

Memories

Cam jumped and tossed the rubber ball, sending it gliding through the hoop that was suspended from the ceiling. The orb bounced against the wall and Cam caught it with both hands. “That’s four to nothing.” Cam turned back to Brist. “You gotta work on your defense.”

“Just throw me the ball,” Brist grumbled. Cam liked the game as an alternative to one of the ship’s onboard cardio exercises, but Brist struggled with the nimbleness required for the sport. Thera was in the control room and June was trying to sleep before her shift at the helm.

The crew had been idling over what was formerly Earth for the past three sleep cycles. Thera was still scanning the surrounding area to try and get a better estimate of their exact trajectory. Cam hadn’t had much hope in pursuing them, but hoped they might be able to get a lead on the craft before they got the news of another planet that had been destroyed. For now, since they wouldn’t know if they were going farther away or not, it meant that Cam and the rest of the crew were bound to the ship as it circled the former planet’s moon.

Cam had already done most of the minor maintenance that he’d needed to do, but didn’t want to commence any overhauls until he knew they’d have a good amount of time to do it. Thera and Brist had catalogued all the information they’d acquired from the last planet and June had organized the ship with Cam a dozen times. Without much else to do, Cam had challenged Brist to a sport they’d invented in their travels. Brist had proposed a few full-contact rules for the game, but June had expressly forbidden them from any sort of rough housing until she had a chance to restock the medical supplies.

Cam bounced the ball to Brist and shuffled around the cargo bay, moving in quick circles around Brist. He rushed around Brist’s back and snatched the ball from their clumsy grip. Cam was about to jump and throw the ball again when the ship rocked and a dull thud made Brist and Cam stop moving and look around.

“Asteroid?” Brist asked.

“No way.” Cam shook his head. “Even if Granny is half-blind, there’s no way she’d miss an asteroid in the middle of—“

The ship rocked again and the lights flickered. Thera’s voice yelled over the loud speaker. “All crew to the bridge! Repeat: All crew to bridge, now!”

Cam took off, leaping the stairs three at a time ahead of Brist. June popped her head out of her room as Cam rushed by.

“What’s going on?” June asked, rushing behind him. “Are we under attack?”

“Not sure.” Cam said. “This was the only recognized planet with life on it, no one should be out here!”

The ship rocked again, nearly knocking Cam off his feet. He held his breath for a second as the ship groaned. When things seemed to settle, he rushed up the next staircase and onto the bridge. Thera was in the command chair, checking the screens, maneuvering small levers and adjusting the controls.

“Granny, what’s going on?” Cam asked. Thera raised a shaking finger and pointed at the viewing windows. Cam straightened and blinked his eyes. Without even seeing the readouts, he could tell that this was not a vessel from around the area. Compared to *The Remembrance*, this ship was massive, nearly as big as the moon that the crew had been orbiting the last few days. It was a long, narrow craft that came to a narrow point like a knife’s blade. Cam wasn’t sure where the command module was or how they hadn’t seen it before, but he figured they were scanning *The Remembrance* for weapons.

“It dropped out of warp about five seconds ago.” Thera said, June jumping to the second command chair on her right. “It has the same signature as one of the Plague Fleet ships...origin unknown.”

“Why are we still sitting here? Let’s get outta here!”

“There’s a life sign!” June said, looking at her screen. “Humanoid...it’s faint, but it’s there.”

“I don’t care if they’re humanoid, we need to get as much distance between us and—”

“Not the Fleet ship,” Thera said, maneuvering the controls. “Currently, it’s behind us. I’m using our shields to try and protect the alien organism, but I can’t guarantee that the shields will hold for long.”

“A survivor?” Cam asked.

“A witness, at the very least.” June said. “Cam, we gotta do something.”

“Then keep the forward shields online as long as you can...and when I say punch it, get us out of here! If we’re lucky, they don’t realize we have no weapons.”

“Where are you going?” Thera asked, looking over her shoulder for a minute.

“To do something stupid or brave, I’ll decide when I get there. Keep the airlock facing the life form.”

“We’ll do our best!” June yelled as Cam ran back down the stairs. As he rushed down the corridor, Brist was slowly approaching the bridge, slower to get to the upper levels than Cam or June. “Brist! You’re with me, come on!”

“What’s going on?”

“Life form! Plague Fleet! No time, come on!”

Without questioning, Brist rushed after Cam. Cam jumped down the flight of stairs and into the cargo bay and turned towards the airlock. He started getting into his suit as the ship rocked a second time. Brist arrived as Cam was pulling his legs into the lower half of his environment suit.

“Brist, you’re gonna need your oxygen tank.” Cam said. “And grab the winch...”

“Winch?” Brist asked. “We goin’ fishing?”

“Yup!” Cam said, pulling his arms through the sleeves of his suit as the back sealed along his spine. Putting his helmet on, the heads up display activated and his communications connected to the bridge. “How are the shields holding?”

