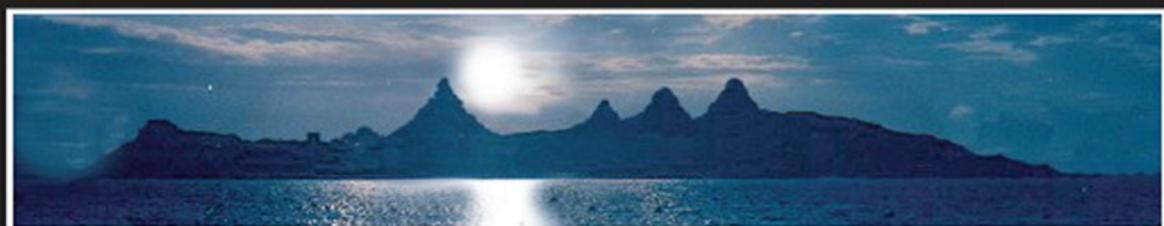


# SHAZALAT



THE ISLAND OF SLAVES

Colbby

# Shazalat

Book 1:

The Island of Slaves Series

By

Colbby



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# Shazalat

## Chapter 1

### *The Academy*

The list was up and everyone made a rush to the notice board. Jay was one of the last to hear the call and although he was a big boy he couldn't get near to see if his name was present. An excited babble of noise greeted him as the other boys shouted 'yes' in triumph or groaned with disappointment as their names were either on or missing from the little piece of paper that so many hopes were resting upon.

The crowd of boys suddenly thinned and Jay could now get to the notice board. He anxiously scanned the list of these who had applied for training to be technicians and then he saw his name, he had made it. He was just twelve years old and had been selected to train for the position of technician on board the Ark 11 the only space ship being built at the moment.

The year was 2619 and it was over 200 years ago since a new earth like planet had been found and the first probes were sending back information. The new spaceships were equipped with all the latest technology including the new faster than light drives, but even so it took many years to reach the planet and young men would be old men if they travelled there and back, but now a type of suspended animation had been invented and it didn't need everyone to be awake as the ship travelled through space but could run with just a few men. Now that Jay had been selected his education would be slanted towards the systems being built on board the ship and in the final selection just six technicians would be on board for the journey, two to be awake and the other four asleep waiting for their turn to awake and look after the systems.

The Ark was being built at a huge complex at Moon Base 2. This was where all the parts of the ship were collected in one place before they were sent into space to be assembled into the ship. When the hull was complete and the fitting out started Jay would be trained to go into space and help. His task now was to learn about every piece of equipment and know how to change it should it fail or repair it on site. There were ten boys training for six places and each one was determined to be aboard when the time came to blast off into deep space. Jay retired to his little room that he had been assigned and lay down on his bed gazing at a poster of the first ship to have undertaken the trip. The first ship was sending reports back of a wonderful planet and so more and bigger ships were built.

The second ship was nearly there but the third ship had disappeared and nobody knew what had happened to it. It was fitted with transponders that should have sent signals back to Earth but nothing had been located.

Ark 11 was named after the first ship and carried frozen embryos to help colonise the planet. The ships were now so big at over a thousand metres long that it took ten years to design and build and during that time nearly all the equipment would change as new components were invented and so if the boys weren't chosen for the Ark it was too late to be trained for the next ship.

The bell sounded out its shrill message that it was time to resume lessons. After the excitement of the list nobody wanted to sit in a classroom and study but he didn't have an option. Reluctantly he rose and picked up his books and joined the other boys but his mind wasn't on his work. In the

evening he went to the academy's sports field and pounded around the track, but he was still thinking of space and also of how he would have felt if his name hadn't been one of the chosen.

The next day was a Saturday and Jay was down to play in a football match but only in a friendly sort of way as the boy's were closely watched to prevent any serious accidents from cutting their career's short. It was also the date of his parents death in a space tragedy when a shuttle taken them back to their home on the planet Mars, had suddenly blown up leaving him alone and under government care. After the match Jay made his way to the small church and sat in one of the pews. It wasn't that he was religious but that is usually one place where you could get a little peace and quiet.

Jay was thinking of how he missed them and what would they think now that he was on the training programme. He could picture his dad proudly stating his name to all who were around. John Charles Augustus Blackburn he would state. Now there's a name to be reckoned with but why with a grand sounding name like that did he call his son Jay? Oh dad, I do miss you, he thought.

During the next year things began to change. At first it was only small things such as a course in basic electronics was started and more emphasis on his fitness and training in the gym with weights. But as he neared his thirteenth birthday he was given problems with circuits that had faults and told to find a way around the problem, his training for the Ark had begun. Every week more equipment was brought to the classroom and he had to find out what its purpose was and how to repair it. The ordinary schoolwork was now secondary to his training. Then a sudden announcement was made as the boys were told to pack as they were going to the large moon base where, because the hull of the ship was ready, the fitting out would begin and Jay was to be one of the fitting out crew.

Jay's class were three months behind the engineers in going into space and to the moon. The first task was to install the Rayners gravity device that made it possible for the ship to have its own gravity force, a device only newly invented and installed on the third ship, the ship that had mysteriously disappeared. A rumour started that the device had blown up and caused the ship to disappear but then it was only a rumour and couldn't be proved. The big nuclear engines were ready to be blasted from the base to the ship and thousands of computer circuits were waiting for cabling before they could follow.

Jay was making good progress with his space training, as part of his work would be installing the equipment outside the ship under supervision. They used the boys because only they would be going on the journey except for the very senior officers and the supervisors reckoned that if the boys had built the components and then something went wrong while they were in space, then they would better understand how to put things right.

One of the boys suffered from space sickness and was taken back to Earth as the rest boarded a shuttle to begin the trip to the ship that hopefully would be his home throughout the coming years.

