

DANGEROUS SUN

TOMAS GONZALEZ

REN

It wasn't that he couldn't sleep, it was that he didn't want to.

Sleeping was what he should be doing, but it was the last thing he wanted.

Sleep was when the voice came, when it whispered to him, like the slow scraping of metal against the inside of his skull. And so here he was, staring into the glassy monitor with its endless charts and data streams displaying the absolute emptiness of the space around them. The concoction of coffee and other stimulants he had worked on over the last couple of trips keeping him awake, his attention chemically elevated and fixated on the screen.

It was this altered state that at first made him question if what he had seen on the monitors was anything at all. But suddenly it was there again, a blip cascading from sensor to sensor, being picked up by magnetic, thermal, and imaging sensors on the starboard side. But what could be floating out in all this emptiness? Likely just a piece of debris or a stray asteroid drifting alone in the darkness he shrugged as he took another sip of his acrid brew.

But as he panned the camera closest to the object, he knew it was anything but trash.

As he stared at the monitor, scrutinizing the object, he suddenly felt ill. His vision blurred and the voice slowly clawed its way up from his subconscious. He gripped the edge of his seat, losing his grip on consciousness, but then, all at once, every machine in the navigation room lit up. Screens blinked, urging attention as data rolls ticked out streams of information in printed, hard copy form. In the chaos he was able to shake the nausea, but the voice did not quiet; it seemed to sharpen and was clear enough to understand.

"Come..."



It was the only word, repeated over and over. He sat there frozen, the word echoing in his mind. It wasn't until another voice broke through the chaos, the automated staccato voice of the computer, that he realized what a world of trouble he was in if he didn't act fast.

"Priority one, full crew activation initiated," the ship repeated.

He hurried back to the crew quarters, just making it to his sleep pod right as the doors of the other crew members' pods began to open with a hermetic woosh.

ALICE

It was always a mindfuck waking up from deep sleep. The first feeling was the slow, dull pain of various needles and tubes retreating from the nooks and crannies of your body. It was like mechanical snakes, gently removing their fangs and slithering away to their hiding places within the walls of the pod. But compared to the total loss of self, this was relatively quick and painless. She wasn't sure exactly how it worked but the cocktail of sedatives, antipsychotics, and various other drugs needed to make extended deep sleep possible really messed with your memory. After the general haze of sleep wore off it always took an hour or so for you to fully become yourself again. Your mind was all in fragments and sometimes you couldn't even remember who you were.

Name, where you were born, who you loved, who loved you; these were often mysteries that slowly drifted into place as you stretched your wobbly legs around the crew quarters. As she looked around the rest of the crew was in similar sorts, wiping the sleep from their eyes and looking at the others half suspiciously as their trust formed for the strangers who were slowly becoming familiar; all except one. A tall, lanky guy pulling long strips of paper through his hands and looking them over as it poured out of the bank of computers along the wall.

The tape. Something about the tape suddenly gave her an uneasy feeling, something she was struggling to pull from her memory... "The computer only prints tape during an emergency and digital copies might be corrupted or lost," she recalled.

"What's the emergency? ...Ren?" she asked, his face slowly

becoming familiar.

“You remembered my name this time,” he said with a half-smile that he quickly put away.

“Nothing major, looks like the computer picked up some space junk worth stopping for. Has it ever done this before?”

She walked over to the nearest console and tried to draw the commands she needed from the corners of her memory. But before she could input anything the screen lit up in a wash of green text.

Congratulations... Captain Alice!

You have been selected to lead a special assignment, please standby for your briefing :)

The message made her stomach sink. This was the pirates all over again.

THE SHIP

The ship did not have a name. At least not the kind that was usually granted during one of those ancient ceremonies where, for long ago forgotten reasons, a bottle of champagne is cracked on its hull. That was an honor reserved for the types of ships that carried some sort of prestige or great purpose. No, this ship was anything but special, only given a serial number: D3MTTR. Nothing but a cog in the machinery of a galactic enterprise so large, it was hard to fathom. A planet cracker, meteor hauler, pirate vessel for a stint and now a cargo vessel for the cheap seats. When whatever splinter nation, religious sect or megacorporation couldn't afford the exorbitant fees of the space gates, the corporation was more than happy to provide a slow boat to “paradise” for a greatly discounted fee. Of course, this included a contract so long you could trail it behind the ship to find your way back once your utopia inevitably failed. Ultimately, the corporation didn't really care what the ship was used for or by whom, as long as the invoices added up at the end of the year and the crew paid their taxes to whatever bureaucrat was sitting at the desk at home office. And it was always the same crew, each ship was coded to its crew and no one else could interface with even its most basic systems if the corporation didn't approve it. Even during the pirate era, they woke up whenever anything needed human



attention, much to the surprise of the pirates who thought they were in control. The ship provided guidance, logged the incident, and when the work was done the crew enjoyed a day or two swapping stories with the pirates and catching up on news, then back to sleep they went. Titles and ranks were never used unless the ship deemed a task dangerous or ethically gray enough to merit a pay bump. Like ejecting hundreds of hapless pirates into the asphyxiating darkness of space for lack of payment.

