

THE LAST FLIGHT OF THE CASSANDRA

A TALE OF
THE **EXPANSE**
BY JAMES
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My name is James Holden and my ship, the *Canterbury*, was just destroyed by a warship with stealth technology and what appear to be parts stamped with Martian Navy serial numbers. Data stream to follow.

"Well," Darius said. "We're fucked."

Amy's voice came up to the flight deck from the galley below. "Are we fucked again, honey?"

With the *Cassandra* on the float, "down" was a convention more than a direction, but Darius had grown up on Earth, and perception is a habit. He saw her as rising up to him. Her hair was in a bun. Her sweat-stained sleeveless undershirt revealed the tree-shaped electrical scar that ran down her left arm. She wasn't his wife, and she wasn't not his wife. Back in Paris, that might have caused problems for their Basic registration forms. Out here on the ship, she was just Amy, and he was just Darius, and what they were to each other didn't need a bureaucrat's stamp.

Darius gestured to the screen with one angry thumb.

"You see this asshole?" he asked, scrolling the feed back to the start of the message. My name is James Holden.

"Sure," Amy said, grabbing onto a handhold and pulling herself to a stop. "It's all over. Everyone's rebroadcasting. What's he to us?"

"He's why we're fucked."

A thin line appeared on Amy's forehead the way it always did when she was getting annoyed. The heat did that. They'd been leaving the ship five degrees warmer and the oxygen mix thinner than usual. It saved money, but it made them all more irritable. All except Lester, who was unchanging in his irritability.

"The *Canterbury*," Darius said. "It's a water hauler."

"Saturn to Ceres," Amy said. "We're not on that run."

"The market's the market. Ceres won't let itself go dry, so it ups the orders from other places. Ships that were heading for Pallas and Vesta go to Ceres. Luna gets in on it. It's straight supply and demand. Less ice on the market means it costs more to fill the tanks."

"We'll be alright," Amy said.

"We won't. We're running at the edge now. There's no more fat we can cut off the budget."

"We have savings," she said, but they both knew they didn't.

The *Cassandra* wasn't a great ship. In truth, she was barely even a good one. A bubble of steel, ceramic, and air with a fussy Epstein Drive and third-rate recycling systems. They called her a rock-hopper, and even that was a shade more dignified than she deserved. But if she had a fatal flaw, it was that she was thirsty. Her heat radiators didn't have the surface area to shed as fast as Darius would have liked. There were other fluids they could have carried to let out onto the ship's skin to evaporate away, but none that they could also use as reaction mass and tea.

And where they worked made things worse.

The Aten asteroids spent most of their time sunward of Earth's orbit, crossing out for a third or a quarter of their time. Sometimes less. They'd been accessible in the first days of humanity's expansion into the void, and so they were some of the first to be mined. The titanium and platinum and nickel-iron had made fortunes that had grown to the

size and power of nations. And some that had withered into shame and history. The push out and out and out into the system—the main belt, the moons of Jupiter and Saturn—had left them behind. But generation by generation, the mining technologies had improved. Now ore that had been exhausted generations before was rich enough for the new techniques to wring out a little more. But only for ships willing to add the sun's punishing light to their drives' waste heat. Sundivers, they were called. It was a good way for a crap ship to grind out enough capital to upgrade. It was also a good way to fail out. Or get killed.

Amy looked away. A sheen of tears covered her eyes, and she grabbed a strap of undershirt to wick them away.

"Get the others, will you?" Darius said, more gently. "I think we need to have a talk."

"Yeah," she said. "All right."

She pushed herself back down in a spiral that put her back to him. He was sorry now that he'd led with his despair. Usually he was better at waiting for his own private darkness to pass before he brought Amy into it. The news had caught him unawares.

The rest of the crew were just Lester and Abril. The four of them living in a space smaller than the flat he and Amy had taken in Paris. He stretched and yawned. The heat in the flight deck was sapping his energy. The breeze from the air recyclers was slow and weak. The thinness of the air put an ache behind his eyes that he knew from experience wouldn't leave until they pumped more oxygen into the system. Which they could get by splitting some water, if they'd had any to spare.

