

“Geostationary orbit achieved, sir!”

“Excellent! Maintain position during final checks.”

“Sir!”

Apart from seeing off a lone pirate in the Toriga System, it had been an uneventful two-week journey. In fact, we hadn't even needed to fire any more than a warning shot with the laser cannon to see them off. Our missiles remained dormant, the half-life of their nuclear warheads no doubt already past. As for the experimental weapon we were carrying – a gun capable of firing bolts of pure plasma – their field testing remained just as minimal as when we had left; for a research mission, we'd discovered very little so far. Personally, I put that down to the fact we had been sent to one of the veritable backwaters the galaxy had to offer: this as yet unnamed and unexplored planet orbited a G-type main-sequence star (much like that which had warmed the air around me during my formative years) with the imaginative name Tallus 179. It was located at the very edge of the galaxy, meaning that a good deal of the night's sky once we'd landed on Tallus 179b (as our star charts referred to it) would be pitch black but for the specks of light which would have travelled for millions, if not billions of years to tell us of the existence of far distant galaxies.

With a small sigh, I turned my attention to the holographic display projected from the left-hand armrest of my chair, the captain's chair. Although hard to tell for any but a trained vulpine eye, the glow of the map that the ship's computer had generated cast a soft, blue glow on the black fur of my hand as I raised it to jab and gesture at what I was being shown of the ground many kilometres below us. In response to my waving fingers, the map zoomed in on a clearing in the midst of the dense rainforest that covered much of the planet: our intended landing site. It was this rainforest that had so intrigued the powers that be back at home, for it was the only sign of life anywhere in this remotest of sectors of the galaxy. Numerous stars in the region enjoyed the pleasure of having planets orbiting within their Goldilocks zones, yet only Tallus 179b showed the slightest trace of harbouring any more than barren rocks, sheets of perpetually frozen ice, or billowing clouds of gas.

“Heat shields active!”

“Planetary drive standing by!”

“Airlock seals confirmed!”

“Atmospheric conditions?” I asked, turning to the impala at the console to my immediate right.

“Nothing out of the ordinary yet...” she began, her eyes scanning the text and figures rapidly generating on the screen before her, “Hmm...some unusually charged particles in the troposphere. They seem to form a thin layer around the entire planet. I can't be sure what will happen when we pass through them, but we can't avoid them either.”

I nodded, taking little time to come to my decision, “We're not jeopardising this mission just for that. Take your landing positions and prepare for planetfall!” There was a flurry of movement behind me heralded by the sounds of squeaking chairs and hurried footsteps followed by several reassuring clicks as safety harnesses secured themselves around all present. “Activate planetary drive!” At my words the low hum of the primary drive ceased. Accustomed as we had all become to its constant presence, the silence its shutdown left seemed to ring in our ears. However, that silence was soon rent by the roar of the planetary drive as it sparked into life.

The descent was gradual, deliberately so. My eyes were trained on that same hologram which, with one well-placed flick of a hand, morphed into a projection of what the hull camera had to display.

The greenish-brown expanse in which we were hoping to land seemed so far away still, blending almost perfectly with the foliage around it whose colours varied from bright purple to a green so dark as to almost be black.

Another wave of the hand brought a representation of our descent before my eyes, the respective layers of atmosphere outside the protective metal plating delineated for my benefit as much as the computer was capable. Naturally, given the information provided by Tadala, my attention was drawn to the troposphere which we were approaching far more quickly than the view of the approaching ground had indicated.

"Entering the troposphere now, sir," the impala announced, her eyes no doubt on the very same display I was fixated upon. My hands tightened on the arms of my seat as I watched the computerised version of our ship gradually dropping through the atmospheric layer for which Tadala's pronouncement had engendered such trepidation.

However, nothing unusual happened as we continued our steady, controlled drop towards the planet. There was no turbulence, no system malfunctions, no alerts: everything was as it should have been. I shared in a collective sigh as we descended low enough to pass between two large banks of greenish cloud.

