

## DISTRESS CALL

### *MOON WARS LEGACY: Volume I*

On his way to the Chronon Research Facility, Keith Zane was wrestling with the emotional ambivalence of retirement. He knew this moment would someday come, which he once was looking forward to with excitement, but as a man of action in the firefighting and rescue force for more than 30 years it was hard to picture a life of serenity and an unflustered day-to-day. He still was feeling unsure about moving in with his daughter and granddaughter into the quiet town of Snoqualmie, Washington.

Zane knew that planet Earth was always the end of the line. Yet he pictured this scenario differently. His late wife Carol always suggested that when they went back to Earth, they should spend the rest of their days in a tropical destination, enjoying the beautiful landscape and rich biodiversity of the Caribbean during the day and wrapped in her warm embrace at night. She deserved the best. She was a woman so tenderly devoted to her husband, not everyone is capable of leaving her life on Earth and following her partner all the way to the Jovian system to settle for more than two decades in Jupiter II. Alas, no one was expecting life and destiny to play that fateful card a couple of years ago.

“There. Confirming visual contact with Chronon Research Facility” claimed driver engineer Estevez as Zane snapped out of his reminiscence and remembered he was on his last day of field job before retirement.

“Chronon Research Facility, this is the firefighting and rescue force of Jupiter II, responding to your distress call. Come in. Do you copy?”

No response.

As Estevez was trying to contact the facility, Lieutenant Daniels approached Captain Zane.

"It is not every day you see a communication blackout on one of these prestigious facilities, Sir," stated Daniels.

"Never, indeed," replied Zane.

"Captain, I know it is none of my business, and excuse me if I am being inappropriate, .... but ... why did you decide to come with us on a rescue mission last minute when you are about to leave the station?"

"Oh Daniels, it's been some time since I've been in action but I just can't leave when 18 crew members of my squad have gone missing. Last day on the job and the team gives no signal of their whereabouts? Not on my watch.

"Captain, I want you to know it really makes me feel better you are coming with me. I am really worried. The lack of updates from the squad is nothing normal."

The firefighter station at Jupiter II received the distress call a couple of hours ago. They were informed that an experiment had gone wrong, causing several explosions across the facility and confining several of the researchers and staff under the debris. A rescue team of around 20 firefighters was sent first to help the affected. However, no reports or updates came in from this squad and communication had been lost. Worried by her teammates, Lieutenant Daniels decided to take action and head directly to help the rest.

Before leaving the station, her chief, Captain Zane stopped her and informed her, he would be coming, too. It was a worrisome situation because of the lack of information from these people and as a Team leader, he could not brush off the missing firefighters.

Founded in 2153, the Chronon Research Facility was an institution of scientific investigation of time particles and wormholes. During the last couple of years, there were

GIFT 2023 Fall Short story contest winner

rumors of the first steps into dimensional rifts jumping. However, no actual results have been released to the public after all these years. Although its existence is recognized, all of the operations and scientific tests held are confidential. Visits from outsiders are forbidden and even some government entities are denied access. The facility has its own emergency protocol and staff in case any accident was to happen. It came as a huge surprise to all the firefighters back in the station to receive a call from the Chronon Research Facility asking for help. Everyone was already imagining the magnitude of destruction the facility had to withstand if they were seeking aid.

As the spaceship was approaching, it was quite evident through the glass and windows that a huge accident had occurred at the facility. There were no active fires in sight, but finding any survivors under the wreckage would prove to be quite a task. Suddenly, a light bluish hexagonal-shaped ring went through the outside of the spaceship. The ship had a breakdown and turbulence began hitting it. The equipment began to spark.

“What the hell...?” Zane exclaimed.

“Captain! The auto dock-!” replied pilot Estevez before he was interrupted by all the movement around the ship.

“The auto dock! We are off track! We are going to hit the hull!

“Hit the blast shields! Ordered Captain Zane “Their guidance tether is damaged” Switch manual, NOW!”

“Inside the magnetic field? Are you insane?!” said Lieutenant Daniels

“NO! We can make it inside! Rookie I gave you an order!” stated Zane to the pilot.

Everyone inside the ship was trying to hold on to something due to the increasing shakiness inside the ship. No one inside it had experienced a real-life scenario where this was happening. Just what was going on?

“Argh, everyone, the field is too strong, prepare for impact!”