He heard Lester and Amy below him. The concern in the man's voice, the sharp humor in the woman's. And Abril's accented murmur like music. He didn't want to do this.

The *Cassandra* had been a fluke for him. A dream. He'd been living on Basic in a suburb of Paris, spending his days sleeping and his nights playing drums—actually ancient plastic buckets turned mouth-down—with a street band. He and Amy had used the tips to buy cheap marijuana cigarettes from the drugstore dispensers and smoke them with her friends. For Darius, it had felt like having all the time in the world and no time at all. Every day a day where nothing happened except you had one fewer. He'd felt like he was drowning.

And then his parents had both died in the same wreck. They'd left him a bank account with actual money, a two-bedroom house in Bangui, and a choice—uproot his life in Paris and go back to live out his days in the same house he'd been in as a child, or sell the house and live off the money until it was gone and he could go back on the Basic rolls.

He had taken a third option. Two tickets to Luna, a down payment on a used rock-hopper, and a call for crew who might keep the ship alive long enough to turn a profit. He'd wanted to name his new ship the Icarus, but it turned out that every sundiver with their eyes on the Aten and Apollo asteroids had the same idea. There were over two hundred ships already named some variation of Icarus. So they'd named it for Amy's baby sister. He learned later that *Cassandra* was also pulled from mythology, but he'd never gotten around to reading the story.

And just like that, the nature of his life had changed. There were probably thousands of other things he could have done with his inheritance,

but this was the one he'd chosen. If he'd gone to Luna, then he'd be eking out meals and a bed there. If he'd joined up with a ship he didn't own, he'd have been out in the black somewhere. Maybe dead with the *Canterbury*. If he'd left Amy behind, he'd be waking up next to someone else or no one. His life was defined by all the paths he didn't take. And yet somehow, he'd picked the one that had this meeting in it.

Lester was an older man—gray, close-cut hair and pale skin with a scattering of freckles. Abril was Amy's age, with a musical voice, straight black hair, and a strong aversion to being touched. That she was half a meter taller than any of the rest of them and that her head was just a little out of proportion had stopped being strange to Darius months ago. He looked at her and instead of thinking Belter, he thought Abril. That, he thought, was what being a crew meant.

"Que kennst?" Abril asked Darius as he pulled himself into the tiny galley they used as a meeting room. He silently translated it. What's on your mind? Lester, scowling, looked like he already knew, and Amy wouldn't meet his eyes. The heat of the ship was like being locked in a sauna.

"You all know how thin the last runs were," Darius said. "Well, we caught another bad bounce. With water prices going up, I don't see how we make another run and stay safe. We're already late replacing the microfilters. And every drink of sour water reminds me we ought to have flushed the H2O reclamation feed lines last time we were in port. Even if we make the docking fees. . ."

He sighed. He was dancing around it. Better to say the words and be done.

"This is our last run. When we get back to Luna, I'm putting the *Cassandra* up for sale. I've looked at the going rates, and I can't make enough to break even. So this. . . is going to be it. I'm sorry."

His crew didn't say anything. Not even Amy. He pulled himself up to the flight deck and watched newsfeeds for the rest of the shift without really seeing anything. He'd dreamed of making a go of prospecting. Enough money to upgrade the ship or trade it for a new one. Something robust enough to head out for the Jovian moons, maybe. Try his luck in the mainline belt. And now that wouldn't happen. All those possible futures, cut away. His life redefined again. Another path he didn't take.

He left them there to grieve together while he grieved alone.

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"What if we found clean ice?" Lester said. "Pure enough we could process it on the ship? I mean, yes, it would mean buying new filters a little sooner, but look at how much we'd save, yeah? Drop our overhead that much, and we could afford at least two more runs. And safely."

Lester's machine shop was hardly more than a wide spot in the hall down near the reactor, but he'd made it his own. The gray metal work stool was painted with emerald-green flowers on silver vines. The drawers and tool shelves were engraved with complex designs. Whatever else Lester might be, he was an incorrigible artist.

