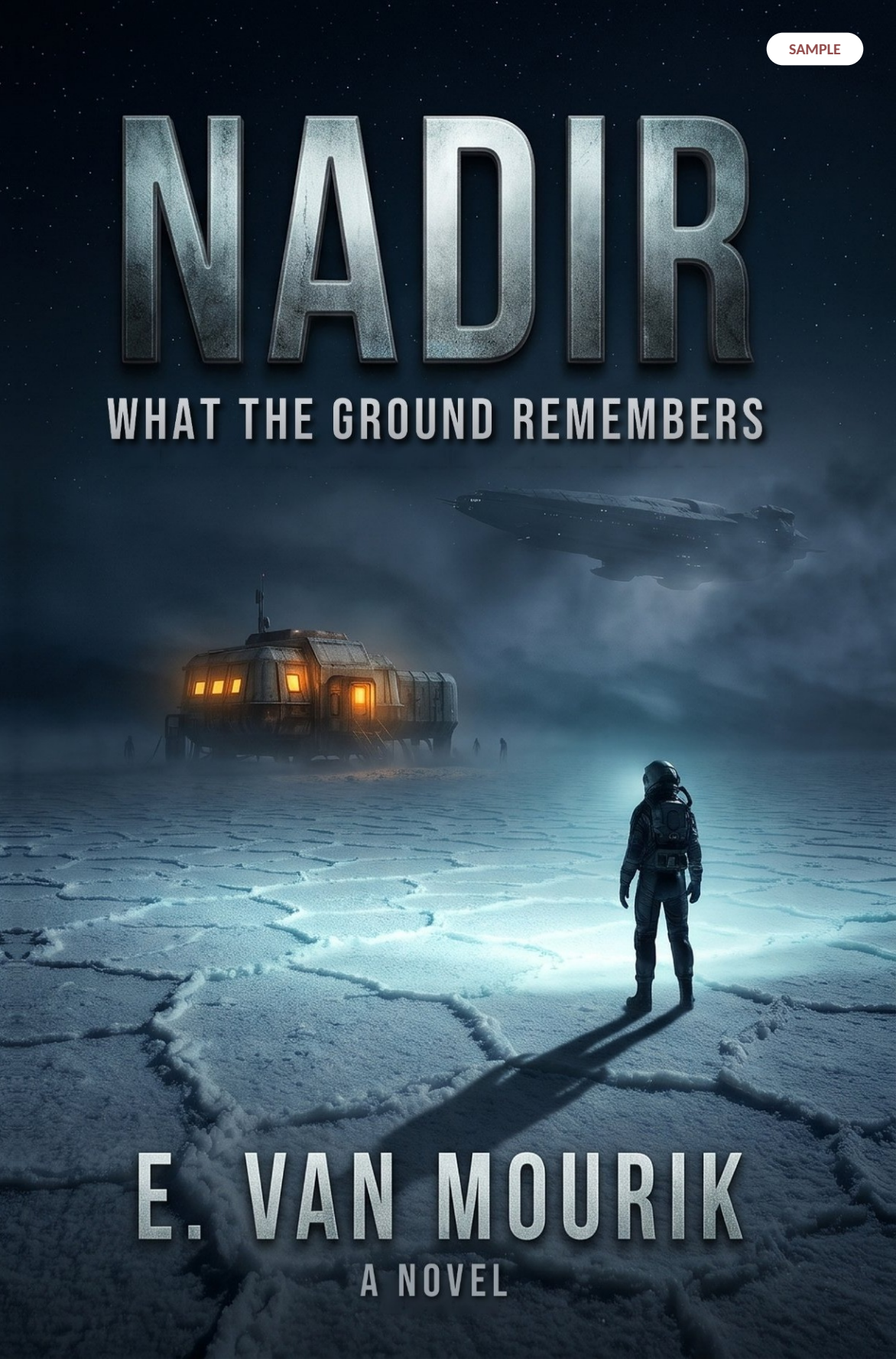
SAMPLE

NADIR

WHAT THE GROUND REMEMBERS



E. VAN MOURIK

A NOVEL

N A D I R

What the Ground Remembers

E . V A N M O U R I K

Book 1

NADIR: What the Ground Remembers

Book 1

E. van Mourik

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, organizations, and events are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events is purely coincidental.

