

Stone Fever

EREBUS TALES: Book I

Norman Westhoff



IGUANA

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This is the second edition of *Stone Fever*.

Although I started writing this story before any of my grandchildren were born, it has always been with them in mind:

Olivia Reed Senter Paul Martin Westhoff Daisy Elizabeth Senter Luther Reed Westhoff Catherine June Senter

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Rough Landing

I'm sardined into the left back seat of the Bailey Voyager. It's a good thing I'm short; this cell they call a cockpit is way too tight to fit four people. And these overstuffed flight suits — I feel like a mummy in a marshmallow. Still, I'm the newbie — Keltyn SparrowHawk, rock-smith savant — and they didn't ask me when they designed this craft.

Buck Kranepool, our big pilot, likes to boast about aeronautical advances of the past four centuries, but ask him why cockpit innovation hasn't kept pace and he'll just mutter. He's parked directly in front of me, yet all I can see of him is a wave of blond hair. He's taken advantage of the legroom I don't need to push his seat backward and hog more for him.

The view of my fellow-scientist Orfea Del Campo is no better. Fay sits right next to me, a fellow mummy. Aside from her marshmallow cocoon all that shows are her gray-tinged auburn curls. She peers out her window, lost in thought. She's got a lot riding on this mission — her reputation, perhaps her whole career as an anthropologist — yet you sure couldn't tell now. It's like she's in a trance.

The only person whose features I can see is the other front seat occupant, kitty-corner from me. His profile is telling: double chin, receding curly gray hairline, gold-rimmed dialups. That's Harry Ladou, our crew chief. Mr. Suave Quebecois. Pet name for me: "*ma chère*." He, too, seems to be in a daze until Buck turns to him.

"Funny how we've lost radio contact with the Space Station. No big deal now, but I'm gonna have to check that out once we land." From the way he keeps tapping the dead radio connection, I suspect Buck is more worried than he's letting on, but his voice stays as smooth as silk. "Soon as we find the site matching this spot on the simulator, I'll slow 'er down and open the vertical landing gear."

Ten minutes elapse in silence. Unsettled, I find myself staring out the window too. Whizzing over the endless water below makes me dizzy. Gradually, the flat blue turns to waves, lapping up to the beaches of Antarctica.

Buck makes a few adjustments on the console, then sits back. "Now let the processor do the steering." He aims another speech at Harry. "First thing you learn in flight school, never trust your sensory cues. Mess you up every time. Vestibular disruption. Four hundred years of manned flight, but amateur pilots still crash when they forget that. You've got to curb your instincts and rely on your instruments."

Someone who didn't know Buck's track record might call that bragging, but this guy is a test pilot. He's walked away from more than one near-crash after a new gadget malfunctioned.

We approach a mountain. I recognize the domed shape with the saddle on one side: it's Erebus, our destination. By craning my neck, I can see a mark on our route console, a flat spot to the right of the mountain. That's the landing spot I picked, back in Canada when we planned this mission. I've never been anywhere near here, but then, neither have the others. The newbie gets

to choose the target because a geologist is supposed to know about different terrains. I better be right; there weren't any other options.

Are we really here? Seems like we should have to pass through a time warp or something. I squeeze my cheek, just to make sure I'm not dreaming. Buck eases up on the throttle. When the plane gets to within five miles, he pulls a grip.

"Speed throttle, vertical stabilizer. In a few minutes we should point straight upward, right at the moment of zero velocity. Fire retro rockets for ten seconds while the VLG deploys, and bingo, the proverbial soft landing for Bailey Voyager." Buck peeks over his shoulder. "Harnesses, y'all."

I snap together the metal clamps that secure my body to the seat and take a deep breath; two years of prep have come down to this moment.

The ship reaches her climactic vertical position, poised just as it was at liftoff. Buck pushes one button to keep airborne before flipping the VLG switch.

Then... nothing happens. "No display on the panel." Buck angles one ear. "I should hear the hydraulics, even if the panel sensor is out."

There's no sound at all.

"Damn," says Buck.

Uh-oh. I hate it when your pilot says damn. A damn from him

packs a lot more weight than if someone like me says it. We're so close to touchdown that I can already feel my boots crunch on the rocks, and now Buck can't get his friggin' plane to sit on its fanny.

Buck's tone rises. "The vertical landing gear won't deploy. It worked when we docked at the Space Station." He flips the switch again. Nothing. He turns to Harry. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Human factors?"

"But how?" Buck mulls over this possibility. "I didn't leave the hangar the whole time we were docked. Maybe it's just radio frequency jamming from all that static earlier."