JUNK

“So, *Captain* Alice,” Yuri, who always had a twisted sense of humor, asked. “What’s the special assignment? Are we ejecting these cruisers into the closest sun or just turning off the life support and selling the pods for scrap.”

“Lucky for our *Customers* nothing like that.” Alice said, correcting Yuri’s pet name for the over 1 million souls stowed in the vast hold of the ship. Each one nestled in a pod alongside all the trappings needed to settle on their future colony.

“Home office wants us to check out some space junk the ship picked up. Ren, can you give us a breakdown?”

Ren was frantically jumping between consoles, looking over scans of the object in between gulps of sludgy coffee.

“Well, two things,” they said excitedly, “One. I’ve never seen anything like this. From first appearances it’s nothing special. It seems to be metal and it’s likely hollow based on weight, but I can’t penetrate the damn thing. I’ve thrown every scanner we have, even some of the old planet cracker stuff, and it’s like a black hole in there. Maybe some kind of shielding but I can’t really be sure. “...Second, and this is maybe, ok...”

“Just spit it out!” Alice said with a bit of shortness, feeling ever more uneasy about this assignment.

“I don’t know how to explain it but I think it’s from Earth. And likely not just some junk lost by a ship along the same route.” Ren’s widening eyes made the sinking feeling in Alice’s stomach into a dull ache. “I checked the company records twice! We’re the first ship this far out in the sector, And more than that, it’s old. Like really old. Like really, really old.”

“Exactly how old are we talking?” Alice asked as Ren scrib-

bled on a piece of data tape.

25

“Best estimate, and this is fuzzy until we can get a closer look because really there are a lot of factors at play here so...”

“Ren, how old?” Alice grimaced.

Ren finished his scribbles, which Alice could now see was a long string of equations, the sum circled in deep red.

“10,000 years.” he said shakily, handing the paper to Alice.

Before she could even structure a response, the hub computer chimed. Alice walked over and read the guidance from the home office. The dull ache broke out into a full cramp.

WARNINGS

As Alice and Yuri approached the object in the quarantine bay, they couldn't really see anything special about it. It stood about 10 feet tall, rectangular, slightly widened out at one end and completely black, like an upside-down obelisk. But as they got closer, they could see deep scarlet markings etched into almost every square inch of its surface.

“We got a translation here, Ren?” Alice asked as she passed her hands over the obelisk.

“Nothing yet. It's definitely Proto-Romantic according to the computer, so we at least know it's from Earth.”

Yuri circled the object slowly, looking over the inky surface for seams or some kind of mechanism.

“It's sealed up nice and tight that's for sure,” he said, huffing as he grabbed the unwieldy looking cutter from the cart and waved Alice to the side.

“You got that old man?” Alice asked with a smile. You wouldn't know from looking at him, but Yuri was the oldest member of the crew by far. Maybe the oldest person that Alice had ever met. She had lost count of how many other ships Yuri had worked crew on and wondered his real age. He looked to be in his mid-fifties with a tinge of salt and pepper at his temples, but with a crew member you never knew. Alice herself was tipping over 200 Earth years old, even though most of that time was spent asleep.

“I got this,” Yuri said defiantly, starting up the



cutter and laying it on the flat side closest to him. In an instant, he was awash in sparks as the teeth, designed for cutting meteor samples, made quick work of the exterior.

“How’s that?” Yuri asked, appreciating the precise vertical slit cut in the object.

“I’ll need at least a few inches of wiggle room to get a good scan,” Ren chimed over the comms. “Can you give it another pass, maybe cut horizontal a bit so we can pry it open.”

Yuri grimaced at the weight of the cutter but powered it back on and started the procedure from the new angle. Helped by the initial cut, things went smoother this time, until he felt it suddenly begin to catch.

“I’m hitting something here, should I stop?” Yuri pipped.

“Just a little more!” urged Ren over the mic as he watched through the monitors, unblinking and covered in a cold sweat. Yuri continued, smoke beginning to creep out of the object as the cutter struggled on whatever it was catching on. Suddenly the smoke got darker and poured out of the slit from the previous cut, the blade screamed.

“Just a little more!” Ren urged again, the voice scratching at him from behind his eyes.

Suddenly the blade gave one last sickening howl and instantly shattered. Yuri covered his face instinctively, the pieces of blade and destroyed cutter shredded through the many layers of the hazard suit. Alice dove for cover, the fragments flying through the air like a grenade had gone off in the room.