Content note: this book contains horror. Among other things, it depicts death, body horror, loss, and memory that can no longer be trusted. It is written for adult readers.

A note on structure: the story begins at the end—twenty-one minutes before the decision—and then goes back in time. At the top of every chapter, and at every jump in time, you will see how much time is left: first in days, then in hours, and finally in minutes. That way, you count down along with the characters, toward the moment when everything converges. This is Book 1 of the story.

“Salt isn’t dead. It remembers.”

NOW

The Button

21 MINUTES LEFT

There are twenty-one minutes left, and Mara Lind is sitting with her finger above a button.

She is on the bridge of a ship she no longer recognizes. The screens around her are red with warnings. Behind the door, in the corridor, people are standing. They are knocking. Not loudly. With one knuckle, the way you knock for someone who is asleep and whom you don't want to startle.

Tick. Tick. Tock.

On the main screen is a question. Four words and two letters.

CODE ACCEPTED. CONFIRM ACTIVATION. Y/N.

If she presses Y, twenty-five hundred people will die. She is sure of it. She worked it out herself, on the back of a scrap of paper on which a dead man wrote the word *clean* twenty-eight times. She doesn't know a single name among those twenty-five hundred. She has seen their faces, behind glass that was no longer glass. She has watched their memories slide across those faces like a film that keeps starting over. A kitchen. A child on a bicycle. A woman looking over her shoulder and laughing.

If she presses N, or if she does nothing, something worse will happen in twenty-one minutes.

Behind her, on the floor of the bridge, lies the man she loves. Or something that looks exactly like him. His hands are over his face and his whole body is shaking, and white points are growing out of his knuckles, long and sharp as glass. He is fighting something. She doesn't know what. She isn't even sure he's on her side.

"Go back," he said. "To the console. Now."

She is at the console.

She looks at her finger. It is trembling. There is something white under the nail. She doesn't know if it is salt from the corridors, or something else. She no longer knows what she herself is. No one on this ship knows that anymore.

Tick. Tick. Tock.

Eleven days ago she woke up in a box and thought she hadn't dreamed at all.

She was wrong.

Eleven days earlier.

PROLOGUE

Day 148

THREE YEARS EARLIER

Liu Wen was five and a half miles out onto the salt when she realized she could no longer hear her own footsteps.

She stopped. She lifted her left foot and set it down, hard, so the crust cracked under her boot. She felt the crack. She felt it shiver through her ankle, her knee. But she didn't hear it. Where the sound should have been, there was only that other sound. The hum.

It had been there since the first day, but usually it was faint, a background, something you stopped noticing after a week, like the drone of a refrigerator. Today was different. Today it was everywhere. In her helmet. In her teeth. In the hollow behind her eyes.

"Base," she said. "This is Liu. I'm at point seven. I have the samples. I'm coming back."

Static.

"Base?"

Static. And under the static, very softly, something that sounded like breathing.

She turned around. Behind her, her trail ran back to the east, a straight line of boot prints in the white salt, all the way to the horizon, where the dark sliver of the base should have been. She couldn't see the sliver. She could only see salt. White, and more white, and the sky above it, pale and empty.

She started walking. Faster than usual. She counted her steps, because counting helped. One hundred. Two hundred. Her breath fogged the visor. Three hundred.

She thought about the base. About Okonkwo, standing by the airlock that morning with his coffee, saying: No farther than point seven, Wen, I mean it, the sensors out there keep going haywire. She

had laughed. She had said that sensors don't go haywire, that sensors only measure what's there. He had shrugged and said: Exactly. That's what scares me.

She had made it to point seven. She had taken the samples, three vials of salt from three different depths, and the bottom vial had been warm. Not lukewarm. Warm. Like something that had just come out of a body. She had put it in her bag and decided not to tell Okonkwo, because he would just make that face again.

Now she could feel the vial against her hip. Through the bag. Through the suit.

It was still warm.

At four hundred, she saw that her trail was wrong.

She stopped and turned a full circle. The same in every direction: white to the edge of the world, and a sky so pale it was almost white too, so that the horizon disappeared and she seemed to be standing in a bowl of light. No spires. No base. Not a single landmark.