"So, what's next?" The chief's voice cracks.

"If this were a flat surface, preferably paved, I might try to land vertically by cutting the retro rockets slowly."

Harry, Fay, and I each peer out our windows again. It's late in the day; visibility is dropping, it's hard to see details, and anyway, we all just want to get out of our marshmallow suits and stretch our legs. To say nothing of other bodily functions.

Buck better pull us through, because he's the only one who can. I start to feel it, the sensation that always hits me when I'm utterly powerless: I'm engulfed to my chest, arms flailing, as I'm pulled down by quicksand. My lips start to tingle. I have to slow my breathing.

Buck seems to know what we're all thinking. "Forget it, you guys. I'm not going to risk it. Too steep. We'd fall on our collective fanny. Not lethal, but believe me, not pretty either. Might damage the shell. We'd burn up on the way home."

"Okay," says Harry. "You've talked me out of it. What's your contingency plan?"

"In the good old days, before VLG's and vertical stabilizers, we used to do a plain old horizontal landing. They even built wheels into Bailey Voyager's landing gear, just in case. One small problem, mates."

"What's that, Buck?" Harry rubs his temples.

"We need a runway."

Harry forces a smile through clenched teeth. "Maybe the folks

here heard we were coming and built one." He peers over his shoulder at me, wondering if I'll bite. I don't. He can't see Fay behind him. I suspect his attempt at humor was really aimed at her.

Fay closes her eyes, shakes her head. "You're a hoot, Harry."

Buck turns halfway around. "Look sharp, everyone. We're gonna make it. Just keep an eye out for a few hundred yards of reasonably flat terrain, preferably bare."

You've gotta love Buck. I wonder if positive psychology is part of their flight school training. He eases back to a horizontal axis, while keeping the retro rockets on full. After a minute, the engine kicks in and the plane again inches forward. Daylight is fading fast. Buck turns a knob and the nose projects a bright headlight. He steers a spiral course around the perimeter of Mt. Erebus, gradually widening the radius with each lap, searching for a place to land. We're barely skimming the ground.

I brace for the worst. With light failing, what if a steep hill shows up? Buck won't be able to do anything until it's too late.

I hope the others can't tell how wildly my heart pounds. *Wait a minute.* I lean forward to tug on Buck's shoulder and point below to the left. Two miles away, a wide, shallow pocket indents the flat scrub terrain. It looks to be about a mile in diameter.

"I think it's a crater," my voice croaks. "They generally don't have much growing in them."

"Score one for Missy," says Buck. "Wide enough, flat enough. The question for our wunderkind is, how smooth? Lots of rocks, we're liable to puncture a tire."

I do a quick mental inventory of crater surfaces.

"If you're not sure, Missy, just say so. I can do a vertical landing in the dark if we have to," Buck says.

"No, it'll be smooth enough for the tires," I blurt. Why do I sound so certain when I'm just guessing? I should have studied maps of the wider terrain beforehand, not just Erebus. But hell, who could have predicted this quandary?

“You’re sure?” The edge in Buck’s voice feels like he’s staring me down, even though he can’t see my face.

“Yup. Go for it.” I try to sound confident.

“Everyone ready?” Buck looks around at the others. Harry nods, but his eyes jump hither and yon. He grits his teeth as he grabs the door handle with his right hand and the seat frame with his left. Fay nods too, but her cheeks have turned a pale gray. Eyes still closed, hands clamped together across her chest, she silently mutters what must be a prayer.

I grasp the handholds on the back of Buck’s seat, my lips clenched.

“Here we go.” Buck pushes another switch. The humming noise of landing wheel hydraulics brings forth a “Yes!” He eases up on the speed throttle and pulls the nose into a slight uptilt.

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 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 takeoff. Then...” My

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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.

We set up our two tents in the dark and make Buck comfortable. Now that Harry is over his initial panic, he has taken to giving me a sullen stare whenever our eyes meet. I think he blames me for the mess we’re in. Get over it, Harry. Stuff happens, especially when you’re out in the middle of nowhere.

Fay avoids any conversation. She's usually upbeat, so her silence bothers me more than Harry's stare.

As we settle in, I'm left to wonder if the break in sound transmission to the Space Station has anything to do with the VLG malfunction. Planned together, or just coincidence? Did my Chinese contacts have anything to do with this? If so, I've been set up.

I try to shrug off our predicament. This mission is the chance of a lifetime. I'll find a way to Erebus, even if I have to hike.