

SEARCH AND RESCUE



A SHORT STORY BY JACKSON ALLEN

Search and Rescue

By Jackson Allen

I pick up his trail at the edge of a crater.

Look up at the sky. Reddish-purple with two or three low-hanging moons. My ship is behind me, little junky thing that wouldn't survive long if I had to stay here. The only good thing about the craft is that it has two seats. One for me and one for him.

Hopefully.

The control surfaces on this spacesuit are clunky. If I had time, I'd hang out, trade with the locals and buy a better jump pack. We're on the clock. The kid's been here for weeks, and if I don't get him out in the next few hours, he won't be coming back at all.

The radio crackles. "Hey, Ryan ... Find him yet?"

"Nope," I grunt, picking my way down the crater wall. "I have a faint signal in my one o'clock position. Distance is about two clicks."

"Klicks?"

"Kilometers, Carlo," I growl to my controller. "You know what I mean."

"You've been watching too many war movies, dude. Just say kilometers like everyone else."

"Whatever. Next time I come out here, you need to give me better gear."

Carlo clicks off without a word. No surprise there. My controller doesn't care. He's never been here before. He can't know how it feels. It's just another operation. Just another rescue.

It never feels that way to me.

Every rescue is *the* rescue. Every time I go out, I know I might not make it back. It doesn't matter. It's worth it. I do this because I care about the lost kids. I care so much that it hurts. Search and Rescue work takes a lot out of you, but the rush you get from saving a life is so huge. It keeps you coming back.

That's what I tell myself, anyway.

At the bottom of the crater now. The signal is in front of me now ... every step is bringing me a little bit closer. Gravity on this planet is near earth-normal, so I

can't bunny hop like you would if you were on the moon. I pause to catch my breath and look at the sky one more time. It's so beautiful here, so clear. No pollution or lights to get in the way. I used to stand out here for hours, counting the stars in the sky.

Time to get moving. I start trudging in the direction of the signal again. To keep my mind occupied, I remind myself of my emergency procedures. Can't teleport the victim, he's a Scout. Need to go out and find him the old fashioned way. Stabilize the kid, help him back to the ship, and then get to the exit point.

This is my fifteenth rescue for the year ... Carlo says that's a record. I'm surprised I have any at all. I tried not going out. For a long time, especially after I made it back and after they had offered me a spot on the SAR team, I wanted no part of it. "I've been out there," I told my parents. "I've seen how easy it is to let go. Why do you want me to go back out there and see it again?"

"You don't have to go back out," my Dad said to me. "But don't you think you should?"

"Dad, I almost died out there!"

"I know," Dad shifted in his glove-leather easy chair, almost dropping the tablet in his lap. "I think about that a lot. That's why I think it's a unique opportunity.

They need people like you, who understand what it feels like to be lost. You need a chance to prove that you're bigger than this."

"I'm already bigger than this," I shot back. "I never went back out again."

"So?"

"So I'm not dumb enough to make the same mistake twice."

"Look, Ryan," Dad tried to reason with me. "Nobody's saying you have to do this. I just think you ought to try. After all, those guys who brought you home risked something, too. Shouldn't you try to pay that forward?"

We argued for hours. I couldn't accept Dad's point of view. He never ventured out, and he couldn't understand what it felt like to be out here. In the end, someone convinced me to give SAR, or search and rescue, work a shot. It just wasn't Dad.

Carlo's voice snaps me back to the present. "His vitals are starting to dip, Ryan.

We need to find him quick."

"I know, I know," I say, picking up the pace. "I'm still ten minutes away, and we have another thirty minutes to make it back to the ship."

"Couldn't you land any closer?"

"Carlo, how many times do we have to go over this?" I complain. "The surface of the crater might not support the weight."

"You're walking over it, how's it feel?"

I try to be patient. There's so much about this place that Carlo doesn't understand. "Our scout's disoriented, bro. He might panic when he sees the ship. We don't need to chase him away."

"We're just cutting it close," Carlo mutters. "Maybe too close."

"I know. Let me get there and check him over. The ground seems to be okay so if you want, you can remote in and pilot the ship over to us when I give you the signal."

"Got it." I'm almost to the far side of the crater. Primordial winds blow across the ground, eradicating any footprints the boy might have left. Never would have found him without the transponder.