The ship started as a thousand metre long trellis of metal and carbon fibre. Another thousand metre long trellis faced it and then the two were joined to form a box girder. The engines were built and attached to one end and the bridge to the other but both the engines and bridge were built in two separate halves so that if anything were to damage part of the ship the other half could split off and continue the journey. The crew too would be doubled with one of the same job in each section. The bridge had heavy shielding to protect it on the trip with an array of cameras and antenna bristling in every direction. When the outer casing was finally finished the whole bridge was pressurised to allow the personnel access to begin the installation work. With the crews working around the clock it took four months to finish. The final phase was the fitting of pods that would

surround the box girder. These were separate sets of rooms set like peas in a pea pod. At each corner of the girder two struts had been attached and at the end of the strut a pod was bolted. A little way further down more pods were attached and so on all the way down to the engines. The only thing left was to fuel the ship and fill the pods with all the various stores that would be needed for a new world.

As the pods had been fitted out at moon base Jays class were given a last holiday back on earth to rest and then learn who would be selected to crew the Ark. He had been in the base for almost two years and now back on Earth the extra gravity felt as though he was carrying around a heavy weight on his back.

As he hadn't any family he remained in the academy to spend his leave going for walks in the woods or playing squash with one of the professors in the gym until he was once more fit and well ready for anything the world could throw at him. It was just before his sixteenth birthday when the selection would be made. Two of the boys were whiz kids on the main computers and it was presumed that they would be almost certain to be chosen. Two more were the best at working in space and that only left two places for five boys. The selection panel met to choose the last two and Jay was lucky as the professor with whom he had played squash was on the panel and although it wasn't suggested that playing squash with Jay would influence him, it wouldn't hurt his chance.

The list was up and this time there wasn't a rush to see who was on it as everyone knew that it was so important that nobody wanted to fear the worst. Jay finally strolled over hardly daring to look. His eyes followed the names until right at the bottom of the list he saw the words Jay Blackburn. With relief and a feeling that an intense pressure had been lifted from his shoulders he made his way out of the room to the chapel where he could be alone as at this moment he didn't want to speak to anyone.

One week later a farewell party was thrown for the boys who hadn't made it. They were offered positions on moon base 2 to train as instructors to help build the next ship and they were due to return to the moon the next day. Jay had another week before he and the rest of the class returned to help fit all the pods and finalise the finishing of the Ark.

It was naming time when the Ark would be handed over as ready to go on her way. Jay was nearly sixteen and had been assigned his pod where he could put a few personal possessions such as books and photographs in digital form around his bed. He was given a week off work as he had to go to the dentist and have all his teeth extracted and new ceramic teeth screwed into his jaw. This was necessary as the suspended animation called Static, rotted teeth on long trips and he wouldn't want to wake up with bad teeth.

The high up people in government and the top men in the team of builders were all there gathered in the bridge area for the ceremony although the champagne bottle would be broken inside the ship as it was thought too dangerous to break it outside where shards of glass might float around and puncture the suit of a spaceman. After the rites were finished the only thing left was to bring aboard the food and the frozen embryos that would be the start of a new population on New Earth as the planet was now being called. When all was ready a huge party was thrown for all the builders and crew and then the crew went back to the ship to begin the countdown when every component would be checked and the engines then fired.

The day finally came to leave the world behind and begin the long journey into deep space. All of the crew were at their designated places on board and each one would be making sure that everything was in order. Jay was in the bridge monitoring all the systems from various consoles.

At twelve noon moon time the captain gave the order and Jay felt a very small vibration as the big nuclear engines burst into life and they were away. Everyone watched as the Earth and moon were left behind as the ship gathered speed. It would take three weeks to reach their top speed faster than the speed of light that was required to travel to another system and only then would the engines be shut down. After four hours with everything checked as normal, the order came for the first crews to stand by and that everyone else to go into Static. This was the name for suspended animation where a person could go to sleep for years. It was the only way to travel the long distances in space otherwise they would grow old on the journey. Jay reluctantly put on his space suit for the short distance back to his pod as he was due for duty on the third change and that meant in another six years. The air lock was crowded as the boys went to their pods. Jay clipped his safety line onto his suit and pushed off.

His pod was just behind the bridge and he was soon at the airlock. Once inside he took off the suit and hung it in the workroom, went through a pair of double sliding doors into the main room of the pod. He carefully checked all his monitors although he wasn't now on duty and it was the job of two other boys to look after the ship, but it was force of habit.

He mustn't have been the only one as a voice from the captain sounded over the speakers.

"Will everyone please go to sleep." Jay realised that the other boys were as him in that he didn't like leaving the ship in someone else's hands but the captain had given an order. Reluctantly he made his way to the cabinet and opened the lid. The cabinet was a bed with levers by his left hand and when the top was closed a clock would appear in the form of a hologram above his head and other information telling him the state of his body when he awoke. He stripped and put on a head covering and a groin shield and stepped into the box. One touch of a button and Static took over and closed down all the systems and filled the cabinet with a gas.

Jay slowly awoke from his deep sleep feeling a little cold and stiff. He glanced at the clock and read the figures in the display above his head. The clock showed that he had been asleep for six years and that it was time for him to take over his duty as the ships system engineer.

A pull on the lever opened the top of the cabinet and he stepped out removing the shields.

He walked over to the shower and took in the monitors that had now burst into life. After showering he put on a pair of shorts and reported in to the bridge. After being acknowledged he was now on duty for the next three years. Jay suddenly realised that he was now nearly twenty two years old but his body was still turning sixteen.

His half of the ship could be monitored from his pod and the central console. After going through all the checks and seeing that everything was as it should be, the rest of the time was his. The ship kept to a twenty four hour clock and the crew could sleep at night or what they called night. His opposite system engineer was a boy called Mike who slept when Jay came on duty and then they had eight hour period when both were up.

The months passed doing the same routine day in and day out with just one hour of checks to be made each day. The ship was so well built that nothing seemed to go wrong and therefore Jay had to fill his time the best way he could. His meals were prepared for him and were delivered by means of a series of tubes that ran from the catering pods the length of the ship. Anything he want from a full meal to a cup of coffee could be ordered and was sent via the tubes to arrive fresh and piping hot from the heat of the nuclear reactors that powered the now shut down engines.