“They’re meant for radiation and small objects.” June said, distracted. “But, uh...they’re holding. Maybe...sixty five percent?”

The ship rocked again, nearly knocking Cam off his feet.

“Better make that sixty.” June corrected.

“I need you guys to put a ping on the life form and send that to my display.”

“You’re looking at about...three hundred feet from our airlock.” Thera explained as a small red dot blinked on Cam’s display. “There’s debris in the way. And it’s in motion. What’s your plan, captain?”

“Like I said, something brave or something stupid.” Cam said, grabbing one end of the winch from Brist. While Brist prepared for the space walk, Cam tied the free end of the winch around his waist and locked the clamp to his belt. Once Brist had their suit on, Cam walked into the first layer of the airlock and closed the door. Brist locked the winch into the wall and looked at Cam.

“Brist? You’re my anchor.” Cam said, looking up at Brist. “When I tell you to, pull me back in.”

“Once you’re out there you got no steering.” Brist said, their grip tight on the coil of steel in their fingers. “You sure you’re up for this?”

“We’ve done zero gravity experiences before. Just don’t let go of that tether! June, how are the shields?”

“Might have another fifty percent. I can divert power from the extraneous systems if we need to, but we might have...two minutes if they keep this level of fire power.”

“Understood,” Cam said. He opened the outer doors of the airlock and looked out into the expanse. Bits of metal floated in the black void and Cam could see large pieces of stone floating around the ship. The screen of his helmet had a small ring with a distance readout

showing a target ahead of him. Cam took a few quick breaths and charged out of the airlock, jumping into the open space.

In the vacuum, Cam's breathing was amplified inside his helmet. Cam turned and watched the Plague Fleet fire four bolts of energy at *The Remembrance*, the shielding flaring up when they impacted. *The Remembrance* turned to block Cam from their vision, the ships engine illuminating the dark round him. Focusing his attention forward, Cam shifted slightly and ran along the side of large sheet of metal, pushing off of it to gain some more speed. He tucked his arms in beside him and kept his body as narrow as he could.

"Cam!" June yelled into his headset. "We just took another hit. I think they realized we don't have any weapons."

"Pop some flares!" Cam said. "It might spook 'em and buy us some extra time." A flash of blue light pulsed in Cam's periphery and a residual haze illuminated the area for a moment. Cam resisted the urge to look back, keeping the target point ahead on his display. His breathing got heavier as the adrenaline rushed through his system. Even without sound, Cam knew he was picking up a lot of speed as he sailed toward his target. He was starting to make out individual pieces of debris, having to shift and run on some of the bigger pieces. His targeting focused on a small, floating shape in the distance. A white smudge in the darkness that became clearer as Cam approached.

"We're down to forty percent, Cam!"

"Brist get ready to pull me back in!" Cam said. His targeting readout started counting down to double digits. Fifty feet. Cam could make out two arms, two legs, and a small protrusion for the head. Thirty feet. There was a visible glint of light off of some kind of artificial material covering the alien. Ten feet. A crude, yet effective suit, floated helplessly in the dark void, unaware of the chaos. Five feet. Cam reached out for the alien's arm.

His fingers caught something and Cam pulled the humanoid form close to him, wrapping his arms and legs around them. "Brist, pull us back!"

Cam's stomach lurched as he was yanked back toward the ship. Cam turned his head, keeping an eye out for dangerously large pieces of material to dodge. The winch was pulling them back much faster now, the distance to the ship rapidly closing.

"Thirty percent!" June yelled.

"Put in a heading and prepare to jump!"

"Where?" Thera called out.

"Anywhere!" Cam said. "Head towards the Pinwheel System, then head to the Fureos Quadrant."

“Confirmed, Pinwheel to Fureos. How much longer?”

“I can see him!” Brist called from their position. “Another twenty seconds.”

“It’s gonna be close!” June yelled, breathing heavily. Cam blocked all the other distractions out as he rushed towards the airlock. He was getting closer and closer to the airlock, a small square opening on the side of the ship. Brist’s shape became clearer, pulling in lengths of cord to try and speed up his reentry. When Cam was about twenty feet away, Brist dropped the cord and braced to catch Cam and the alien.

Getting caught in Brist’s grasp was like striking a thick wall, but Brist moved a little to buffer the collision. Dropping the alien, Cam slammed his hand on the console and the airlock closed.

“Thera, hit it!” Cam yelled grabbing the nearest brace. The ship lurched, parts of the craft shaking as the engines reeled. Outside, Cam could see the moon and wreckage rushing by. More planets zoomed passed as the starscape blurred around the ship. There was a loud groan as the metal rebelled against the force. Cam held his breath for a second, willing the ship to settle. His repairs held and the craft stopped shaking as it leveled out in high speeds.

“We’re clear of the planet system.” June sighed into the communication array. “We’ll have to see if they follow us, but I think we lost them.”