The eroded wall of the crater rises ahead of me. The boy I'm looking for might be in any one of a hundred crevices. It reminds me of my rescue; when they first brought me home. This is what it must have looked like to them.

I still stay in touch with the two guys who rescued me. They are the reason I got into the SAR program. I had been out on the planet's surface for several days. I was out of it, weak from hunger and dehydration. No sleep in days. I thought I was going to die, but I refused to turn off my life support systems. Part of me wanted to die and get it over with while another part of me wanted to keep breathing. I needed to see if things would get better.

When Mike and Jose found me, my oxygen levels were low, and I was drifting in and out of consciousness. I barely remember them pulling me out of the crevice and getting me shipped out on the medevac transport. Later, they visited me via video chat in the hospital.

"Wish we could come in person, sport," Mike said. "We're gearing up for another trip."

"Yeah ..." I struggled for something to say that wasn't about how scared and ashamed I felt. What were you supposed to say to the guys that saved your life after you had decided to give it up?

Jose must have known what I thought because he leaned forward into the camera. "Hey, Ryan." I looked up at him. "We're here to extend a hand, not wag a finger, right?"

"Yeah, but ..." I couldn't find the right words. These guys saved my life. I owed them everything, but I couldn't say anything. "I just don't know why I did it."

"Why you did what," Jose asked. "Go out there?"

"Yeah."

"Someone put it this way," Jose said. "'Kids who need the most love will ask for it in the most unloving ways.'"

"What does that mean?"

"I think you know." Tears welled up in my eyes, and I nodded. No words could push past the lump in my throat. Jose knew. He wasn't there to judge me, he was there to help.

Later, when I asked him about joining SAR, Jose helped me again. He agreed with Dad: I needed to prove to myself that I was bigger than my mistakes.

"But I don't know if I can do it," I said.

Jose grinned. "Nobody does. That's the scary part." An amber light winks on in my helmet. Now I have a new problem.

My life support pack is acting up. The temperamental generic battery pack fades in and out. If I lose power, my atmospheric converter will stop working. I won't have anything to translate the gasses around me into breathable air.

"Carlo, we have a problem," I announce, channeling Tom Hanks.

"What now?"

"Power and life support. I told you I needed better gear."

"No time to turn back now," Carlo answers. "Go find that kid; I'll bring you home as soon as you have him."

"Roger that. Better get the ship warmed up ... I have the feeling we'll need it fast."

Carlo clicks off as I reach the crater wall. Over my eyebrows, the helmet's HUD shows his signal dead ahead. On the ground leading into a crevice are the faint reminders of footprints. "Jason?" I try calling over my radio. "Are you there?"

Nothing but silence. Winds moan through the passage as I follow footprints that lead toward a cave. "Jason?" I curse at having to use my floodlight. The lamp uses my battery pack and sucks up precious amps I need for life support.

"No sign of him?" Carlo asks.

"Not yet. Bring the ship over."

"You got it."

"Kid," I call. "Where are you?" My floodlight picks out more footprints, and some scratches on the walls of the cave. Someone has used a tool to carve rudimentary petroglyphs: a man, a house, a dog. They get more complex as I work my way along the wall. Now they're spelling words ...

I can't do this anymore.

I'm sorry mom.

This is not your fault.

Jason Tyler Roth.

That's when I find him. My light picks out the dirty shoulder of his spacesuit. Jason lays crumpled like a wadded-up tissue at the bottom of the wall, not ten feet from where I'm standing.

"Kid!" I stumble over to him. "Jason!" I roll him over, alert to any signs of life.

Condensation on the inside of his helmet means he is still breathing. The

readout on his chest plate shows his battery is at zero. Jason's running on the meager amount of power from his backup power source, and that is also fading out.

"Jason!" I place my helmet against his. If his radio doesn't work, you can press both faceplates together to make a sound conductor. It's a useful life hack in an emergency like this one. I shout and then I shout again. "Jason!"

Thankfully, the boy's eyes flutter to life. He looks at me in exhausted confusion. Long curly hair, dried snot on his upper lip. He's been crying. You can't wipe your nose in space.

"Can you sit up?" I yell through the armored plexiglass of my helmet. "I'm going to get you out of here."

"Are ... are you real?" he mumbles, peering at me with dreamy, unfocused pupils. "Am I alive?"