Life went on as a normal routine of checking, eating and sleeping and filling in the rest of the time watching films or exercising in his small gym and sometimes using a sun bed. Very

occasionally he would suit up to check the external mounts that held the cameras but even then he knew that if anything was loose then the engineers checking the ships structure would tell him but it helped to pass the time.

The day finally came when he had finished his spell of duty and he would once more go into static to sleep for another six years. His age was now coming up to nineteen although the clock said nearly twenty five as he was fifteen when they set off. Jay handed over the duty to the next man and retired to his cabinet. Soon he was fast asleep for his second six year spell.

Jay slowly opened his eyes, took in the bank of monitors on the centre console, stretched and pressed the off button on the sun bed. After another six years in Static his skin looked very pale and the sun bed, although not strictly necessary, gave him feeling of well-being. He walked over to the gym machine and began to exercise, lifting weights or really heavy springs that could be set to simulate any weight. As he exercised he looked around the pod. This room measured fifty feet by twenty. It contained the cubicle called Static, a form of suspended animation. Next to Static were the shower and the console. The other wall was all drawers and lockers with double sliding doors in the exact centre. Through these doors were his sleeping quarters and the workshop with his pressure suit and tools.

After his workout he walked to the shower cubicle. The deck felt warm beneath his bare feet. He entered and closed the door. A fine mist of water and soap mixture automatically filled the cubicle, thoroughly drenching without using a lot of water, which was recycled anyway.

He hit the button to stop the water and start a bank of jets blowing hot air. The jets dried the skin and saved the need for using towels. Stopping the air he stepped out of the cubicle and padded over to a dispenser set into the wall. He pressed the button and a drawer opened. A small package was inside. He took it out and opened it up. The package contained a pair of cotton shorts all that was needed as the environment was precisely controlled. He dressed and then sat in the reclining chair in front of the console, reaching with his toe to flick a switch and say:

“Mike, have you made your move yet?”

He was referring to an ongoing chess game he was playing with Mike, another systems engineer.

“No, I’ve got a problem with Number 2. I’ll call you later.”

He did a visual check of the pods of which Jay’s was one; others were for stores, fuel and the nursery where embryos were stored for the New Earth program along with nurses, doctors and engineers in Static. Other pods contained building equipment, electronics, spare parts, shuttlecraft, in fact everything needed for a New World.

“OK Mike, but no using the computer.”

Jay closed the channel, again with his toe. Now, what will it be, a book or film?

Before he had the chance to select a film a message flashed onto his monitor screen. One of the caterers was having a problem with his laundry chute. This was a large vacuum tube that led down to the laundry pod where any washing was done. As most of the crew just wore shorts it was mainly bed linen that was changed. Jay said that he’d look into it and switched to another monitor. The laundry tube had capsules like a large artillery shell where the soiled linen was placed and then the shell was deposited into the tube where the vacuum sucked it down to the laundry pod. After cleaning the linen was sent back to the pod from where it had started. Jay checked his instruments that showed a loss of vacuum at one point in the tube. He entered the corridor that led to his workroom and once there reached for his pressure suit to go outside. Once ready he informed the captain and walked to the airlock. Permission was finally given to proceed to the outside of the ship. That meant he was being monitored from the bridge as all the crew who had to go out were

just in case anything should go wrong. Jay floated over to the main box girder to where a small open seat was waiting. He sat and pulled the strap across his body to hold him and then flicked a switch. The seat moved down the middle of the girder to the spot where his instruments said the fault was. The seat also had a small crank just as a bicycle that he could have used just as a back up in case the power wasn't working but this time the seat reached the spot. Jay released the strap and floated over to the tube. He could see at once that a small hole had been punctured that was letting out the vacuum and instead of pulling the shell capsule down the tube it was sucking the vacuum of space. Under the seat was a small tool box that could be used to remove the damaged section but then he would have to return and either repair the hole or replace it and that meant going to his workshop. Jay removed a two metre section and carried it over to his seat for the return trip. He informed the captain and pressed the return button. Later in his workshop the hole was repaired and once more he had to go outside to install the repaired tube. Two hours later the tube was tested and found to be back in working order. Jay was now free again for the rest of the day. He stripped back to his shorts and ordered a cup of coffee that was duly delivered just the way that he liked it.

Back at his console he brought up the list of films in his data banks and selected one.

"Yes, this will do," he said out loud, referring to a film title selected from a list on one of the monitors.

He was addicted to twentieth century space films, especially those featuring warp drive, as in reality it had taken Ark II three weeks to reach top speed with their nuclear engines. Once he'd finished his checks of all the equipment he was free to do what he wanted and, as it was only two weeks since he had woken from Static to start his spell of duty, there was plenty of time to pass. He started the film and settled down to watch, stretching out his legs on the top of the console. The film had barely begun when Mike's monitor flicked into life. Mike appeared and said:

"Jay, switch on your number two."

Mike was referring to the forward camera in the bow of the ship.

"What do you make of it?" Jay duly obliged and brought up on the screen a view showing nothing but darkness.

"I can't see anything."

"That's the problem. There should be the glimmer from the stars."

"What about the equipment? Does it all check out?"

"I've run a full diagnostic on everything and I'd swear its all OK."

"I'll check mine as well. Meanwhile, I'd inform the skipper just to be on the safe side."

"Already done. He just wants to be informed if we find anything wrong."

"Right," said Jay. "I'll start a check and call you back." The computer ran through its diagnostic program without reporting any faults. Jay called Mike.

"Everything checks out here. Could it be the camera?"

"No, I've just changed it - still nothing."

"How about long range radar?"

"Nothing showing on the scope. I don't know what to think. I'll just...Hey! Hang on a minute! I think we might be getting something. Yes, definitely an echo."

Jay looked at the monitor and saw faint echoes. He switched on the image enhancer and began to take measurements. He fed the data into the computer and waited for the answer. When the information came, Jay was shocked. The ship was heading straight for a belt of asteroids a thousand kilometres thick and so dense it was doubtful a ship could pass through without major damage. Mike's face appeared on the screen.

"Have you...?"

"Yeah, I reckon an hour and twenty minutes before we hit," interrupted Jay.

Captain Willard was in conversation with the chief engineer.