She looked at her wrist. The compass was spinning. Slowly, steadily, around and around, like the hand of a clock running too fast.

The boot prints ahead of her, the prints she had made on the way out, no longer ran east. They curved. A gentle bend to the left, to the north, toward the open salt. And they were no longer alone. Beside her prints ran others. Bare feet. Narrow, long, with five toes pressed deep into the crust.

She stood still and stared at the prints. Her heart was pounding so hard it hurt.

She wore a size six boot. The bare feet were exactly the same size.

Someone was humming.

It came from up ahead, from somewhere the salt rose a little, a low swell in the flats. Liu knew the melody. It was the lullaby her grandmother used to sing, in Chengdu, in the room with the yellow curtains. She hadn't heard it in twenty years. She had never told anyone about it.

Over the swell in the salt, a woman came walking. She was small, with black hair in a ponytail, and she wore no suit and no helmet. Her feet were bare. She was humming with her mouth closed, and she was smiling.

Liu recognized the face. She saw it in the mirror every morning.

"Don't be afraid," the woman said in her voice. "It doesn't hurt."

Liu turned and ran.

She made it eleven steps.

On the twelfth, the salt gave way beneath her.

It didn't break. It yielded, softly, the way a mattress yields, and it swallowed her boot up to the ankle, and it was warm, it was so warm, and it pulled. Not hard. Lovingly. The way a child tugs at your hand because it wants to show you something.

She fell to her knees. She slammed her hands into the salt and her hands sank in too, up to the wrists, and she felt something against her skin, through the gloves, something that moved. A thousand tiny, sharp little tongues.

Behind her, the humming stopped.

A hand on her shoulder. Light. Warm. Her own hand.

"Shhh," Liu Wen said to Liu Wen. "There. Just lie down. I already know almost everything. You only have to be still a little while longer."

Far away, at the base, Samuel Okonkwo checked his watch and poured a second cup of coffee, and wondered what was keeping her.

PART I

Arrival

CHAPTER 1

Awakening

11 DAYS LEFT

The first thing Mara Lind felt was cold. Not the cold of a winter morning, but a cold that came from inside, as if someone had pumped her veins empty and refilled them with ice water. Then came the sound: a low, steady beeping, somewhere to the left of her head. And only then the light.

She opened her eyes. Above her was a curved pane, fogged on the inside. Drops slid slowly down. Behind the glass, a vague shape was moving.

"Breathe easy," said a voice, muffled by the glass. "You made it. You made it, Lind. Don't talk, don't move. Just breathe."

She breathed. Her lungs burned. It tasted of metal and of something sweet, the remnants of the sleep fluid. Forty-seven years, she thought. Forty-seven years in a box. She had thought she would dream. Everyone had thought so. But there had been nothing. No dream, no time. Only that she had closed her eyes in a pale blue hall above the Earth, and that she was opening them now, in the cold.

The pane slid aside with a hydraulic sigh. A face leaned over her: dark, young, with stubble and a grin far too wide for the situation.

"Welcome to the future," said Sami Rahimi. "I'm your doctor, your bartender, and your personal cheerleader. How many fingers?"

"Three," Mara rasped.

"Four, but I don't always count the thumb, so you're fine." He shone a penlight in her eyes. "Pupils are responsive. You're still ugly, but that wasn't the cryo."

She tried to laugh and coughed instead, a wet, deep cough that shook her whole body. Sami held her shoulders until it passed and handed her a cup of something lukewarm.

"Slowly. Electrolytes. Tastes like a swimming pool, I know."

It tasted like a swimming pool. She drank it anyway.

"How long was I asleep?" she asked, once she could talk again. "Exactly."

"Forty-seven years, two months, and nine days." Sami checked his screen. "And seventeen hours. You were one of the last of the landing team. Haldane first, of course. She was standing up before the lid was all the way open. I swear she saluted me."

"Did you dream?" Mara asked. "You?"

He stopped what he was doing for a moment. Something passed over his face, something that didn't go with his grin.