"Yes, you're alive," I shout back. "But we need to go home now."

Jason's face squeezes tight, and he begins to cry again. "I can't ... I can't go home."

"Yes, you can-"

"I can't ... they know."

"What do they know?" I call, trying to remain patient. If I were strong enough, I'd pick him up and manhandle him out of the cave. You can do that on planets with lower gravity, but not here. I need his cooperation. "What do they know, dude?"

"They know I tried to die," he wails, turning away from me. "I can't go back!"

This is why they send me. Controllers, other SAR guys, don't get it. They can't understand the confusion, the shame, and the fear. Until you've been out here at the edge, you don't know what it feels like to look into the abyss and have it look into you. After that happens, you can't go back home again. You aren't the same person.

I grab him and pull his faceplate to mine again, but he won't meet my eyes. "Listen to me Jason," I yell. "Yes, you can go back. I've been here before."

"You don't know how it feels," Jason keeps repeating.

It's time for me to use the nuclear artillery. There's a reason they do this with a real person versus a bot with a screen. It's something about Scouts that I don't completely understand. When they're almost gone, they can't listen to anyone

but a real person. It has to be a real human connection, it cannot be fake.

Nothing else can bring them home. "Look at me," I command, leaning forward so he can see my face through his steamy helmet. "Look at me."

It takes a moment for him to slow down. Actually, his low life support is working in my favor because he's running out of oxygen to speak with. He runs out of air, and his chest is working with exertion to get air into his lungs. "Look at me," I repeat. Jason's unfocused eyes finally meet mine again.

"Yes, Jason," I say. "Yes, I do know how it feels. That's why they sent me. Your mom and dad asked me to be here. I told them how you felt and that I understood. That's when they asked me to come to see you."

He peers at me, chest heaving. "You ... you know?"

"Yeah," I smile sadly. "I do. I've been here."

"This place?"

"One just like it. I'll take you there some day. But right now, I need you to sit up, bro. I have the ship waiting outside."

"What am ... what am I supposed to tell them?"

"I'll help you with that," I say. "But first, I need you to sit up." I put my hands under his armpits. "Come on, help me out here."

As Jason makes a feeble attempt at sitting up, I hear a new alarm sound. My battery is out, and now my auxiliary power is running. I need to get this kid moving fast, but he has no oxygen.

Spacesuits are designed for emergencies like this. I connect our external air ports with a two-meter hose and turn a valve. Now my oxygen is running to both suits, and Jason has a chance to breathe again.

The effect is immediate. The teen takes an involuntary deep breath as his lungs get used to having clean air again. His helmet clears of condensation and his eyes lose their dreamy, unfocused look. As good as that is, my spacesuit's alert system pitches higher and higher. We only have about sixty seconds of life support left.

"Come on, bro." I lift him to his feet and throw an arm over my shoulder. The last thing he hears before I pull my faceplate away is me saying: "We have to move, now!" The rubber and fabric of our suits squeal and scrape while we stumble toward the mouth of the cave. Over the sound of our motion is the

rumbling of my spacecraft. Carlo has brought it in for a bumpy landing, and the canopy is rising as soon as we reach the struts.

"Get in, get in!" I disconnect the hose and motion to Jason: *you should go first*. He's a little slow to understand, so I shove him toward the ladder and over the edge of the cockpit. Jason sits down as I hear the last *ding* of my life support alarm. Power's gone and so is the constant, reassuring *whir* of my life support fans. No time to lose.

I clamber into the cockpit and seal it. Just like traveling on an airplane; when two people are running out of oxygen, you take care of yourself first. This time was no exception. As soon as we have solid air pressure, my helmet is off, and I'm taking some grateful gulps of clean air. Then I reach over and pull Jason's helmet off and let him breathe, too.

When our lungs calm down, I report in. "Unit 671. I have the target, and I'm heading in."

Carlo's voice crackles over the cheap speakers. "Good job 671 ... Get to the exit point and we'll take over from there."

"On my way." I'm too tired to fly, so I select our preset course and let the autopilot take over. Our ship is soon pointed up toward the stars, achieving escape velocity for our jump home.

Jason is slumped in his jump seat, staring dully at the receding planet. Tears streak from his eyelids, dropping backward from the steady pull of our acceleration. "My mom and dad are gonna be so mad at me," he finally says.

"Trust me ... they're just going to be glad you're ok."