Suddenly, a deafening rumble boomed out from above us. I hurriedly gestured my hologram to display the camera pointing back out into space. I swallowed: brilliant bolts of lightning were criss-crossing the troposphere now, occasionally blinding the electronic eye with their extreme luminosity. This appeared far more than a simple storm however, the atmospheric disturbance extended beyond the scope of my vision. Instinctively, I turned to the impala seated close by, her eyes full of trepidation at what she was examining on her display.

"It's...the whole planet is surrounded by electrical storms, sir," she began weakly, her fingers flicking to and fro in front of her hologram, "They appear to be confined to the troposphere, though, so I can only assume that we disturbed those particles I mentioned and they're discharging energy between each other."

I nodded: I had been afraid that would be the case. "Continue the descent," I barked, my expression resolute and my tone as confident and commanding as I could muster, "it would be unwise to try to pass through those storms. We continue with the mission." The rest of the crew showed no dissent, whether because they were in agreement with my orders or silently cursing my dedication.

As we approached the canopy surrounding the landing site, I called, "Reverse thrust!" The roar of the planetary drive shifted slightly to my ears as its impetus was directed towards the bare ground. Our momentum slowed and, with only the slightest bump, we made planetfall. There immediately followed a flurry of sound and movement as everyone sought to unfasten their harnesses. Before anyone could do more than that however, I stood up and raised my hands to order everyone's silence and attention. "We mustn't take any chances on this mission, even if we don't anticipate anything more than plant-life here," I announced, my gaze shifting about the flight deck and fixing on every face in turn, "All security personnel are to suit up, arm themselves, then secure the perimeter of the landing area. Tam, I want a full systems check. Tadala, investigate those electrical storms some more," the hare and impala began their respective tasks immediately while I completed my orders, "All researchers are to get their necessary equipment and their own weapons, then wait for the all-clear from Marcel." A swift nod gave the crew clearance to move.

An orderly queue soon formed by the door to the corridor that paved the way to the living quarters, medical bay, and equipment lockers. Soldiers were given right of way and they were soon jogging down the ramp that had lowered to give us access to this strange new world we were tasked with charting. I lingered at the back of the queue, perfectly prepared to let the other members of my crew to prepare themselves as I wouldn't be venturing beyond the ship imminently.

As I was in the process of retrieving my heavy duty boots from my locker, the heavily accented voice of the gruff canine I'd put in charge of our small security force crackled through my radio, "The perimeter is secure, sir."

"Thank you, Marcel," I replied, not entirely surprised by the poor quality of the transmission, "Return to the ship but remain on the alert." With a grunted word of assent Marcel signed off, leaving me to remove my more comfortable 'space shoes' as I liked to call them in favour of footwear which would stand up better to trudging through mud and over uneven ground.

As I emerged from the locker room, both Tam and Tadala came hurrying towards me. "Sir!" exclaimed the impala, making her voice heard before the hare's, "The charged particles appear to be gradually dispersing and I expect the electrical discharge will cease once they are sufficiently distant from one another. However, that does mean that the storm will spread to other parts of the atmosphere before it dissipates."

I frowned, realising that what she was saying in layman's terms was 'it's going to get worse before it gets better. "We'll just have to sit tight until it wears itself out. Any idea how long that'll take?"

"At the current rate," she began, consulting the small device clutched in her hand, "we could be looking at several weeks at best, if not months."

A low growl escaped me, but there were worse things than a delay. "At least that will give us a chance to study this place even more thoroughly than we intended. I'm sure HQ will send out someone to help us once we've contacted th--"

"That won't be possible, sir," interjected Tam, looking rather grave, "The storms are preventing any signals from leaving the atmosphere, and even communications at ground level are being disrupted."

"So, we're completely marooned?" I questioned the hare, my eyes narrowing. He just nodded in response. "Well, like I said, we'll sit tight and investigate this place until we know every little secret about it while we wait," I was putting a positive spin on things, but I deemed it prudent. Slinging my rifle over my shoulder, I beckoned for the two of them to follow me outside.