Darius folded his arms across his chest like he could hold in the ache. "You have something in mind?"

Lester grinned and pulled up the familiar map of the Aten asteroids. The first time Darius had looked at it, it had felt like watching snow. Now, he saw the patterns in it. Lester shifted the display, lighting up and darkening whole arcs of stone and ore, until only one remained.

"Xi-Mallow 434," Lester said.

It was a small marble of a rock. Not technically an Aten, since it never crossed Earth's orbit. It didn't even make it out as far as Venus.

"It's locked," Lester said. "Always the same face to the sun. Which means always the same face away from it too. Shadowed. If there were ice on the back end of that, it would stay there forever. And looking

at visual—" The display jumped. A black dot caught against the sun's corona, pulled up and enhanced until the details hidden in the darkness came clear. "That looks glacial to me."

"How far?"

"It's not perfect," Lester said, "It'll mean a two-day burn to match orbit. But we can do it if we skip 19-Daedelus. Just swap them out on the schedule and change our angle a little before we light the drive up. It's not that big a deal."

Darius felt hope stealing into his chest like an assassin. He shook his head. "No. Free water just sitting here, waiting for someone to come along? People have been scraping at these stones for generations. No way they leave that sitting there all this time."

"That's what I thought," Lester said. "But look. Most of the work gets done closer to Earth orbit. This one never gets that far. It's almost a vulcanoid."

"Still," Darius said. "It has to be high-albedo silicates or something. Not ice."

"And . . ." Lester looked away. Darius felt the hair on his arms stand up.

"And?"

"It's under UNN military quarantine," Lester said. "It has been for a hundred and sixty years. All the prospecting lists neglect it. It doesn't even show up as an option."

"Military. Quarantine."

"You never served, Dar," Lester said. "You don't understand. You think military means well-regulated, controlled, everything buttoned down. I did my twenty, and I'm telling you it's not like that. You heard the story about the guard and the bench?"

"The what?"

Lester waved a hand like he was erasing something. "Old story. It goes like this. There's a fort that gets a new commander. Guy comes in, and he tours the place, and in the middle of the yard, there's this old bench with a guard stationed beside it. Every shift, the guard changes. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Rain, snow, or storm. Doesn't matter. There's always a guard there. So the new commander gets curious. Looks into the records to see why. What is it about this bench that it needs that much attention.

"It takes him weeks to find it, but he does. Fifteen years before, someone painted the bench and the commander put a guard there to make sure no one sat on the wet paint. No one ever rescinded the order. Everyone just forgot." Lester grinned. "That's what it's like. Things fall through the cracks all the time. Always. And this is one like that. I can feel it."

Darius felt the objections rising up in him like bubbles in a beer. Even if Lester was right, other ships might have broken the quarantine and hauled off any good ice decades before. Or maybe there was no good ice. Or maybe the whole place was lined with decaying nukes set by someone's paranoid great-grandfather and just waiting for anyone to touch the tripwire. All the reasons not to. And the one argument in favor: that Lester had thought of all the same things and still wanted to try. That the *Cassandra* meant enough to his crew that they'd take a risk for it. And if Lester would, how could Darius do less?

"Let's figure a course," he said. "Then we take it to Amy and Abril. No pressure, no persuasion. Just lay out the option, and if anyone balks, we don't. Agreed?"

Lester grinned. "Unanimous or nothing."

It wasn't nothing.

The burn was designed not for speed or comfort, but to minimize waste heat. Even then, they agreed to let the internal temperature rise another half degree rather than spend the water to cool the ship, and the recyclers were doing their best to keep the ambient humidity low.

Darius sat in his couch, sweating, and his dreams weren't about wealth or freedom. They were about winter mornings along the Seine and the feeling of ice cubes against his lips. The sounds of the ship changed with every degree of temperature rise as heat expansion changed the tensions and altered how the ship fit together. As soon as they had their orbit set in, Abril shut down the reactor. Even the radiative heat from the sun kept the ship's temperature ticking slowly upward. A point would come, Darius knew, when they'd have gone too far, where the balance of heat and water would mean that all the paths back to Luna ended with them baked to death in their couches. There wouldn't be a warning, either. They could sail past the point of no return without noticing it if they weren't careful. Whenever there was nothing else to do, Darius ran the numbers and planned his exit strategies.