The spaceship could not withstand any more the force of the magnetic field and Estevez lost control of the helm. The gravitational pull of Themisto was so strong that crashing was imminent. Yet, inexplicably, miraculously, a counterforce prevented such a debacle.

“Uhm, Captain Zane... we have a situation,” said Estevez through the communicator.

Zane opened his eyes and was still squeezing onto the locked necklace with the picture of Carol.

“Sir, are you there? You won't believe this!” continued Estevez.

“Captain, we need to move,” stated Lieutenant Daniels.

Zane was still frozen, fearful of what had just happened.

“Daniels, are we dead?”

“No, Sir,” replied Daniels. “Somehow Estevez managed to pull it off and avoid crashing.”

“Captain Zane, Lieutenant Daniels, are you there?”

Zane quickly recovered from the situation and responded:

“Heading right to the cockpit, Estevez”

When Zane and Daniels arrived at the cockpit, he didn't need any explanation of why he was called. What he saw through the cockpit glass was unbelievable and without any logical sense. The research facility which was just a couple of minutes ago debris was somehow now intact, as if no incident had ever happened.

“What in the world is going on?” muttered Zane.

"Estevez, are we still on track to the Chronon Research Facility?" asked Daniels with a bewildered look on her face.

"Lieutenant, that IS the research facility. The radar is not wrong," answered Estevez.

"Well, that is not possible. We just saw the remains of the building not long ago. How could this be possible?! Try to make some sense" replied in an exasperated tone.

"Look, Daniels" replied an irritated Estevez, "I am as confused as you are, I don't know what is going on, but the artificial intelligence that helps me drive this ship is not wrong. That you see there, is real, the Chronon Research Facility"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, you two calm down!" interrupted Captain Zane. "None of us know what is going on. Estevez, try to contact anyone in the facility. Daniels, go to the engine room and check if everything is alright. We came here to answer that distress call and look for our teammates. Something is going on here.

As Daniels headed to the engine room, Estevez tried to contact the facility again.

"Chronon Research Facility, this is the firefighting and rescue force of Jupiter II, asking for authorization to dock. Do you copy?"

"There's no use." sighed Captain Zane. "Get us to the surface, Estevez. We will deal with this once we land."

Estevez followed the captain's order and approached the docking point. He managed to safely land. The spaceship that carried the first squad was nowhere to be seen. Could it be it was docked somewhere else?

"All right, we are moving out," commented Zane to Estevez, "once Daniels gets here, open the -"

"Captain Zane, the engine is busted. It needs a check-up," stated Daniels as she returned to the cockpit.

"We have no time to lose. Estevez, open the door. Daniels come with me. Let's get outside and see what is going on and look for the rest. Estevez, try to look for a workaround to the engine as we get back."

Captain Zane and Lieutenant Daniels put on their helmets and headed straight outside as Estevez stood behind in the engine room. It was a short walk from the deck to the facility.

"Sir, excuse me for my behavior with Estevez back on the ship. I am just worried for the squad. All of them are gone. Complete silence, no updates, and this place seems as if no help was needed. I am just thinking the worst"

"Daniels, I understand. We are all stressed out. No one knows what is going on."

The research facility was a stand-out of technological innovation, seamlessly blending cutting-edge design with functional efficiency. Smart glass invisible solar panels cover the exterior, capable of dynamically adjusting their opacity to control sunlight and optimize energy efficiency.

As Zane and Daniels got near the entrance of the facility, they noted several security drones destroyed on the floor. By the shape of them, it seems that they fell from the sky and crashed while hovering duty. Still, not one soul was to be found at the exterior entrance of the facility.

"This does not seem like the place with extremely tight security it is supposed to be" commented Zane.

“Sir, I feel this rescue mission is more than what we assume it to be. There is something weird going on.

“Estevez, do you copy?” said Zane to his communicator. “How is everything up there? We are at the entrance portal. We are heading in immediately.”

“Sir, I might have already found a way to fix the engine. I could solve it in a couple of minutes. Already heading to the cockpit again to look for the last coordinates of the squad. How about you both?”

“Keep up the updates, Estevez!” replied Zane. “We have no time to lose. We are heading in. “

The entrance was marked by an imposing portal, framed by a green illuminated edge, indicating the operational status of the facility. As the captain and lieutenant entered, a spacious and well-lit atrium was revealed. They removed their helmets and were amazed by the beauty of the reception. However, what caught the eye of the firefighters the most were the multiple androids lying on the ground. These androids were all shut down, victims of what seemed a violent rampage against them. Most had their limbs removed, others beheaded. Circuit parts were lying around. Without a doubt there were signs of struggle and violence, even some firearm weapons were visible yet the atrium was pristine and undamaged.

