert training mission to be exercised in the

region of Saturn. Am to pick up students on Io, and proceed from there . . . .

He stared in astonishment at the words on the page. "Either this is someone's sick idea of a joke, or —" He read the next several entries, then came to where the log stopped:

Thursday, August 27, 2087 18:32 - will be approaching the asteroid belt soon. Plans are to take the ship above the belt, but close enough to not be detected by the radar. Will attempt to appear as another one of the floating rocks. There seems to be an unusual vibration in the

"In mid sentence, it just stops," his mind reviewed it logically. "Something had happened at just that moment to cause the writer —" Gasping in disbelief he shouted, "What am I saying? I'm the writer!"

Vail looked at the ship's chronometer. It read 870827 2116.09.

It all seemed like a dream. He couldn't remember, and yet, he was the pilot. Not just a pilot either, but one skilled enough to be training others.

What had happened? Just then, he heard a small thump on the outside of the ship, and another. Then a thought occurred to him, "Am I even out of danger yet?"

With as much speed as he could muster, he pulled himself back to the control room just in time to see an asteroid filling the huge screen in front of the control console! The ship was moving rapidly toward it.

He was in the asteroid belt, and yet he didn't know how to steer the ship .

..

. . . he couldn't remember!