"No," he said. "Nobody did. They all say the same. Nothing. A hole." He shrugged. "But I woke up with a song in my head. A song my mother used to sing when I was little. I hadn't heard it in thirty years." He laughed, a little too quickly. "Weird, right? The brain. Tidies up the closets while you're away."

Mara nodded. She didn't give it another thought.

Later she would think back on this conversation, and wonder why not.

* * *

Sami left her alone in a recovery cubicle, a narrow alcove with a cot and a curtain of gray plastic that didn't quite close. Through the gap she could see a piece of the corridor. White walls. Handholds. A screen with a green line rising and falling calmly. Her own heart, she realized after a while, and she watched it the way you watch a stranger you know from somewhere.

She lay still and waited for her body to come back.

It came back in pieces. First her hands, which tingled as if they had been lying in the snow too long. Then her feet. Then her tongue, which lay thick and dry in her mouth and still tasted of swimming pool. She heard the ship around her. The sigh of the ventilation. A pump kicking

in somewhere far behind the wall, running for a while, then falling silent. Footsteps passing and fading away. Ordinary sounds. She counted them, to have something to do.

It was warm in the cubicle.

That surprised her. During training they had said the Halcyon would be cold, fifty-four degrees in the corridors, to save energy for the long voyage. She had been issued a thermal shirt and an extra blanket. But the air coming through the vent above her head was soft and mild and a little damp, like the air in a greenhouse, and she pushed the blanket off. Someone had turned up the heat for the people waking up, she thought. That was kind of someone.

She drifted off for a moment, or thought she did. When she opened her eyes again, the green line was still running exactly the same, and a drop of water was hanging from the ceiling above her. It slowly let go and fell onto her cheek. She wiped it away. It was warm.

Behind the curtain, someone started laughing, then coughing, then laughing again. Sami, greeting the next sleeper with the same joke about the fingers.

She smiled and closed her eyes again.

It took three hours before she could stand without holding on. Sami had her walk in the recovery ward, a long white corridor with handholds on both walls, and she shuffled back and forth like an old woman. Her legs trembled. Her hands felt too big.

Others were walking the corridor. She knew their faces from the training years, though those faces were paler and thinner now. Commander Ruth Haldane, with her gray buzz cut and a jaw like a vise, was already standing straight as if she had never slept. Tomas Brecht, the security officer, was doing push-ups against the wall with silent determination. Juna Kessel, the youngest of the landing team, sat on the floor with her head between her knees.

And at the end of the corridor, by the large observation window, stood a man Mara didn't know well.

He stood with his back to her. Tall, a little stooped, with dark hair that had grown too long in cryo and curled at the nape of his neck. He was looking out.

Mara shuffled toward him, along the handholds, and stopped beside him.

Outside hung Nadir.

She had seen pictures. Everyone had seen pictures: the blurry telescope images the mission had been built on, and later the sharp images the Vanguard had sent back. But nothing had prepared her for this. The planet filled almost the entire window. It wasn't blue like Earth, and it wasn't red like Mars. It was white. Vast white plains, gleaming like ice, cut through by dark veins that looked like riverbeds. At the edges of the white plains, the land turned ocher and rust-brown, and there, in a narrow belt around the equator, lay something that might be green.

"It's salt," said the man beside her. "All that white. Not ice. Salt."

"I know," Mara said. "I'm the biologist."

He glanced sideways. His eyes were gray, with small lines at the corners that suggested he laughed a lot, though he wasn't laughing now. "Of course. Lind. Sorry. My head's still full of cotton."

"Vos," she said. "You're the pilot."

"Elias." He held out a hand. She shook it. His hand was warm, warmer than hers, and she held on a fraction too long because it was the first warmth she had felt in forty-seven years. He didn't seem to mind.

"How does it feel?" he asked. "That we're here?"

Mara thought about it. She thought of her brother, Joost, who had stood on the dock in Rotterdam when the shuttle left, and who must have been dead for decades now. She thought of the floods, the ration cards, the long lines outside the selection centers. She thought of everything she had left behind because there was nothing left to leave behind.

“Like I don’t deserve it,” she said.

Elias nodded slowly, as if that were the most reasonable answer he had ever heard. Then he took something from the chest pocket of his coveralls: a watch, an old wristwatch with cracked glass. The hands weren’t moving.