"What can you give me?"

"How long have I got?" asked Chief Bennet.

"About eighty minutes before we hit."

"That rules out the main engines. They take three hours to work up. You can have rocket power in thirty minutes." He was already starting to pressurise the tanks, as he knew the captain had no other option.

"Soon as you can, chief," said the captain. "Full on starboard, reverse on port." He knew there was little chance of stopping the ship and could only try to turn it a little, but that would be difficult as the Ark was not designed to make violent manoeuvres, only go in a straight line as fast as possible.

Twenty-three minutes later a small shudder ran through the ship as the rockets fired. Captain Willard watched the bridge monitor showing the position of the ship as a dot of light in the centre of a spider's web; it barely moved.

"Can you give me any more, Chief?"

"No, you've got the lot, unless you include the pod motors." Each of the pods had a small rocket motor to help with docking onto the Ark.

"Use them, chief, first six forwards starboard, and the last six to port."

"Aye, aye, skipper." Moments later twelve more motors burst into life.

The dot in the centre of the spider's web started to move very slowly from the centre.

The asteroids filled the screen and Jay made a quick calculation. It's going to be very close; he thought and wondered if the third ship that was lost had run into the same belt of rocks. Everyone now watched, as there was nothing more to be done. The dot was now at the edge of the screen as Captain Willard ordered the pod motors shut down.

They had done their job, the Ark was now pointing at the very edge of the asteroid belt.

Jay watched as the last of the asteroids passed to starboard and he heard the Captain say to one of the technicians at the helm.

"Bring us back on course."

"More asteroids coming in from starboard," shouted Mike. "Contact in thirty minutes."

Jay watched as his monitor filled with the echoes. Heavy shielding protected the Captain's bridge, but even so it wouldn't stand a direct hit from an asteroid.

Everyone knew this time there was no time for manoeuvring the ship; they would just have to take their chance.

The time was nearly up when he heard the Captain say:

"Brace yourselves and good luck everyone."

A shower of stones rattled the hull of Jay's pod, and then a jarring thud and his console went dead. Must have lost a power lead somewhere, he thought. Then a light flicked on as the back up power kicked in. Jay looked up. Only four of his monitors were working. In one he could see the ship. She seemed to be intact apart from one pod, and was moving away under her own power. Moving away! The horror suddenly dawned on him; the pod that was missing was his. He punched a button on the radio.

"Jay to Ark, Come in please. Over."

"Ark here. This is Captain Willard. Are you all right? Over."

"Yes captain, pod intact, what are my options? Over."

"Jay, Wait! Out." Five minutes later. "Ark to Jay. Do you hear me? Over"

"Yes, Captain, any news?"

"Do as follows. We cannot turn to pick you up. We have you plotted, you will have to go into Static and we'll pick you up on the way back." Jay didn't like the sound of that. A little desperation sounded in his voice as he said:

"What about the shuttle, I could use that."

"Not fast enough," replied the captain. "You'd never catch us up. No, as we see it, going into Static is your only choice." It would be ten years before they reached New Earth and after unloading another ten years to come back to this position and the pod would have travelled half way across the galaxy. They didn't like saying so but Jay knew it was a death sentence.

"Roger, Captain. I'll go into Static and wait."

"See you when we return," said the Captain.

"Hang in there, kid!" said Mike, interrupting.

"Right I will," said Jay slowly. "Take care. Pod out."

With his last transmission he switched off the radio and watched, with tears in his eyes, ARK II slowly growing smaller.

"Well, nearly everyone had good luck, with one exception - me."

After half an hour he rose and took stock. The pod was a self-contained little world.

For the moment there was no danger. He went to the wall dispenser and took out some emergency packages of food, and thought about his position. His rocket motor was not powerful enough to put him back on course to New Earth and the food would not last indefinitely. Static was his only option. He set the pod's computer to find a suitable planet to await rescue - a very long shot. He finished his meal and set the power to sleep mode, stepped out of his shorts and fitted the skull cap with its visor, and a groin protector, the only things you could wear in Static because of the need for the electrical charge to interact with the skin. He stepped into the cabinet, closed the lid and pulled the visor down to protect his eyes. There was a whirring of a small motor and twin needles pierced his buttocks and injected him with a special drug mixture to halt the ageing process, a gas then filled the cabinet and he drifted off to sleep.

Jay blinked his eyes, slowly growing used to the light. He looked at the clock date counter and saw he'd been in Static for two years. He opened the lid and stepped out on to the deck. It felt cool to his feet, which was odd. He checked the temperature gauge and read twelve degrees. He tapped the glass - just the same. I'll have my shower and then look into it, he thought, as he took off the helmet and, still naked, walked to the shower. A shower was essential after Static because the electrical charge burned the top layer of skin leaving a fine white powder. It also destroyed hair follicles, hence the helmet. At least Jay wouldn't have to shave again. He stepped into the shower and closed the door. Nothing happened. No water, no soap. He pressed the hot air button - again nothing. He stepped out of the shower and walked over to his discarded shorts and proceeded to wipe himself down with them. When he was satisfied he had rid himself of most of the powder he pressed a button on the dispenser to obtain new clothing. Again nothing. He tried the food, nothing worked. Donning his old shorts, he went over to the console and switched on the monitors. The computers told him the pod was orbiting a sun with four planets. The first was a frozen world, the second a gas world, the third no atmosphere at all; not very promising.

The fourth was behind the sun. He turned his attention to the power, switching it out of sleep mode, and noticed the level was down to thirty per cent.

The pod's requirement for basic energy would use most of what power was available. His life support, computers and monitors were essential, and they were programmed to take whatever power they needed. No wonder the equipment wouldn't work. What could be wrong? He checked the fuel tanks - they showed empty. There ought to be enough for three years at least. Jay realised that the tanks must have been damaged in the asteroid shower and had been slowly leaking all the time he'd been in Static.