The twenty-strong crowd that had gathered around the ramp took the news of our extended stay as well as I could have hoped, and each set off into the surrounding jungle in their assigned groups without too many complaints. We had been assigned enough soldiers for two to accompany each of our scientists who needed to head out into the wilderness plus a couple of reserves, and every person on the mission had been fitted with a small locator beacon and a body camera. I was to remain on the ship to coordinate the five trios roaming the surrounding forest. Tam, our pilot, and I were also in charge of ensuring the ship's security, as well as that of Tadala while she conducted further meteorological examinations. The mission's medical officer, an experienced surgeon named Sanjit, was also remaining behind to man the medical bay and to examine native plants for medicinal properties.

As the genial tiger headed towards the edge of the forest to collect a few samples with Tam and a wolverine by the name of Sanaa as his guards I joined Tadala to act as her bodyguard as she set up a device of which I had no knowledge, my attention largely directed towards the hologram being projected by the device in my hand. On it were twenty-one dots, most of which were gradually moving away from my location at the centre of the map; no one was to venture too far from the ship today as night was soon to fall, they were merely scouting for potential locations of interest at the moment.

“Those storms are going to make my job a lot harder,” Tadala commented just as a few of the dots disappeared briefly, “my only reliable observations will be through my telescopes.” I made an indistinct noise of comprehension, my eyes briefly following Hiroki, a salamander, as he wandered about, already appearing bored and restless at not being part of one of the expedition teams. I turned my attention away from him to gaze up at the sky Tadala had commenced studying, watching the green-tinged heavens being criss-crossed by the bolts of electricity that would be keeping us bound to the planet for far longer than we had intended.

Several hours of uneventful guard duty later, night had fallen. Apart from the lights of our ship, the only illumination this part of the planet was receiving was that reflecting off the moon shimmering high in the heavens, its satellite just beginning to crest the horizon, and the continuing light show our arrival had sparked. Everyone had returned to base by the time darkness had enveloped our base of operations, their blink points set up within the forest in preparation for the next day. We had dined together before retiring to our quarters, all except two of our number who would be keeping an eye on the ship’s exterior surveillance cameras for a few hours before swapping over with another pair.

I emerged from my bunk three hours before dawn to assume the last watch with Tam as my partner, taking over Sanaa’s seat at one of the two collections of monitors. Yawning, we both settled in for a long session of keeping the ship and the rest of its crew safe.

*Thud. Thud.* Two cups were set on the desk between us. “Don’t know if it’s anything to worry about, but Stijn told us before he signed off that he saw some movement out there,” Sanaa told us, already starting to head towards the few hours sleep that beckoned to him, “Good luck!” I gave a nod and a wave of thanks before decanting some of the caffeine from the reservoir he’d provide to fuel my drowsy brain.

Ten minutes or so went by in bleary silence, Tam and I both steadily making our way through our steaming cups of the computer’s best estimation of coffee. We wouldn’t be running out of the brown stuff in a hurry as the computer could conjure up any food or beverage in its data banks so long as it had access to some form of matter. Sadly however, it rarely managed to hit the right spot for my taste buds. I’d become used to the disappointment, so not a face was pulled nor was a complaint heard as we sipped away at our brews.

“Mmm!” came an exclamation from the seat next to mine, the muffled sound echoing slightly within the cavern of Tam’s cup.

“What is it?” I asked, leaning across to peer at the hare’s screens.

“I think I saw something move,” he elaborated with the index finger of his free hand pointing to an area on the right-hand side of one of the monitors, his mug still clutched in the other, “about there.” I peered at the spot he was indicating, but only saw some vaguely rustling leaves on a bush at most.

Unconvinced, I made a small noise to indicate my scepticism as I returned to a more settled position in my seat to resume watching my share of the screens.

Barely more than a few minutes had passed when we both let out almost simultaneous cries. "You saw it too?" Tam asked, glancing at me. I nodded. "Could you make out what it was?" I shook my head, "Neither could I."

We lapsed into silence for a moment or two before I reassured the hare: "Probably just some nocturnal creatures, doubt it's anything to get too anxious about."