Xi-Mallow 434 was a dot of black, but it grew larger as they got close. At its farthest point from the sun, it was still well inside the orbit of Venus. The solar disk felt oppressive and huge. The braking burn meant taking the temperature up another degree. Even if there was no ice, there would be shadow. Darius felt himself growing hungry for just a little darkness to park the ship in. He had the irrational certainty that the *Cassandra's* heat sinks would melt, fuse, and lose their surface area.

The braking burn was short and harsh. The supply of reaction mass dropped quickly, the heat rose fast, and Darius watched, unable to affect anything. Then Abril shut the reactor down again, and they were on the float and moving into the pencil-thin shadow of the asteroid. Darius pulled up the external cameras in time to see the silhouette of Xi-Mallow 434 against the vastness of the sun. A dead-black iris in a vast and burning eye. In his baking-hot ship, he shuddered.

"I've got a few places for a decent dock," Amy said. "I'm not seeing any structures, but there are some flat spots we could anchor on."

"Let's take this slow," Darius said. "Coming out all this way to heat shock the hull would be a stupid way to die."

"Dychanie lloga es," Abril said cheerfully. It was a Belter idiom about the transience of life. Darius thought it literally meant "breath is rented".

"Lester?" Darius said. "Make me happy."

"Be happy. That out there? It's not silicates. It may be a little dusty, but it's ice."

Darius closed his eyes, relief flooding into him. "Amy, pick a mooring spot. We'll let the ship cool down before we snuggle up and spill a little heat—"

"Conduction!" Amy sang out like a victory cry.

"—and let's go do a little prospecting. Lester and Abril, meet me in the airlock."

He undid his straps, pulled himself up from his couch. Amy grinned at him, and he pulled himself in to kiss her. Her lips were salty.

"Keep the comms up too," he said softly. "If the UNN starts coming for us, I'd like to be someplace else."

She made a mock salute. Humming merrily to herself, she went back to mapping possible landing sites on the asteroid, and he went to the airlock. The others were already waiting. It took an hour to get all their equipment together—suits, kits, core samplers—and by then Amy had picked a place for them. It was flat, and the stone had been melted at some point recent enough from a geological perspective that the cooled surface was stable.

Once the *Cassandra* was in place, Darius cycled the lock and they went out. It had been a while since he'd heard Abril and Lester through the suit radios instead of the shipboard air, and the thinness of their voices reassured him. When they sounded like this, it meant they were working, and working meant things were going right.

The gravity of the asteroid was hardly more than a suggestion. A strong jump would have been enough for them to part company with

it for longer than their air supplies would last, so they moved slowly. The suits all had compressed gas thrusters, but they'd learned not to rely on them.

Darius' first priority was the ice. If the asteroid itself had ore worth hauling, that would be good, rationally speaking. But there was something in the back of Darius' mind that made scraping a little ice off the surface of an asteroid under quarantine feel less dangerous than collecting ore. As if one substance was somehow morally different from another.

"It's not bad," Lester said. "But it's not dense either."

They were a few hundred meters from the *Cassandra* where Amy had brought it to rest. With the sun hidden by the asteroid, it was as dark here as in the depths of space beyond Neptune. Darius played his worklight over the pale crust around them.

"It's castoff," Darius said. "All of this around here. The formations over the horizon might have been here naturally, but this is all either steam from drives or native ice that was heated to steam, cooled, and recollected here."

"It's clean, anyway," Lester said. "We can use it. Fill the tanks and more with all this to work from."

"Coyos?" Abril said in Darius' ear though she was nowhere in sight. There was something in her voice that dropped adrenaline into his blood.

"We're here," Darius said. "Where are you?"