Just then a warning bleep came from the console. The pod had been caught in the gravitational pull from the sun and was in a decaying orbit without fuel for the motor. Jay asked the computer to calculate the time to burn up. Back came the answer, eighteen days, six hours, but Jay knew the pod would be far too hot long before then. The other monitor flashed on. A fourth planet had appeared from behind the sun and it had an atmosphere. It was his only hope. He asked the computer to calculate launch time and course to let the planet catch up with him if he used the shuttlecraft. Back came the answer - thirty-two minutes. Better check the shuttle to see it wasn't damaged.

At the press of the button the motor whirred but the double doors remained closed. The power must be too low. He switched everything off including life support; there was enough air in the pod to last, still nothing. With no more power the door would have to be forced. His tools were in another room along with his pressure suit. The only way to get to them was through this door. A bracing bar for the table seemed to be the only thing not fastened down but looked a little light. Jay broke it from the table and attacked the cover of the electronic lock. His feet felt lighter; the artificial gravity must be failing. The lock refused to open. Just then a piece broke from the bar. He picked it up and inserted the point into a small crack between the two doors and, using it as a lever, managed to open a space large enough for his fingers. Bracing himself he pressed the open button once more and heaved with all his might. The door finally gave and opened enough to allow him to pass through. He glanced at the clock. Twelve minutes to launch. Sprinting along the corridor he came to the airlock that led to the shuttle bay. At least this time it was a manual lock with a central control wheel. The wheel spun easily. He heard a click as the bolts released, allowing the door to be opened. His broad shoulders were put to good use pulling the heavy lock open as he burst into the shuttlecraft bay and ran to the craft. It was the second time his athletic prowess had served him. The first was by doing well playing squash at the academy and having one of the principals on the selection panel for the Ark, the only ship being built at that time and now being powerful enough to get through the doorway.

Lifting a concealed flap on the shuttle revealed a button and, when pressed, showed a green light as the door opened.

No time to check the ship. A glance at the clock that kept the same time as the pod was showing five minutes to go. Jay strapped himself into the pilot's seat and, with two minutes left, fired the engine. Thankfully it started first time. The pod's power was too low to open the outer airlock and Jay hadn't had the time to put on a pressure suit and open the door manually. He therefore did the only thing left. A signal sent to six explosive bolts blew the hatch cover off. There was a rushing sound as the air and everything loose was sucked out of the pod. Jay remembered he'd not had time to close the inner airlock. He released the clamps holding the shuttle and was jolted back into his seat as the shuttle followed the air into space.

## Chapter 2

### *Taken*

The ship was a schooner, a two mast trading vessel that plied the coast of the land of the Allo. Her captain a man named Bradl had traded up and down the coast and up the rivers of Allosia for many years. The vessel was old and long since past its best just like the captain who should have retired to a comfortable chair by the fireside twenty years ago, but because the schooner was all the family that he had he tried to keep her sailing. His crew were the general labourers that seemed to frequent the dock areas of every port you could name. They were the flotsam of the sea that had been washed up in the various ports and remained there because they hadn't anywhere else to go to, having been at sea most of their lives.

Captain Bradl had managed to get a cargo of wood from the great inland forest that occupied a large part of the country. The cargo was destined for the far north where the land turned gradually from forest to a great river delta that emptied into a huge swamp. General goods was the only cargo the captain could get as not many would trust the old ship with anything of great value. The wood was to be loaded at a small inland port and then sailed up the coast to the delta mouth and unloaded, but the ship was taking in water.

The captain went down below to inspect the bilges and could see that a fair amount of water was already there and they had only just left the river. All the pumps were working just to keep the level steady as they turned up the coast. A heavy swell met them and the old ship creaked and groaned under the strain. The water that had been steady began to creep ever higher. The captain consulted his chart and saw that a little port only two hours sailing away offered shelter from the storm and also the chance of repairs as it boasted a ship building yard. He didn't want to spend time and money paying for expensive repairs but this time there was no denying that without repairs the water would reach the wood of the cargo and if he lost that then it would be very expensive. Reluctantly he gave the order to head for the port.

As the vessel drew close the captain saw that the port consisted of a long stone built quay ending at a river. The banks of the river had been faced with heavy stone blocks to make a strong wall with a large lock gate. Behind the lock the area had been drained to make a large ship building yard with its own dry dock that could hold six ships. At the side was a fitting out berth where the half completed hull of a ship being built could be moved to make room to lay the keel of another ship. Captain Bradl moored his ship at the quay and left his men to keep watch on the water level in the bilges, although now that they were in port and out of the heavy swell the water wasn't coming in so quickly.

He walked over to the yard and enquired as to who was in charge and the person to see about repairs. The men told him to see a man called Ast who was the owner's son and who ran the yard. One hour later his still leaking vessel was pulled by rope around to the lock gate to wait for the tide before entering the yard. The gate opened and the ship headed towards the dry dock before being allowed to settle on the stocks as the tide turned and the water was drained from the lock and the gated closed. Now Ast and the captain could go underneath the hull and see where the trouble lay.

Water dripped from a dozen points and Ast who was a master shipbuilder saw that it was poor maintenance that had cause the leak. He told the captain that the seams of the vessel needed re caulking before he could sail again and that it would take a week and not be cheap as it was labour

intensive. The captain tried to barter the price down but Ast knew his job and could only lower the cost a little. It was then the captain mentioned a few other jobs that needed doing like the mast that was a little loose and one or two of the spars were rotting and some of the sheets that the captain called the ropes were fraying and they too could be replaced and also some other jobs that he couldn't recall because there was so many. Ast interrupted him and said that when the hull was watertight he would accompany the captain on a short sail to find out the true state of the ship, or could give him a price for the new ship just finished at the other side of the dock. Captain Bradl gazed wistfully at the new ship but knew that he couldn't afford it. Two weeks later the cargo had been unloaded and the planking in the bilges was lifted to reveal the ballast. Some of the keel beams had rotted and sagged putting all the weight on the bottom planking and with the heavy cargo the combined weight had caused the seams to open and allow water to enter. Ast saw that the whole keel needed attention but was only allowed to do what was necessary to sail.

A little tavern that was used by the shipyard workers offered rooms to rent, but after two days the captain was back on board his ship watching as the work progressed. The ship was his life and he hadn't anything else that he cared about, and if someone was going to start cutting and pulling his ship apart then he had to be there.