"My parents are getting divorced. That's why I left." Jason looks at me to see if this bombshell makes me fall off my chair.

"I know," I shrug. "I read your profile before I jumped out. People don't become Scouts because they're happy at home. When it was my turn, it was because my father died. I couldn't take it anymore."

"What did you do?"

"Same thing as you, pal. I needed to be away from them." I nod back toward the planet, which was almost a dot now. "Out for several weeks, jailbroke my ship and my suit so they couldn't recall me. Then I waited for the end."

"What happened after that?"

"Just like you. Somebody came to find me, someone who had been there. When they found me, they let me make the choice to come home. Mike and Jose listened to me. Nobody else did that."

"So you'll listen to me?"

"Of course," I look at him. "That's part of the job. You get home and get better. We'll keep talking. Maybe one day you'll be sitting where I am, bringing someone home."

Jason's face tightens with bitterness. "That's never gonna happen."

I laugh. "That's what I said. Never say never, bro."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." The proximity alarm beeps. We're about to jump home. I give my harness a final tug to make sure it's tight. "One step at a time, though. One step at a time."

Lights streak across the sky as we begin to jump. Flashes of brilliant colors streak past our eyeballs. Faster and faster. We're falling toward a bright ball of white light. The ball grows bigger and bigger until it's the only thing I can see-

"- and he's back." Carlo's voice sounds strange when it isn't coming from a radio. He's right next to me, peeling the trode set off my head. "Just relax, duder. You got Jason home."

I yawn and rub my face, getting used to all the new sensations. Coming in from a deep virtual reality link is disorienting. You're hyperaware of every part of your body now that the VR system isn't controlling the experience.

I've only been under for a couple of hours, but Jason's been down there for almost two weeks. "How's Jason doing?" I ask.

"See for yourself." I turn my head. Jason's on the couch next to me. He's moving fitfully and crying as the medics unwind all of his gear and gently moving him to a stretcher. Like anybody else coming out of a coma, it will take Jason some time to get used to life in the regular world. His muscles have atrophied, and he's got the faint outline of a beard.

They only call us in for the hard ones. Jason's parents tried for a week to get him to come back on their own. When that didn't work, they called in some experts who got him on an IV drip so he wouldn't starve. Then they sent messages in for him to come out.

Nobody planned for virtual reality to be dangerous. Over time, the Internet developed ways to get around the safety protocols. Virtual reality can be jailbroken as easily as you break a mobile phone. Open source systems let you do anything you want. It's not just about safety, every online VR universe has a community devoted to hacking it. Whether you're into space, fantasy, Westerns, or war ... you can download and install a patch. Every round can be a winner, every shot could be fatal, and every experience will be 'authentic.'

If you're into exploration, like Jason, you can turn off all the lockouts. It lets you test your survival skills against the system. It's a badge of honor to experience the reality of games without any safety nets. The truth is you can get so deep out there that your entire body can shut down. In a world where they plan every kid's life from birth, this is our idea of an extreme sport. They call the participants 'Scouts.'

I should know. I was one of them.

Mike and Jose brought me home when I was twelve. For the past two years, I've been going out and bringing kids like Jason home. That was after a year of therapy and a year of training.

A rescue like Jason's is a good one. It doesn't always work out this well. Some kids are too far gone, and I can't get to them in time. Others just refuse to come back. All I can do is keep trying. I keep talking until their eyes close and Carlo whispers to me that it's time for me to jump back.

Those are the hard ones.

One of the reasons I'm good at my job is that I won't give up. Carlo has to drag me out of VR kicking and screaming. Then I'm on the disabled list. It takes me a few weeks to get back together through some intense psychotherapy and meds. Search and rescue takes a lot out of you.

But I don't quit. I can't.

I don't dream about the kids I didn't save. Instead, I dream about the kids I might not get to if I stop. One recurring nightmare is about me. I waste away in that virtual cavern while Mike and Jose are out living their lives in the real world. "If I don't go out," I keep telling my therapist, "who will?"

"You're oversimplifying the problem," she says. She's right, of course. I think she knows the real reason, the dirty little secret of rescue work.

Do you know? It's pretty straightforward. The dirty little secret of rescue work is knowing that I can go out to the edge and come back again. I'm not just rescuing them.

I'm rescuing myself.

About the Author

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