

Unity

“Take a look at that,” Tristan said, folding his arms and looking down through the port side window. “It’s easy to forget about everything looking down there. If it weren’t for the suits over the radio, you wouldn’t believe that they’d just barely avoided war...”

Chloe looked up from her research terminal and pushed over towards Tristan, floating in the space station towards the window. For a pilot, Tristan often romanticized aspects of space in the time Chloe had known him. He wasn’t wrong about the view this morning. The expanse outside was jet-black, dotted with pinpricks of light from far off suns. Looking down, Chloe could see the curve of the Earth’s horizon. Clouds streaked like gentle paint strokes against a background of blue and the North American coast as the sun rose on another day that no one was certain would come.

“Do you know where the wall was?” Chloe asked. “They claimed you could see it from space, but I never saw anything out of the ordinary in the last three months we were here.”

“Somewhere around there, I think?” Tristan said, pointing vaguely. “It’s hard to say for sure. I’m glad that we can finally feel a little more relaxed around the Alliance cruisers that pass by up here.”

“I thought it was more like a second Cold War,” Chloe asked, floating over to her console to check the solar level outputs. They looked alright, but the input was a little sluggish for some reason. “For the most part, it was just showing off our technology to one another. ‘The best tactical defense is deterrence’ and all that...”

“Well, the Alliance and the United Powers were at each other's throats in all sorts of ways.” Tristan floated over to the research pilot’s station and adjusted course. “United Powers would hit them with import taxes and Alliance would hack into our banks. The Alliance shot a research vessel into space and the United Powers shot us right after them. The Final War, or whatever they end up calling it, was two rams butting heads without goring each other. It was all about trying to destabilize the other until the Alliance submitted.”

“Well, luckily there is no more ‘Alliance’ or ‘United Powers’ to argue. It’s just one, big Earth. It’s like that old, sci-fi TV show my parents used to tell me about. No more war, no more greed—“

“War, maybe,” Tristan said, “but there’s always greed as long as there are humans.”

“You think that lowly of humans? You are one.”

“Let’s just say—while I appreciate you and the work we’re doing up here—I mostly started coming to space for the lack of company. These two-crewmembers missions, especially. I know all of your quirks well enough to avoid them. The whole planet? Trying to step around everyone’s fears and such isn’t ”

Chloe was about to say more when the lights flickered. “Damn it!” She pushed over to another computer terminal. “What is going on with the power today? That’s the fifth time that’s happened, but nothing shows up on the diagnostic report. Did you see anything when you last went out?”

“I don’t know if I can remember the last time I went out,” Tristan said. “It looked fine when I went out last...Tuesday? Nothing besides the standard maintenance protocols.”

“That’s almost less comforting,” Chloe said. “We might need to go out and take a look before—”

The lights flickered again before Chloe’s screens went black. Before she could reboot the systems, the lights turned off and the dull hum of the space station disappeared. Chloe didn’t speak. For a brief moment, she thought she’d gone deaf in the chamber, but her and Tristan’s breathing was suddenly amplified.

“No, no, no!” Chloe cursed smacked her console. “Come on, don’t do this to me!”

“What happened?” Tristan shook himself out of the shock and started punching the buttons on his console. “Why did the lights go?”

“Because everything went!” Chloe floated over to another terminal and desperately poking at the dead touchscreen. “Either one of the power couplings just failed or the solar array hasn’t been working properly since we checked it last week.”

“What about the backup power?”

“If the solar was out and we’re getting faulty diagnostics? We could’ve burned through emergency power in a day.”

“Damn it!” Tristan slapped the console. “We have no controls.”

“That’s the least of our worries,” Chloe said, putting her hand on the side of the ship. “We lost life support.”

“How much oxygen do we have?”

“Between the carbon scrubbers and the onboard tanks? Enough to keep us breathing until we freeze to death.”

“I was hoping for a little more optimism and less realism,” Tristan sighed. “Alright, what are our options?”