“Is someone out there?!” shouted Zane.

No response.

He decided to approach one of the androids. Maybe they could check on the footage of the robot record before its demise. As he bent towards the beheaded android, a small-sized leech-like alien creature jumped off from the remains of the android and straight

into Captain Zane's neck. The unexpected attack knocked off Zane. He was desperately trying to pull it off but the worm had already attached itself to him and was moving as if it was sucking off blood from Zane. Shocked in the middle of the commotion, Daniels tried to pull off the creature without success. She then grabbed one of the detached arms of an android lying around.

"Sorry Captain, this might hurt" she stated and began hitting off the leech with her weapon, hitting Zane in the process, too.

After a couple of hits, the leech came off and Daniels smashed it. Suddenly, the same light bluish hexagonal ring that went through the spaceship, some time ago went through the whole facility area all the way to the spaceship. Daniels felt the presence of energy going through her. The area shifted out of nowhere and the undamaged location came to its true form, the debris and wreckage it actually was, as if a curtain was raised and showed the true nature of the place. Daniels was stunned but she proceeded to help the grunting Captain Zane get on his knees.

Meanwhile, at the spaceship, Estevez was done making a round searching for his colleagues. There was no explanation for the sudden disappearance of approximately 20 firefighters. He headed towards the cockpit and was about to contact Captain Zane when he saw a new scenery through the glass. What he saw as the undamaged research facility was once again a pile of destruction. Suddenly the command board lit up, and a video transmission notification popped up with the title "DO NOT COME TO CHRONON! NOVEMBER 7, 2452".

Estevez opened the transmission and a video of what appears to be a scientist in distress and panting began to play.



“Dr. Clarke here...please, do not come to Chronon. We screwed up. We tried to play with powers we were not ready to handle. These.... creatures, are able to alter time, alter space...alter reality. Make you see what is not there and then suck your blood. They already took so many of us. Marissa, Zelda, Isaac, Raruru they are all... gone.”

Estevez continued watching the transmission with horror, unaware that a couple of the leech creatures already made their way into the spaceship through the door that was left open when Zane and Daniel went on their mission. The transmission continues.

“Anyone seeing this, just turn around and leave. It is a lost cause. These beasts can infect you, bite you, and infect you with a hallucinogenic fluid that makes you go mad and -”

Estevez was bitten in the leg by two of the creatures who began sucking his blood. Immediately a party of worm-like monsters had already leeches across his body. He screamed in despair without someone to hear him or help him as the transmission was still playing.

Back at the facility, Daniels managed to get Zane back on his feet. Zane had realized just yet that the atmosphere had completely changed.

“Daniels, where are we, what happened to the atrium?”

“Sir, I don't know what is going on. We must leave now; some weird stuff is going on.”

She then took two of the guns lying around and handed one to Zane.

“Take this, we must be ready in case any of those monsters decide to show up again.”

Zane began to feel dizzy and began to blink in quick succession as if he just started losing his sight, not seeing clearly.

“Wow, just hold on Daniels what is going on?” remarked Zane as he was bending trying to see clearly. Scared, he held on to the locket.

Suddenly, a group of the larvae creatures were heading towards the firefighters.

“Captain, come on. Get ready!” shouted Daniels.

She began shooting at the worms in the process and hitting some in the process.

“SIR I NEED YOUR HELP!”

Zane regained his clear vision but was already affected by the hallucinogenic effect of the previous bite. He was not able to see the leeches. All that he was able to see was his wife happily running towards him.

“Carol?!” sighed Zane.

“Captain, come on, help me!” shouted Daniels desperately.

Zane’s image quickly changed and now saw a disfigured Daniels shooting at Carol. Full of rage and feeling danger, Zane raised his firegun and shot Daniels in quick succession. She fell, injured.

Zane then looked at what appeared to be a happy Carol running towards him. He opened his arms wide to hug her wife and realize herself once again, unaware that in fact, a group of leech creatures were coming towards him. The group of leeches split into two. One headed towards Daniels and the other towards Zane. Even though Daniel's scream of despair was strong enough to scare anyone, Zane was not able to break free from his hallucination. He met his demise snuggled against her most cherished one. As the leeches gained control of the area, the blue hexagonal ring went through the facility once again, hiding any trace of the true nature of the facility.