In response, Abril turned on her locator. The cheap heads-up display in Darius' suit pointed him to the far side of the ship and down into a split in the stone body of the asteroid. Long streaks in the frost-like ice showed where Abril had gone. Darius gave in to fear and used his suit's thrusters, driving himself deeper into the fissure. Lester flew at his side, a little slower.

"Abril?" Darius said. "Tell me you're alright?"

"Bist bien," she said, but her voice had a strange tone. Like she was looking at a puzzle she didn't know how to solve.

The fissure bit deeper into the stone than he had expected. The rough sides spoke to a natural formation. Mining would have been smoother and more controlled. Ahead of him and below, Abril's work light glimmered.

And something ahead of her glimmered back.

At the bottom of the fissure was an airlock. The outer doors were half open. The steel frame set into the natural, unworked stone was polished and smooth. Only a thin layer of dust served to dim its mirror finish. Darius braked hard, the jet of nitrogen kicking up fines and dust and tiny crystals of ice like fog rising from a river.

"Lester?" Darius said. "What am I looking at?"

"No idea," Lester said.

Slowly, Abril moved forward, her work light shining into the lock. The inner doors were open too. Darius scanned infrared, but nothing rose above the ambient cold of the stone. Whatever this place had been, someone had vented it intentionally, and a long time ago.

"We sure this is a good idea?" Darius said on the open channel.

"Are we sure what is?" Amy said from the ship, but Abril had already moved inside the lock.

Darius and Lester exchanged a look. "One of us should stay outside," Lester said. "Just in case."

Darius lifted a hand in agreement and moved forward. In the micro-gravity, he had the uncanny sensation that he was falling down into the airlock like it was a pit. Or a grave. Inside, Abril's worklight was playing over a wide chamber. The walls had been insulated once, but the foam had broken down over time, leaving long strips that had drifted to the floor. The bare stone was polished and worked. The fissure that led here might have been natural, but the chamber had been created. Abril pulled

herself along the wall, and Darius followed, his thrusters off to keep from stirring up more dust. His breath sounded unnaturally loud in his ears.

"Ah," Abril said. "Vise la."

"I am looking."

"No," Abril said, pointing forward. "La."

Thirteen figures were sitting in a semicircle, legs folded beneath them. Their vac suits were all a dusty red color, plasticized fabric that had broken down over decades. The helmets were swept back and weirdly aerodynamic, like something out of a history book on the first days of terraforming. All of them had holstered side arms at their hips and military insignia that Darius didn't recognize. For a few long breaths, he thought the suits were empty, but then his light passed over a faceplate, and the corpse inside it stared out. Gray, desiccated flesh. Sunken, empty eyes. Everything that made a human except for water and life. Abril moved forward slowly, letting her feet drift down to the chamber floor. There were nameplates on the suits. Hoffmann. Gutierrez. Dahl. And ten more beyond them. The ancient dead.

"What the hell is this?" Darius said, as much to himself as to anyone.

Abril agreed with a hand gesture, then looking up, said, "Y que es la?"

Her work light angled up. There, suspended from the wall, was a thick rectangle of dark ceramic. An ancient storage container. The circle and arrow symbol for masculinity stood out in silver and blue, and what looked like three ideograms in a form Darius didn't know. A seam ran around its edge, making it seem like a great, still sarcophagus.

The semicircle of the dead faced it, as if the end had caught them all in a final and terrible act of worship.

"Ah. Well. Could be a number of things," Lester said.

They were back in the *Cassandra*. All four of them in the galley again. The three of them who'd gone outside were still wearing their vac suits, and it made the space feel smaller. Tighter. The dust of Xi-Mallow they'd tracked inside smelled like gunpowder. Darius almost never felt the claustrophobic sense of being buried alive that he'd suffered when they first started flying, but it was tickling at him now.

"A number of things," Amy echoed. It came across as skepticism, but Darius has known her long enough to tell it was only not knowing what else could be said.

"Yes," Lester said. "Could be a religious cult. There were several of those on Mars in the early days. Or this could have been a secret research facility. Mars was all about that back in the day." Then a moment later, "Still is, probably."