“There’s a small emergency beacon that goes off if we lose power,” Chloe said, taking a breath to steady her nerves. “Not enough to give us heat for more than a few minutes, but it’ll let someone at mission control know we’re in trouble.”

“Ok, so that’s a small miracle,” Tristan sighed. “What can we do until then?”

“Beats me,” Chloe said. “The most we can do is conserve body heat as long as we can.”

“Are you suggesting a cuddle?”

“I’m suggesting a blanket,” Chloe snapped, opening a small container over her bed.

“Sorry,” Tristan sighed, folding his hands together. “I make jokes when I’m anxious. Isn’t there someone we can call or something?”

“Our radio might be able to give us enough range to talk a ship that’s within a hundred feet of us,” Chloe said, handing Tristan a blanket. “Until someone comes looking for us, we can’t really talk to anyone.”

“So, we just...wait?”

“If your religious, you could pray? The less we, do the better off we’ll be. Conserve energy and keep our bodies warm until we get power again.”

“Can’t I...pop outside and fix it?”

“Without a proper diagnostic, I don’t even know what the problem is. It’d be like trying to fix a car blindfolded. Besides that, we’d need power to open and close the airlock or we’ll freeze even faster. And we need to worry about the pressure.”

“Don’t the airlocks still seal?”

“With power, we could equalize the temperature and air pressure easily. Unfortunately, opening the airlock now would mean losing the last good seal we got and that’ll kill us in a few minutes rather than days. We gotta keep that seal we had when the system was working.”

Tristan grumbled and folded his arms, pulling the blanket tight around his shoulders. Chloe pulled her survival blanket tighter around her body and looked out the

window. She couldn't afford to panic now. If Chloe started to freak out now, she'd waste oxygen and precious time. There was nothing left she could do to improve her situation, but she could control herself.

"Does it take a while?" Tristan said. "The rescue?"

"We were due for check-in in an hour. If we don't call in, they'll be curious enough to ask questions and start poking around for our beacon."

"And then?"

"We wait for rescue..."

"You seem way to calm about this. How long can a rescue take?"

"Maybe a day to get an emergency shuttle up from one of the Alliance stations? Could be two?"

"How long until we freeze?"

"The optimism you hope for is warmer than the odds."

Tristan folded his arms around his chest and squeezed. Already the cold was starting to set in, but Chloe focused on counting the stars to settle her mind. There would be time to panic later, but Chloe knew that staying calm in the early moments improved her odds of survival.

"Which one is your favorite?"

"Stars?" Chloe asked. "I guess I have my preferences, but it seems unfair to the million-billion others out there to have me pick just one."

"Sorry, I meant constellations..."

"I don't know them well enough. I'm an astronomer, not an astrologer..."

"Come on, you're telling me you weren't one of those kids with a telescope in their backyard lining out constellations? You must have one you like. It's not like we're doing anything else."

"I think I'm a Leo, I guess?"

"I would have thought you were a Scorpio."

"You're one of those people?"

"I'm a shuttle pilot, I can't have other hobbies? When all the science nerds are doing your work I like to keep myself busy and it's a fun thing at parties. And good for picking up women..."

“As your friend and copilot,” Chloe asked, “please don’t let the last potential conversation we have turn into you hitting on me...”

“Sorry. Jokes and a cocky attitude make death a little easier to stomach.”

“I get it,” Chloe said. “I’m scared, too.”

The pair waited in silence a bit longer, the only indication that time was passing coming from their steady breathing. Chloe focused ahead, but Tristan had bowed his head with an uncomfortable frown.

“Could we use the oxygen?” Tristan asked, hopeful.

“For heat?”

“No, to turn the shuttle. We vent it out in short increments and then use the pressure in the airlock to propel us down towards Earth. If we can’t land manually, we let gravity do the work for us.”

“We’d more likely burst into flames on reentry, lose control, and crash...”

“So, we’d die, but we’d be warm?” Tristan asked.