Repairs to the hull were completed and the vessel was watertight but Ast's men had found a crack in one of the masts that was worrying. He tried to tell the captain that it need replacing but the old man would have none of it saying that it been like that for years and the crack didn't grow any deeper as it was only on the surface.

Ast wasn't too sure and reckoned a good storm would prove the captain wrong.

The ship was now re-floated and moved to the quay side. After the bottom planking was replaced Ast decided to sail with the ship the next day to convince the captain to allow more repairs to be made.

Early the next day they cast off and headed out into deeper water with Ast going around examining every corner and listening as the ship creaked and groaned under the strain and the ship wasn't even loaded with cargo. Ast and the captain were heading out to where the trade winds conveniently blew parallel to the coast of Allosia, and where they could test the mast and to prove to the captain that it wasn't safe and could let him down at any time.

At the same time as Captain Bradl had put into Ast's shipyard for repairs another ship was getting ready to leave a harbour in another land two weeks sail away. It was leaving from an island just off the coast of a land called Mordia. The men who lived in Mordia differed in that they had grey skins and a yellowish tint to their eyes but in every other respect they were men just as the Allo's. These ships had one mission and that was to raid the Allo shipping for slaves. The ships were black in colour and only half the width in the beam as the trading ships they preyed upon. They were fast and didn't carry heavy cargo to slow them in the water.

The crew was made up of twelve fighting men who sailed as sailors when raiding but could leave half their number behind when going to the mainland for stores.

The Blackship headed to the North West and was soon out of sight of land as it went on its mission. It reached Allosia in twelve days having made good time. The lookout was set as the ship stayed well away from the shipping lanes. Allosia had only a very small navy consisting of six ships and a very long coastline to protect. Their ships could just about match the speed of the Blackships if they could get close enough to engage the raiders in combat and therefore the captain of the Blackship didn't want to get in a fight especially as the navy ship may be carrying a compliment of soldiers on board. An accidental collision could damage his ship and the raider didn't want to risk

that and so kept out to sea and then made quick swoops inshore to attack a ship and be out of sight before anyone could do anything about it.

In one of the swoops a small yacht was seen and the chase began. As soon as the Blackship had been spotted the yacht had turned but the Blackship had come out of the darkness and had been almost on to the yacht before they could get out of crossbolt distance. A crossbolt was a type of crossbow that was deadly accurate. Now the crew couldn't control the yacht as they had to stay undercover and they were soon captured and taken to be chained below. Another small ship had seen what had happened and turned to the north as the Blackship was between it and the coast. With luck it could get far enough ahead to turn to one of the little ports and safety.

Ast and his men were making notes as they sailed. Everything that needed attention was jotted down and the list was growing long. Just then the lookout shouted that they were being hailed by a small ship. The captain steered a little closer as a man called across the narrowing gap.

"Raiders astern," he shouted. Captain Bradl looked at where the man was pointing and could see a black dot slowly growing larger as it came towards them. The Blackship had seen them and was after more prey. The captain shouted a change of course to get away but as the ship heeled over doing a fast turn the strain on the weak mast was too much and with a sharp crack it broke. The mast was leaning at an angle and the sails flapped loose. The speed immediately dropped by half and everyone turned to look if the Blackship was still coming, it was.

When he had taken the yacht he would normally have headed back out of sight but then the lookout had seen the other small boat and so they had given chase. Now they had a bigger prize ahead and one that was disabled and easy to overtake. The crew gathered their weapons and waited by the side ready for boarding.

Captain Bradl twisted and turned his ship to escape from the raider but with his speed down by half it was fruitless. The Blackship slowly drew alongside and a grapple line was thrown and once attached the raiders began to pull the two ships closer together.

The captain rushed to the grapple to release it from his ship and a moment later a crossbolt took him squarely in the chest and killed him outright. Ast knew that fighting was hopeless and to do so would result in more deaths, he surrendered along with all the rest of the crew. Ast and his four men along with six of Captain Bradl's crew were taken on board the Blackship. He just had time to see smoke rising from a fire that had been started by the raiders in the old ship with its dead captain still laid on his deck and both going to the bottom. The men were taken across to the Blackship and told to sit on the deck. As one man guarded them with his crossbow the grapples were released and the ship turned out to sea leaving the schooner still on fire.

There were five men missing from the crew and Ast didn't remember anyone being killed except the captain and he wondered if they were still on board or had they taken the skiff and made an escape? When well out at sea and out of sight of land the prisoners were ordered to strip while a search for or gold or weapons was carried out. Each man had to throw his garments consisting of tunics and briefs over to one of the guards and afterwards they were given a strip of cloth to wear as a loincloth and then taken below and chained.

The boat that had escaped reported the loss and the navy ship set out to search the area but no sign of Blackship was found.

The raiders had gone and then turned to the South before coming in for another sweep looking for more victims.

## Chapter 3

### *The Blackship*

The planet looked beautiful to Jay after he'd been cooped up inside the pod of the spacecraft. The blue of the oceans and the green and brown of the land were particularly inviting set against the blackness of space. White clouds drifting over the surface made him nostalgic for Earth. All he had to do was to get down to the surface to feel the warm sun and breathe clean fresh air. There was just one small snag. His craft was only a shuttle meant for working in space or from a planet with a light gravity and low atmosphere. It lacked a heat shield worth speaking of. The shuttlecraft, along with many other parts on the Ark, was second hand. Because of the great expense of building a ship in space, parts from bases on the moon and on Mars had been used, and the shuttle along with three more had come from the Mars base.

When used in space they were fine, but Mars is a low atmosphere planet and this world was not. The chance was that the heat shield would break up on entering the more dense air, but this couldn't be helped.

Jay tightened the straps of his seat and, as he hadn't any alternative, got ready for the descent.

"Here goes," he said, as he fired the small rocket motor.

The shuttle shook slightly as it responded. He gripped the control lever and began to ease the shuttle into the atmosphere.