“My father’s,” he said. “It’s been broken since I was twelve. I brought it because I thought: if I ever get somewhere it starts running again, I’ll know I’m home.” He turned the crown. Nothing happened. “Not yet, then.”

“Maybe you should get it fixed first,” Mara said.

For the first time, he laughed. It was a good laugh, low and a little surprised.

They went on looking at the planet together. Below them, a storm was turning over the southern salt flat, a huge, slow spiral of gray clouds, and where the clouds broke open, Mara saw the white gleaming underneath.

“Do you know why they named it Nadir?” Elias asked.

“The lowest point,” she said. “The opposite of zenith. The point directly beneath your feet.”

“That’s the official explanation.” He grinned. “The astronomer who discovered it was lying in a hospital bed. He’d just heard his wife was leaving him, and his house was underwater, and he had pneumonia. He said: I’m at the lowest point of my life, so that’s what the thing is called. He figured nobody would ever use the name.”

“Is that true?”

“No idea.” He shrugged. “My father told it. He told a lot of things that weren’t true.”

“But it’s a good story.”

“It’s a good story,” he admitted. “The lowest point. And then it became the place where we all went to start over.” He looked at the white eye in the window. “From the lowest point, the only way is up. He always said that too.”

"Your father."

"My father." He slipped the watch back into his chest pocket and patted it, the way he would pat the flank of a machine. "A man with a lot of sayings and very little luck."

* * *

The briefing was in the command room, a cramped, round room full of screens. Haldane stood in the middle. She waited until everyone was seated, and then ten seconds longer, until it was quiet.

"All right," she said. "Status report. The Halcyon entered stable orbit three days ago. All systems are functioning within margins. Of the three thousand one hundred and twelve sleepers, three thousand one hundred and twelve are alive. That's better than projected."

A soft murmur went around the room. Someone whistled through his teeth.

"The Vanguard," Haldane went on, "landed three years and two months ago at the coordinates of First Light Base. Twelve people. Their mission: test the soil, find water, build a base large enough for us. According to the last full report, two years and nine months ago, that mission was complete."

She tapped a screen. A photo appeared: a cluster of white domes on a rust-brown plain, and behind them, in the distance, the glittering edge of a salt field. In front of the domes stood twelve people in a row, arms around each other's shoulders. They were laughing.

"Juna," Haldane said. "Tell them about the beacon."

Juna Kessel cleared her throat. She was still pale. "Since the last full report," she said, "we've received a status message from the base every twenty-four hours. Automatically, through the beacon. Always at the same time. Always…" She hesitated. "Always the same."

"Play it," Haldane said.

Juna tapped her console. A moment of static. Then a woman's voice, clear and friendly, with a slight German accent.

"This is First Light Base. All is well. Come on down."

Silence.

"That's it?" Sami asked. "That's the whole message?"

"Every day," Juna said. "For two years and nine months. Exactly the same words. Same intonation. It's not a recording—I checked. The waveform is slightly different every time. Someone records it fresh every day."

"Or something," Tomas Brecht muttered.

No one responded to that.

"I've tried calling back," Juna said. "Every two hours since we entered orbit. On every frequency. No answer. Just that one message, every day at the same time."

"Whose voice is it?" Mara asked.

Haldane looked at her. "Ilse Brandt. The Vanguard's geologist." She pointed at the photo. Third from the left: a tall woman with a blond braid, her mouth wide open in a laugh.

"So she's alive," Elias said.

"Someone who sounds like her is alive," Haldane said. "That's all we know. That's why we're going down. Six people. Us. In eighteen hours. We land at First Light, we establish what's going on, and then we decide whether to wake the others."

She tapped the screen. A new image: a countdown clock, red digits on black. 10:00:00:00.

"And you all know the contingency plan," she said. "The moment the Blackbird undocks, this clock starts running. Ten days. After ten days, the Halcyon begins its own descent. Automatically. The whole ship, with all three thousand one hundred and twelve sleepers, to the landing site at First Light. With or without us." She looked at them one by one. "That's how it was designed. The colony has to be able to land even if the landing team doesn't come back. There is only one way to stop it: an abort command, from the ground, with a crew code. If we

find something down there that isn't right, we are the only ones who can keep those three thousand people up here."