“I know it’s hard,” Chloe said, “but the safest thing to do is wait for help.”

“I don’t like leaving my life up to fate...”

“Fate happens whether we want it to or not. It’s in the stars, *n’est pas?*”

“I thought you didn’t believe in astrology?”

“Not really, but if it brings you comfort? I don’t see anything wrong with a bit of hope.”

“Not resigning yourself to the odds of death quite yet?”

“I have no intentions of my last meal being freeze-dried, don’t worry,” Chloe smiled.

Tristan smirked a little, but went quiet and looked out towards the emptiness that surrounded them. The shuttle rolled a little and Chloe looked out to the port side so she could watch the Earth roll underneath them. From up here, everything looked so peaceful as the planet slowly glided overhead and the blue marble was above them. No wars could be seen, no walls, no borders...just the singular planet. If the rescue didn’t come, Chloe was glad to know that there was peace everywhere else.

“What’s that?” Tristan leaned forward, watching out the front of their craft. Another streamlined spaceship was approaching their ship, blue and grey with white lines along the

nose of the shuttle. The craft approached them, drifting through the dark and coming from their starboard side over the curve of the planet down below. “Rescue ship?”

“It’s way too soon for a rescue mission,” Chloe said. “They might have noticed our distress signal, but not a whole rescue—“

“That’s an Alliance ship,” Tristan said, his hands gripping the controls.

“Do you think they know that the war is over?”

“I don’t know. That’s a five-person vessel, so they outnumber us and we don’t have weapons even with the power on. And who’s to say that the truce is even real or still valid? It’s been less than twelve hours.”

“And it could be another twelve before we even hear from Control,” Chloe said. “We need to take that risk. Even if they do outnumber us, they’re probably engineers and scientists, not soldiers.”

“I can’t trust them,” Tristan said. “Not yet.”

“You say people are inherently greedy? I have to believe people are inherently good. That’s what it means to be human.”

“They’re Alliance...three days ago, we wouldn’t be allowed to cross paths.”

“And now there is no Alliance,” Chloe said, picking up her radio. “We’re not fighting anymore. Now, we’re all human.”

The vessel approached slowly, drifting through the void until it was close enough to get their radio signal. Chloe cleared her throat and activated the radio.

“Mayday, mayday...is there anyone on board the approaching vessel? We have lost power. Situation critical, please respond. Repeat, situation critical. Can you help? Over.”

“United Powers vessel,” a voice said in heavily accented English, “you’re looking like you’ve seen better days...”

“Care to help out? As far as I know, we’re on the same side now.”

There was a brief moment of confusion on the other end of the radio conversation. Chloe had panicked for a minute, wondering if they hadn’t heard the news. Worse, Tristan could have been right and they were plotting some way to sabotage their ship. Chloe shifted her focus from the Alliance vessel to the Earth above them...one Earth, not a divided planet. She had to believe that.

“Sorry about that,” the voice said after a moment, “we were trying to think about the best way to approach this. I’m afraid we might not have all the right parts for you on hand, but there might be some comparable pieces if it’s easy enough to fix. Or we could—I know! Sorry, I got an engineer blabbering in my ear while I’m trying to talk to you. We have the right equipment that we could let you piggyback off our systems long enough for you to get a proper rescue team?”

“We’d honestly just appreciate enough life support to get an emergency call down to Control.”

“We got two of our people suiting up now. If you see a man on the wing, try not to panic. He’s with us.”

Chloe looked out the window and saw the ship gliding closer and closer. The hatch opened up and pair of people in space suits drifting out of the shuttle and gliding down toward their smaller vessel.

“Don’t mind if you hear Kowalski hitting things. I’ll try not to have her break anything, but she’s got a temper. She may look like a princess, but she’s an Ares...especially when machinery is giving her trouble.”

“I’ll be sure to keep an eye out,” Tristan laughed. “If it helps, I’m a Libra...”