A small vibration started and, through the cockpit window, Jay could see a wisp of smoke coming from the short stubby wings, but nothing too serious as yet. He eased the craft lower - more smoke; lower still - now more vibrating and some flames coming from the shuttle. He pulled back on the control column and the engine did its best to pull the craft back level. The flames died away and Jay checked his gauges on the console and tried once more. He was trying to skim the atmosphere, like a pebble skipping across a lake, gradually going lower to protect the nose of his craft. This time the air grabbed the craft and violent buffeting shook the shuttle. Jay fought for control as the nose became red hot and then the shaking broke loose a piece that just missed the cabin. The figures on the temperature gauge were climbing but there wasn't anything he could do to slow the mad descent. Another piece snapped off. The ship levelled for a few seconds, allowing the heat to subside, and then it started again.

The violent shaking hit the shuttle once again and, with a loud shrieking scream, the whole front of the cockpit canopy was ripped away leaving Jay exposed to a searing heat and wind.

Suddenly the heat subsided. He was in the atmosphere. However, the wind was the air leaving the cockpit. Jay gasped for breath and clawed at the roof of the shuttle for the oxygen mask located above his head. It should have dropped when the pressure fell but it must have been damaged. His hand found it and pulled. Thankfully it started to supply the much-needed gas. He strapped it over his face, drawing a deep breath.

The craft was now in a steep dive heading for an ocean. Jay fired the retrorockets to slow the speed, but as they were only designed for manoeuvring in space they only slowed a little. He pulled as hard as he could on the control lever and, little by little, started to level off. The short stubby wings gave a little lift but not enough. The engine was at full power but the sea came closer. He realised he was going to crash and braced himself as he neared the water. With a sickening crash of tortured metal the shuttle slammed into the sea.

The force of the crash submerged the craft to a depth of two or three metres. Water began to pour into the broken cockpit as Jay struggled with the straps. The craft lurched to the surface and the water stopped coming into the cabin, but he could hear it pouring in from below and, with all the damage, knew it would be only seconds before the shuttle sank. The bow was now beginning to lift as the weight of the rocket engine pulled the stern down. No time to try the door, he must get out fast.

After finally freeing himself from the seat straps, the damaged canopy seemed to offer the quickest way out. He crawled out over the controls and on to the casing of the shuttle, took a last deep breath from the oxygen mask, pulled it from his face and dived into the sea. He surfaced to see the craft capsize and watched as the damaged, blackened hulk sank beneath the waves. A last eruption of air escaping from the sinking shuttle disturbed the surface and then the sea was calm.

He had no idea where land was, and because of that fact there was no point in swimming; it was simply a waste of energy. He turned over on to his back and floated. It was the easiest thing to do but how long he could keep it up was anyone's guess. The day was bright and hot. The kind of day to laze on a beach doing nothing but sunbathing and taking the occasional sip from an iced drink, and then maybe going for a cooling dip in the sea and just floating around.

Jay had been floating for about half an hour when something touched his leg. Shark! Was his first thought, but then he realised he was on a strange world and didn't even know if there were any sharks. He turned over and looked around but there was nothing to be seen. No sharks or fish, no boats, in fact nothing at all to be seen. Then what had touched his leg? Or was it his imagination?

Just then it touched again. This time Jay made a frantic grab for whatever it was.

"Got it," he shouted to himself. His hand closed around the object. It felt like a rope; it was a rope. Jay took hold with both hands and pulled, and then he saw it. A piece of board made from a black wood, about three square metres were attached to the end, a life raft on this strange world. He thankfully climbed aboard.

The raft appeared to be a piece from a ship. The ends were broken and jagged as though it had been broken off from a bulkhead. It had a square hole in the side where the rope was tied. At the moment Jay didn't care, it saved him swimming and offered hope because it meant there was intelligent life on this world.

Jay lay on his back drying in the sunshine. All was not well. True, for the moment he was safe, but what of the future? There was no food or water, as he hadn't had time to rescue any from the shuttle before it sank, and he didn't know where he was or where land lay even if he had the means to sail towards it. The sea was calm and it had been an exciting day. He decided to try to sleep; after all there was nothing else to do.

He stretched out in the warm sun. The leg of his cotton shorts, all he was wearing, had been torn nearly to the waist. A long scratch ran up his thigh. He didn't even remember getting it.

Hope that doesn't go septic, he thought, but if it did there was nothing to be done, as he hadn't had time to salvage any medicines from the stricken shuttlecraft. He settled down, tied the rope around his waist in case a wave threw him off the raft and finally slept.

The next morning he opened his eyes, stretched, untied the rope, and then stood up on the raft to have a good look around.

There was nothing to be seen. He sat down on the raft, slowly coiling the rope and waited, for what he'd no idea. The sun rose higher. The water that had splashed on to the raft started to steam; it was getting hot. Jay took off his wet shorts and placed them on top of the coil of rope to dry.

It grew hot on the raft and the glare burned his eyes so much he turned onto his front to shield them and escape the worst of it. As he lay there going over the past events, he could not recall seeing any deserts while orbiting the planet, just the sea and the green. Green what, he wondered?

The sun was slightly larger than Earth's sun. However, the planet was around the same size and distance as the Earth. That would account for the heat. The temperature would be about thirty degrees centigrade and he was not on the equator. His measurements on the shuttle had told him the days were approximately the same as Earth's - twenty-four hours. His mouth was dry, a rumbling came from his empty belly and he was starting to get sunburnt.

The sea seemed to be the only way to cool off. But what was swimming in there that could or would attack him for a meal he'd no idea. As he had no alternative, he tied the rope around his waist in case a sudden gust of wind blew the raft away, slipped over the side into the water and clung to the edge with his shoulders just covered.

The sea remained calm with just a slight swell and very clear. Looking down into the depths Jay could see at least four metres. The blue sky matched the sea - another really nice day given the present circumstances. He took a quick swim with the rope still fastened to his waist and then climbed back on to the raft for a rest. Jay stood and stretched his limbs and prepared to go back into the sea and then he saw what he thought was a sail on the horizon but too far away for him to call out, still it gave him hope. All day he kept to the same routine, swimming and resting, until darkness fell and he donned his shorts and settled down for another night.