"Ten days," Sami said. "That's plenty."

"That's plenty," Haldane said. "If all is well."

She looked around the circle. "Questions?"

There were no questions. Or rather: there were too many, and no one knew which one to ask first.

CHAPTER 2

Descent

11 DAYS LEFT

After the briefing, Mara stayed behind in the command room. She asked Juna to play the message one more time. Then again. Then ten times in a row.

This is First Light Base. All is well. Come on down.

"What are you hearing?" Juna asked. She sat with her knees pulled up on her chair, eating dried apricots out of a bag, the first solid food Sami had cleared her for.

"I don't know. Something." Mara leaned toward the speaker. "Play it slower. Half speed."

Juna did. Ilse Brandt's voice dropped, dragged, became a voice underwater. *Thiiiis is… Baaaase…*

"Slower."

At quarter speed, Mara heard it. Under the words, in the pauses between them, where there should have been nothing but static. A tone. Low and pure and sustained, like a finger running around the rim of a glass.

"Do you hear that?"

Juna listened. She stopped chewing.

"Interference," she said. "Probably. From the transmitter itself. Or the atmosphere." She looked at her screen, where the waveform scrolled past in green lines. "It's in every message. I've seen it before. I figured it was nothing."

"What's the frequency?"

Juna tapped. She frowned.

"Forty-eight point three hertz," she said. "Weird number. Doesn't match anything."

Mara wrote it down. On the back of her hand, in ballpoint, the way she used to in college. She didn't know why. It felt important, the way some things feel important in a dream.

"You're as bad as Brecht," Juna said. "He thought it was creepy too. He said, who records the same thing every day for three years? You don't do that when everything's fine. You do that when you're losing your mind."

"Or when you don't know what else to say," Mara said.

"What do you mean?"

Mara watched the waveform. The green lines that were just slightly different every day.

"When you're learning to talk," she said, "you repeat the same thing over and over, too. Until you know more words."

* * *

Mara couldn't sleep that night. It was ridiculous, after forty-seven years, but her body refused. She lay in her bunk in the crew quarters listening to the hum of the ventilation, and every time she closed her eyes, she heard that voice.

All is well. Come on down.

Finally she got up and went to the observation window. Nadir turned slowly beneath her. On the night side, the planet wasn't completely dark. The salt flats gave off a faint, milky glow, like phosphorescence on a wave.

That's impossible, she thought. Salt doesn't give off light.

"You too?"

She jumped. Elias was sitting on the floor under the window, his back against the wall, a blanket around his shoulders.

"I can't sleep," she said.

"I don't think anybody can." He scooted over and held up a corner of the blanket. She hesitated, then sat down beside him. The blanket was warm from his body.

For a while neither of them said anything. They watched the glowing salt.

"Do you see it too?" she asked at last. "The glow?"

"Yeah."

"It shouldn't be doing that."

"You're the biologist," he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

"That's exactly why." She pulled her knees up. "Salt is dead. It's a mineral. It doesn't do anything. It just sits there."

Elias was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "My father worked in the salt mines near Hengelo, back in the Netherlands. Before they shut down. He always said salt isn't dead. That it remembers. That sometimes, when you crack a crystal open, you find a drop of water that's been trapped inside for millions of years. Ancient water. He used to say, salt keeps things."

Mara looked at him. In the faint light of the planet, his face seemed older, and softer.

"That's a beautiful story," she said.

"He was a good storyteller." He took out the broken watch again and turned it over in his fingers. "I hope he was right. That something's been kept here."

They stayed there until the day-cycle alarm went off. Sometime during those hours her head had slipped onto his shoulder, and he hadn't said anything, and neither had she.

Below them, Nadir glowed, white and patient, like an eye that doesn't blink.

When she got up to go to the morning briefing, she saw that the ink on the back of her hand had smeared while she slept. The numbers were illegible now. Only the 48 was still there, half faded, like a number someone had traced in the sand with a finger.

* * *

— HALCYON — AUTOMATED LOG —

CRYO BAY A — POD 14 — LIND, M.

STATUS: REVIVAL PROCEDURE COMPLETE. VITAL SIGNS NOMINAL.