"If it's Martian," Amy said, "why's this place under UNN quarantine?"

"When was the Epstein Drive invented?" Darius said. "Did those people in there. . . Did they get here in a flying teakettle? Old chemical rockets, maybe? And what killed them? I mean, they were there to die. You saw how the lock was forced. They were all in suits, and they just sat there and died."

Abril waved a hand like she was shooing away all the questions. "Ab que im eske, sa sa?" But what's in it? She meant the black storage container.

"It has a label on it," Lester said. "The Mars sign, and the writing."

"Mars sign?" Darius asked.

"The circle and arrow. It's an old symbol for Mars."

"Thought it was the old symbol for the pisser you could use standing up," Amy said, but the joke had an overheated quality. Like there was fear behind it.

Lester nodded, and Darius didn't see fear in him, but a growing curiosity. "And the ideograms. . . there was a lot of Chinese influence on Mars at the beginning."

"And these are the traditional Chinese families of Dahl and Hoffmann?" Darius said.

Lester looked hurt. "I didn't say I knew what it was. I said it could be a number of things. But it doesn't matter what it was then. Not really. The point is what it is now. And we do know that." He looked around at them all solemnly. "That thing is our ticket out. We know that, right? Whatever that thing is, it's immediately convertible to money. We put it in the hold, haul it back to Luna. A few words in the right ears, and we'll have buyers lining up. We might even get a bidding war."

Darius knew this was coming, and even so it shocked him a little to hear it said out loud. That he already had arguments for and against the plan—What if it's a nuke? It's been stable here for over a century. We don't have to open it.—told him how much he'd already been thinking about it. About saving the *Cassandra*. His inheritance from his parents. The path he'd chosen. After all, they'd come here trying to get enough water for one more run. This was that hopeful impulse answered a thousandfold. If they left it here. . .

With the ship laid down against the stone, microgravity pulled him gently toward the wall. The others all looked at him like they were expecting a pronouncement. He pulled up the ship's stats. Since they'd made contact, the *Cassandra* had dumped so much waste heat into the asteroid that life support was adding heat to the living space now. If he listened, he could hear the ship ticking to itself as it cooled and contracted. He loved the ship, and he loved the people on it. He felt the weight of his dreams and aspirations on his shoulders, stronger than the actual pull of gravity.

He took Amy's hand, running his thumb along her scars by long, affectionate habit. "Get the drive up. And a path to Luna."

"Yes!" Lester said. "I'll slap together a loading mech and have that thing out in—"

"Anybody who leaves the ship stays here," Darius said. "We're getting out now."

Lester sputtered. "But. . . I mean, the water—"

"Fuck the water," Darius said. "Get us a path to Luna. As soon as we're clear of this place, I'll put in for a berth and an indigence auction. Whatever we get, we split four ways."

Amy squeezed his fingers. "Babe, are you sure?"

"We can get work on Luna," he said. "Maybe we can crew up on some other ship. Find a captain who knows what they're doing, maybe."

He tried out a smile, and the power behind it wasn't sorrow. Or at least it wasn't only sorrow.

"Dar," Lester said, cajoling.

"You want to come back here, Lester," Darius said, "I can't stop you. But the answer now is no. Everyone go make ready. I want to get out of here in the next two hours."

There was a moment of silence in the galley while the others caught up to where Darius already was. Abril lifted an acknowledging hand and Lester nodded. They pulled themselves out of the galley, and a moment later, he heard the unmistakable sounds of them pulling off and stowing their vac suits. He was still holding Amy's hand. He looked into her eyes. He'd been afraid to see tears in them, but they were dry. After a moment, she squeezed his fingers again, and hauled herself toward the flight deck. Darius took a silent moment alone in the galley.

He didn't know what would come next. How he would make his living once the *Cassandra* was gone. Lester and Abril with it. Probably he'd still be with Amy, but that was her choice to make, and he was never perfectly sure. But whatever it was, it wouldn't be what it could have been if he'd made the other decision. His life was defined by all the paths he didn't take.

And the mistakes he avoided.