The remainder of our shift was comprised of intermittent glimpses of the same movements out in the profound darkness of the forest, but neither of us could glean anything from these but be reminded that there was *something* out there. As the sun rose over the northern horizon however, the forest-dwelling shadows seemed to shrink away from the limits of our view, its rays driving them back so that any creatures of the light could have a turn at parading themselves before the eyes of science.

The sun's arrival also heralded the start of the start of our exploration proper. As the golden ball settled itself above the canopy surrounding the ship, the first weary faces began to emerge from the cabins to gather around the few small dining tables. The sounds of hurried munching and crunching filled the air for a period, then the ramp was lowered to allow Tam, Tadala, Sanjit, Saana, Hiroki, and I onto the sun-bathed surface while the others trooped to the back of the ship where they could blink to the locations they had marked out the previous day.

I was soon settled into yesterday's role of guarding Tadala and her meteorological equipment while also keeping an eye on the progress of the fifteen dots which were gradually spreading out from the location of my dot, on which the display was centred. I was sure to check in on each of the groups intermittently, but found that there was little of interest to be reported save that they were making notes, taking samples, and capturing visual records of points of interest. I maintained my vigilance however, largely relying on the still-fidgety Hiroki to keep his eyes on our non-digitised surroundings.

Several hours later when Sanaa, Sanjit, and Tam had returned from their continued examination of the local fauna for medicinal properties in order to have lunch, an excited voice crackled out of the main speaker inside the ship, "Sir! This is Kalle! We've found something!"

Abandoning my sandwich, I hurried from the dining table to take up my position in the captain's chair. "What is it?" I demanded, turning on the holographic display to reveal the overgrown ruins of what could only have been a construction by native inhabitants. The picture quality was poor, with a great deal of static cutting across the images of the ancient stone structure, but its former grandeur was still obvious.

"We've been finding hints of habitation all day: what looked to be carvings, ancient paths, or tool-like objects," the ursine archaeologist and anthropologist explained, holding just such an object in front of his bodycam for emphasis. Lowering the tool out of sight, he began to take measured steps towards what appeared to be the cracked and crumbling remains of what could best be described as an obelisk. "I can't be certain about this, not knowing if the patterns we've observed hold true for this civilisation," he began, the thumps of hefty footfalls accompanying his words, "but I think this would have been some kind of palace or place of worship. I'd like to explore the interior of the building once I've documented the exterior, sir."

"Permission granted," I replied with a curt nod which was more for my own benefit, "I still want you back at base tonight, though." After giving me a one-word reply assuring me that my instructions

would be followed, the feed from Kalle's bodycam ended and my display returned to the map by default.

The remainder of the day followed in much of the same vein as the previous day: Hiroki and I lingered in Tadala's vicinity as she went about her examination of the sky above us while I kept a close eye on the locations of the dots moving about the holographic map. However, interspersed with the monotony were further reports from the other groups roving the tropical forest of traces of a precursor civilisation. First to call in was Valerie who had what looked to be a large boulder carved into something akin to a bench with an overhang to act as shade from the rain or sun. Only a few minutes later, Rosalind was brandishing a crude knife before her camera which must once have sported a vicious serrated edge. The otter and lioness were far more interested in the vegetation which had taken over the boulder and the type of rock the primitive blade had been fashioned from respectively, but both were clear indications of this planet's historic – and likely ongoing – habitability. By late afternoon, all five expeditionary teams had reported extensive evidence of what could only have been a long-dead race that had flourished within the vast jungle.

With the golden celestial orb starting to threaten the treetops with its fiery presence, my expectation was for those who had ventured beyond our landing site to be starting to make their way back to us. Indeed, as the shadows began to lengthen one group after the other reported that they were packing up their equipment and returning to their nearest blink point.

Unsurprisingly, Kalle was the most reluctant to curtail his investigations: "Sir, we've made some truly remarkable discoveries here!" he had exclaimed excitedly, trying to induce more than cursory enthusiasm from me by showing me wall carvings that looked like no more than abstract squiggles to my untrained eye.

"You can return to studying whatever that building used to be tomorrow," I told him wearily as I helped Tadala pack up her instruments, "I just want you back at base before night sets in."