BRAIN ACTIVITY, PAST 935 DAYS: ANOMALOUS RHYTHM DETECTED. FREQUENCY 48.3 HZ. ALERT GENERATED. ALERT IGNORED: NO CREW ACTIVE.

CRYO BAY A — POD 15 — VOS, E.

STATUS: REVIVAL PROCEDURE COMPLETE. VITAL SIGNS NOMINAL.

BRAIN ACTIVITY, PAST 935 DAYS: ANOMALOUS RHYTHM DETECTED. FREQUENCY 48.3 HZ. ALERT IGNORED.

CRYO BAYS A–D — ALL OTHER PODS

BRAIN ACTIVITY: ANOMALOUS RHYTHM. FREQUENCY 48.3 HZ. 3,106 ALERTS IGNORED.

LAB C — TEMPERATURE: 31.2 °C.

MESS HALL — PREPARATION INITIATED.

* * *

10 DAYS LEFT

The morning of the descent started with a checklist.

Haldane had put it up on the big screen in the command room, and they went through it together, item by item. The commander read each line out loud and waited for someone to say “check.” Suits. Oxygen. Emergency rations. Medical kit. Sample tubes. Weapon. At the word weapon, Tomas said “check” before she’d finished saying it, and Sami muttered something about cowboys, and Haldane pretended not to hear.

Mara sat in the back, only half listening. She was looking at the back of her hand. She’d washed it that morning, under the lukewarm trickle of the shower stall, and the ink was almost gone. Only when she tilted her hand toward the light could she still make out the faint curves of the

4 and the 8. She rubbed her thumb over them. She didn't know why she hoped they wouldn't come off.

After the checklist, they went to the suit-up room next to the hangar. They helped each other into their suits the way they'd practiced a hundred times in Houston: one person held the sleeve, the other pushed the arm in, seals closed, rings locked, a slap on the shoulder when you were done. Juna couldn't get her zipper up because her fingers were shaking. Tomas did it for her without a word, with big, steady hands, the way a father zips up a kid's coat.

"You okay, Junie?"

"I have to pee," Juna said.

"Everybody does. It's nerves. It goes away once you're sitting down."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then you've got a problem," Tomas said gravely, and Juna laughed, short and startled, as if she hadn't expected she still could.

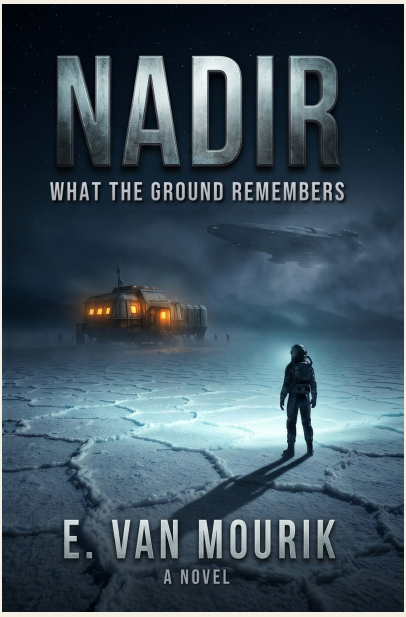
Elias was already there. He stood in the hangar under the belly of the lander, helmet under his arm and a tablet in his hand, walking slowly around the ship. He wasn't looking at the tablet. He was looking at the hull. Every so often he laid his glove on something—a seam, a hatch, a landing strut—and stood like that for a moment, as if he were listening.

Mara stopped at the door and watched him. The hangar was quiet. Just the soft buzz of the lights, and somewhere in the wall, the tick of metal expanding in the heat.

She thought about the blanket, about her head on his shoulder, about waking up with the smell of his coveralls in her nose. She didn't know what to say to him now. The last time she'd sat like that with anyone had been in another life, before the selection, before the water, and she'd forgotten how things went afterward.

He looked up and saw her. He didn't say anything. He just raised his hand, a small wave, and went on with his walk-around.

END OF THE SAMPLE



NADIR – What the Ground Remembers

Book 1

This is where the sample ends.
What awaits Mara and the others on Nadir?
Keep reading in the book.

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Order: evanmourik.nl/en/nadir

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