The third day on the raft began as the others - hot and dry. Jay dropped into the sea to cool. Mid-morning a breeze sprang up to give comfort to his sunburnt shoulders but even so he remained in the water with his arms resting on the raft. Suddenly he was choking. He kicked to the surface and coughed, gasping a lung full of air. The heat had made him a little light headed and he'd slipped off the raft and taken a mouthful of salty water.

Two more hours passed and then he heard a shout. He looked up and saw a ship. It was long and black with a square sail, a cross between a Viking longboat and a Roman galley. He wondered if it was the same boat whose sail he had spotted, but then what did it matter, he was very tired and weak, and any boat would do. The sail was reefed and a rope ladder was hung over the side for him to climb. As the boat drew alongside Jay grabbed the ladder and pulled himself up on to the deck where he collapsed into a heap. Two hands helped him to his feet. They belonged to men like him except their skin was grey with a faint green sheen. Their eyes were yellow. Jay thought they looked like grey wolves. One of the men held out a jug of water. He took it gratefully and drank long and deep. The men motioned he should sit on the deck. Jay thanked them and did so as the boat got under way again.

He finished the water and remained seated, and then the two men who had helped him approached with a third man. They were talking, obviously discussing him. The third man appeared to be in charge and, as he neared, Jay arose. The man said something to him but, not knowing the language, Jay could only stare and shake his head, indicating he did not understand. The man shouted at him, waited a moment and then struck a blow to the side of the head that knocked him down onto the deck.

The other two men picked him up and half carried, half dragged him to a hatch in the centre of the boat and down a long ramp on to a lower deck, then up to a bulkhead where a series of chains were hanging. Still dazed from being on the raft and the unexpected blow, Jay felt an iron collar being snapped around his neck. Then he was dumped on to the floor and left.

Jay's head was clearing. He felt a pair of strong arms lift him and place him on a blanket over some straw. He looked about. There were thirty-two other men chained inside the hold. The chained men were different from the crew, their skin was light like Jays and their eyes were brown. They could have been from Jay's own ship The Ark. The young man next to him who had helped him touched his arm and said something in a language he didn't understand. Jay replied in English and the man smiled and shook his head. They grinned a little self-consciously. The man pointed to himself and said Ast or as near as Jay could make out.

The hatch opened and two crewmen entered and dropped a cauldron of food and some plates and spoons in the middle of the deck, then left. Ast went over to the food and returned with an extra plate. He placed a spoon into Jay's hand and bade him eat. Jay finished the food, a type of cereal, put down his plate and looked around. All the prisoners were chained as he was, with a neck collar, and all were barefoot and wore only trunks or loincloths. The deck was brightly lit by eight lights and showed just some straw and blankets for bedding and a bucket for a latrine. The collar had a chain ending in a ring through which another chain was passed. This second chain ran the length of the hold and allowed movement of the wearer to collect food and visit the bucket.

The crewmember returned and collected the plates and spoons, counting them and, being satisfied, he left. Jay ran his fingers around the collar. It was a little bit tight, especially where the chain was attached. He was now aware of pain and rubbed his cheek where the blow had landed and felled him to the deck. Why were they so savage? He was very weak from being on the raft for three days without water.

His new friend tried talking with him, but it was difficult. Jay now realised that, as he was on a strange world, it was he that would have to learn the language of the people, as nobody would be able to speak his tongue. From painful beginnings he practised with Ast and started picking up a few words.

Time dragged in the hold, punctuated only by being fed twice daily. Then one day shouting and the sound on the deck of running feet could be heard. Something was happening topside as the sounds echoed through the wooden planking.

Shortly afterwards a crash sounded as though two ships had collided, followed by the sound of steel on steel, then silence.

A guard entered the hold down the ramp to where Jay and Ast were chained and unlocked their collars. They were ushered on deck.

A vessel smaller than the black ship and squarer in the beam, probably a trading ship, was slowly sinking. Piled high on the deck of the black ship were goods looted from the stricken vessel. The two men who had rescued Jay were sorting these into piles. The captured crew was lined up with their hands raised above their heads. They were being closely guarded by one of the crew armed with a sword. Jay counted twelve and most likely they would outnumber the black ship's crew, but these were sailors and not fighters. The fight would have been a short one.

The guard gave Jay and Ast very sharp daggers and said something to Ast. Ast motioned to Jay to follow his move and approached the first man on the line and started to cut all his clothes from him. The clothes were thrown to the guard who searched them for hidden valuables, then threw the rags overboard.

Jay inserted his knife into the collar of the next man and cut down. The man was wearing a kind of tunic with a belt around his waist. Jay cut the sleeves and it fell away. He threw it to the guard. Ast had now finished his man by stripping him of his briefs and sandals and had moved on to the next. As he cut down his tunic, a shower of coins cascaded onto the deck. The guard let out a yell of

triumph and motioned Ast to pick them up. The man had tried to hide them when he knew he was going to be captured. Now there was another yell, the guard searching the rags held up a gold coin sewn into the lining of one of the tunics. Soon all twelve had been searched. They were issued with a strip of cloth and piece of cord to serve as a loincloth then led two at a time down into the hold to be chained. Jay and Ast were relieved of the daggers as the last prisoners were led away and put to work clearing the deck under the watchful eye of a guard armed with a type of crossbow. This afforded Jay to have a close look at the ship.

The ship looked like it was built for speed rather than trade. He gathered it was used for raiding, preying on a merchant fleet of some country. Jay counted six crewmen and six who could be crew or soldiers, making twelve plus the Captain, all of whom could fight, and more than a match for ordinary sailors.

An old man was being questioned by a captor at the stern; maybe he had been the captain of the trader, but Jay couldn't understand what was being said and attended to his work. Shortly afterwards the man had gone.

They were returned to the hold and re-chained in the neck collars.

It was then Jay noticed that all of the prisoners were young men, without any middle aged or elderly. What had happened to the older men? Were they kept somewhere else on board? Jay had noticed cabins both at the front and stern of the ship. Or had they been killed and thrown overboard? He tried to put the idea out of his mind.

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