“They don’t want to be seen, so we gotta get somewhere with a lot of witnesses.” Cam said. “Get us to the most populated system in the Fureos Quadrant as fast as possible.”

“Got it.” Thera sighed. “Course laid in. How’s the life form?”

“Impossible to say.” Cam said. “June, we’ll need you in medical.”

“I’m on my way.” June said.

Cam took off his helmet and looked up at Brist with a smile. Brist smiled back with a smirk. “Stupid or brave?”

“Let’s have future generations decide.” Cam said, slapping Brist on the shoulder. “Good work. Help me with the alien.”

Cam grabbed the arms while Brist wrapped their hands around the legs. Carefully, the pair moved the limp body to the cargo bay, sealing the air lock doors behind them.

“What kinda suit is this?” Cam grunted, moving one of the stiff arms. “Heavy as hell...”

“These people didn’t even have trans-system class ships yet.” Brist said. “They must not have Nyla-Ten cloth either.”

“Probably not.” Cam said, looking the body over. He extended a single finger and tapped on the glass faceplate. “Hello? If anyone is alive in there, we’re going to try and get you of your suit. Try to stay very still.”

Cam examined the suit for a few minutes, trying to find some kind of release or buckle that would at least get the helmet off. Cam undid a clamp on the right side of the dome, loosening the helmet with a hiss. The helmet twisted off easily as Cam pulled the plastic and metal dome. He dropped the helmet and took a few steps back from the body.

“She...looks like you.” Brist said.

As far as Cam was concerned, they weren't wrong. The unconscious woman was human with dark skin and tight bun of dark, curly hair. Her features were similar to Cam's but took different shapes, the lips were broader and the nose was slimmer. June paused when she approached and knelt down, putting a small, round probe against the human's forehead.

“Help me get her to the medical room.” June said. The trio carried the alien through the cargo bay to the small medical space opposite the airlock. The well-lit room was a sterile white with rows and rows of cabinets with dwindling medical supplies. June grabbed the medic's panel and started doing preliminary x-rays on the woman's skull for any signs of trauma.

Brist and Cam took the time strip off the parts of the clunky spacesuit, dropping pieces on the floor or tossing them out into the hall. June was placing the sensors around the young woman's body, trying to make sense of the readings that she was getting.

“What do you think, June?” Cam asked.

“I...I don't know.” June shook her head. “I'm not sure what to do with this...breed of human. Your biology is very similar, but we aren't sure how the environment she was raised on will change certain factors. You're from two different planets, so until I have some time to thoroughly examine her, we won't know how far the extent of your differences are. Think of it like...the differences between Grays from Penneros and Grays from the Kymal belt. The Kymal Grays are better adapted for the heat than Penneros Grays. They're the same origin species, but two different 'breeds' that branched off due to differences in environment.”

“But is she...alright?” Cam asked.

“She'll live, if that's what you mean.” June said, starting to do some preliminary testing and checking of vitals. June passed a screen over the human's head and chest cavity. The heart was still visibly beating, but June shook her head as she examined the lungs. She examined the displays and set the screen aside. “Oxygen deprivation...she was on the last of her supply. We'll get her an approximate atmosphere boost.”

“How did she get here?” Cam asked, grabbing an oxygen mask and handing it to June.

“She was from the planet.” Brist said, picking up the suit and pointing at the flag sewn into the sleeve. “How did she survive?”

“We’ll have to ask when she wakes up.” June said. “Cam, go up with Thera. She’s not going to be talking for a while.”

Cam started to walk toward the command bridge, pausing to look back. June and Brist were starting the work of checking the human patient’s vital systems. He set his arm on the window and looked at her.

Growing up on an abductee colony, Cam had heard about humans of Earth, but had never imagined he’d get to see one. Now, he was looking at the last of them...like an ancient being preserved in ice. He shook his head and walked up to the command platform at the nose of the ship. Thera was still in the command chair, but stood up when Cam entered the bridge.

“We got her in.” Cam said. “She’s human.”

“A survivor?” Thera asked. “We’ve never had a survivor. And she’s human? Like...you and I?”

“June isn’t sure. She said we’re different breeds of human, whatever that means.”

“Different worlds, different environments, could lead to differences in biology. But she’s human?”

“And a survivor of the Plague Fleet.” Cam climbed into the command seat and maneuvered the screens. “Which makes her a person of extreme interest to our cause. What we need to do now is get as far from the Plague Fleet as possible. We’re setting a course to the Fureos Quadrant. There are a few heavily populated planets we could hide out on. We got favors on Soberos that might buy us a couple of days.”

Thera nodded and turned to the navigation panel, punching coordinates for their destination and browsing local planets. Cam leaned back in the command chair and focused on the rushing starscape ahead of him. Until now, they’d only been a few steps behind the Plague Fleet. Now they were running from it. Things changed in an instant.