Firestorm Rescue

"It's just like Off World Battle 7.4," Albert said into the microphone attached to his helmet. "The grid looks exactly the same."

There was a pause, and he pictured the Professor rubbing his hands across his face in the nervous gesture he used whenever things at the research station were not going well.

And today, things were not going well.

"Albert." Long pause. "This is not a game."

Albert grinned. Waited.

"This is life and death, Albert."

The grin disappeared.

The Professor was right. Commander Bryson and Dr. LeClaire were still in a 48-hour cyber sleep—regenerating for the trip back to Earth in three days. And Dr. Van Arndt and his technician, Benton, were stranded at the outpost, rapidly running out of air after a systems malfunction during their final data-gathering mission. So it was up to Albert to operate the shuttle—the big, clunky, not-the-latest-model shuttle—on a rescue mission to bring them back to the safety of the research station.

Through a firestorm.

"Okay, Professor," Albert said. "Walk me through it again."

They did the pre-flight check one more time. Albert repeated all the instructions back perfectly, tested his controls, reported his air pressure and fuel gauge readings and made sure all comm links were working.

It was time to go.

Albert gripped the control lever and punched in the navigation coordinates, then waited for the final word.

He pictured the Professor at the control console, holding his head in his hands and showing every sign that he thought this was a bad idea. He'd pretty well said so from the start.

But Albert had convinced him. Albert, the kid from Orphan Shelter 823, who was only along as an experiment anyway, had persuaded him. Someone had to take the shuttle to retrieve VanArndt and Benton from the damaged outpost before their air ran out. And the Professor was the only one who could manage the research station with its complex array of controls, settings and hazards – especially with this firestorm raging out on the planet's surface.

Why not give the job to the kid who was brought along so Dr. LeClaire could study the effects on a 12-year-old boy living for six months off-world?

"Okay Albert, now there's just one thing more," the Professor said after a long pause.

Albert was impatient now. Would the old guy never shut up and let him get going?

"I have complete confidence in you," said the Professor. "But there's one thing you should know…"

A blinding flash, the shuttle lurched in its mooring and Albert heard the percussive barrage of debris hitting the roof.

"What, Professor?" he shouted into the microphone. "What do I need to know?"

Static in his headphones, and between the flashes of light, Albert could just make out the bay doors open—blown open, it looked like—and a view of the planet's surface beyond.

"Professor!" he yelled. No response.

Another flash of light and a loud clang on the side of the shuttle, which lurched and shuddered.

"Time to go," Albert muttered to himself.

"Shuttle A3, launching," he said, hoping someone could hear and, turning his eyes to the monitor, he positioned the stick, hit the button, and launched the shuttle out into the maelstrom covering the planet's surface.

The first thing he noticed was that it was loud. Really loud. The shuttle's mechanics weren't exactly the latest in either design or materials, so there was a lot of juddering and buzzing and vibration, not to mention the air-flow system, which sounded as if it was working at maximum capacity (and it was, Albert knew, having listened to the Professor's muttered asides during pre-flight when he probably thought Albert couldn't hear or understand him.)But the sound was nothing compared to the sensation of being tied to an ancient Earth machine called a "roller coaster" and rocketing up, down and all around through the planet's thick atmosphere. Not to mention the thrusting and dodging that was taking place thanks to the heat and debris sensors on the hull.

"Weeeeeeee!" Albert said under his breath, wrestling with the console stick for some kind of control.

The professor was right: this was nothing like playing Off World 7.4.

It was better!

But no time to enjoy the ride, Albert reminded himself, trying not to think of the Professor stuck back in the research station with no comm link.

He kept his hand on the stick and dodged the gaseous torpedoes streaking across the shuttle's path. Sometimes the entire shuttle would clang as a piece of molten rock bounced off the super-reinforced hull, and when that happened, the windshield (they still used the old Earth term for the shuttle's front window) would be overwhelmed in a blinding flash.

"Okay, maybe this isn't as awesome as I thought," Albert said out loud after careening almost upside down to avoid another large piece of debris. How much stuff was this storm going to throw at him?

And then suddenly, there it was. The research station beacon flashing steadily through the storm. Red, blue, blue, red. The alarm signal.

Albert pushed the stick gently forward to lower the nose of the shuttle and aimed for the docking bay, its shield solidly in place and needing only the coded password punched into the linked console in the shuttle to open and let him in…

And that's when it struck him.

He didn't know the password.

"NO!" he hollered, quickly pushing the anti-thrusters to bring the shuttle into hover mode. "No, no, no, no."