“Yuri!” Alice yelled as she collected herself and rushed over to him.

“I’m ok, I’m fine,” he wheezed as he tried to brace himself on the obelisk; blood spilled out from his hands and arms as the suit struggled to self-seal.

“Just a little nick,” he said with a crooked smile as he collapsed into Alice’s arms.

THE CONTENTS

“What do you mean it’s empty?” Alice prodded. Ren had been gone for hours and his answer annoyed her. Especially given that Yuri almost died trying to open the damned thing.

“Well, mostly empty; it’s full of junk. Old books and pieces of paper—it’s basically just trash. There’s maybe a handful

of recoverable artifacts, but again, it's all written in that obscure Proto language, and the computer can't get a clean translation on any of it. Especially now that it's all covered in Yuri's blood."

"So, Yuri risked his life for a pile of junk, is what you're telling me?" Alice scowled.

"Basically, well... yes. And the new briefing came in. Head office wants us to dump it. Not even worth its weight in scrap, I guess," Ren shrugged.

"I can take care of it if you want."

"No, I'll dump the fucker myself," Alice said as she stormed off to the hazard bay, Ren ducking out of the way nervously.

"You double-check Yuri's lab work; don't want him catching some space bug from that garbage pile," she yelled back.

"You got it Captain!" Ren said timidly, watching her as she turned the corner. Once she was out of view, Ren's demeanor darkened. Biting down on his lip, he pondered the situation for a moment. Looking down at Yuri, he bit down harder, almost drawing blood, his mind racing. What should he do?

THE TRAIL

What an absolute mess.

The obelisk now looked even more bizarre than before with a jagged hole on one side and a pool of blood at its base. Fragments of its contents were all over the hazard bay: signed books and torn papers, beads and other bits she couldn't quite make out. But what she noticed most was the smell—a smell of burning metal and herbs so strong, she wished she had worn her hazard suit. After the incident, initial scans showed no hazardous materials or radiation, but the smell was absolutely horrid. As she put away the last of the tools, she sighed with anticipation of a long shower and an even longer sleep. Once she ejected this heap, she would assign the rest of the crew to clean up and try to forget the whole thing. Looking at the long trail of blood from dragging Yuri to the med bay made her spine shiver. They were this close to losing him over nothing.

"He's ok," she thought as she punched in the sequence for ejection and started heading back to the slowly clos-



ing doors of the bay. Once those doors closed, the obelisk would be gone; maybe Yuri might even be awake, and they could laugh about the whole thing. As she crossed the room, she took one last look at the mess and turned towards the doors. But she only took one step before stopping cold. She snapped back around, her eyes laser-focused on a trail of bloody footsteps that led away from the obelisk.

Previously hidden in the shadow of the obelisk provided by focused spotlights, they now stood out thanks to the intermittent room filling flashes of the ejection warning lights.

“Fuck.” She uttered the phrase, motivating her legs to move. She ran back to the console and, with one hand, smashed the “ABORT/EJECTION” button before she got ejected along with the obelisk.

“HUB REPORT, WHO’S IN THE HUB!?” she yelled into her radio.

“Hi Alice, it’s Margot. Everything okay down there? We saw you aborted the ejection..”

“GET EVERYONE DOWN HERE NOW!”

NOT ALONE

As the room continued to blink with the disorientating hazard lights, against her best judgment, she approached the footprints. The first thing she noticed was the stride, incredibly long and scattered. The shape of the foot was also grotesquely long, more animal than human. As her reason gave way to curiosity, she began to follow the steps deeper into the bay—but suddenly, the trail stopped. Two final steps marked the ground side by side, a spot of blood between them, as if the owner had taken a second to think of their next move and vanished. As she examined the final marks, the room flooded with beams of light from the approaching crew and their flashlights.

“What the hell is going on?” Margot asked.

Alice grabbed her and searched for the words to respond, but then she felt it—a warm, wet tap on the crown of her head, it trickled down the side of her face and hit the floor below her. Looking down, she saw a scarlet drop of blood, and for the second time that, night she froze.

As she craned her head upwards, Margot followed Alice’s line of sight with her flashlight. The beam hit empty air for

what felt like an eternity until it landed on the vent—or what was left of it, directly above them.

“Jesus, that must be 40, maybe 50 feet off the ground. Did Yuri’s blood really go that far?” Margot asked, already knowing the answer. A large gash in the twisted and mangled grates was slathered with blood, strings of hair and filth.

“It didn’t,” Alice answered, looking into Margot’s confused eyes as her stomach twisted.

The others stared at her in silence. Their eyes widening as they followed the bloody trail with their lights and up to the vent, while coming to the same terrifying realization.

“It wasn’t empty,” Alice uttered. The black hole of fear and anxiety where her stomach once was pulled her in...