"Very well," the grizzly agreed grudgingly, "We just need to find our way out of the temple, which I'm quite sure this once was. Let me show you some of the other things we discovered!" The old bear's voice was full of such eager delight – I could just see those dark eyes of his sparkling with almost childlike wonder at the prospect of sharing his new pet project – so I decided to humour him. The view from his bodycam allowed me to see Marcel trudging on ahead, a large piece of chiselled stone Kalle had no doubt thought significant slung over his powerful shoulders, bouncing against the wolf's broad back with each step he took.

Suddenly, my attention was caught, not by anything the light of Kalle's torch was falling on, but by a curious noise that was audible even through the ongoing interference muddying the connection.

"Was that one of you blinking?" I questioned, ready to fire up as it was firm policy that blinking was to be done in groups whenever possible and the sound, while unfamiliar, was sufficiently similar to that of someone using a blink point to ascribe the unusual quality of it to distortion.

"No?" Kalle replied, a little confused, "No, that wasn't us. Anything behind us, Cassia?" I heard the leopard's boots crunch against the floor of the dark passage as she turned to peer back the way they had come, a beam of her torch sweeping across my static-riddled picture. Before I could hear her report, the connection ceased.

"Kalle!" I said sharply despite knowing perfectly well my voice was falling on deaf ears. I attempted to re-establish the connection. Nothing happened. I tried again. Nothing. I flicked my hand once, asking the hologram to show me the map; where I remembered the ruins being, there was only one

dot and it was moving rapidly towards a blink point. Mere seconds after it intersected with the eye-shaped icon that denoted the blink point's location, the dot vanished briefly only to reappear next to another ocular representation closer to base. Several times this repeated before a clatter could be heard from the depths of the ship.

"Sir!" the gasped cry was in stark contrast to Marcel's normally growling voice. He came stumbling out of the blink room as I burst through the door from the flight deck; the wolf was slumped against the wall of the corridor, his breathing rapid, his brow sweaty. I opened my mouth to question him, but he forestalled me between deep lungfuls of air: "Ambushed, sir. I don't know what by."

"Calm down," I said, gesturing the wolf towards his shared cabin, "Tell me what you did see."

He sat down on the lower bunk, both elbows propped on his knees as he ran his hands through his short-cropped hair. "Nothing..." he began, still taking deep breaths in an attempt to calm himself, "just some light, purple light. I thought it best to get out of the ruins, I thought Kalle and Cassia would be behind me...I should look for them."

"No," I told him firmly, placing one hand on his shoulder to keep him seated, "we stay at base after dark. Anyway, it would be next to impossible to find them at night when their locators aren't working."

"Tomorrow. We'll send a search party first thing tomorrow morning," I assured Marcel as he looked at me in shocked outrage. He stared at me for a few seconds, clearly deciding whether it was worth arguing with his captain, but eventually nodded his ascent. "Rest up," I instructed as I rose to my feet and left his cabin.

With missing personnel burdening an already troubled mission, my thoughts briefly dwelled upon how my prospects of future commands would look once we were out of this mess. However, with the smallest shake of the head, I rid myself of such fixations: now was not the time to be self-centred. I was thus reassured by how packed the flight deck was when I returned to it. Glancing at the map still being displayed on the hologram in my hand, I saw that only two groups were still out in the wilderness: one in the process of blinking, the other approaching their nearest blink point.

Moments after setting foot on the flight deck, my stomach gave a very clear signal that it was time for a break. Once I'd got Tam keeping an eye on the status of the stragglers, I fetched myself some sustenance and settled at a dining table. Despite the stress of the day, I found myself unwinding as I chatted with those others who had returned and chewed my way through the unusually palatable serving of chicken curry; perhaps the matter here was somehow better-suited to being transmogrified into food. I was soon settled back in my seat, feeling replete and far more comfortable with our situation than I had been since we had landed.

However, just as I was lowering my cup from my lips after imbibing a sip of water as refreshing as any I'd had before, Tam's voice cut through my cosy reverie with a note of concern that made the back of my neck prickle: "Sir..." he began, clearly not wanting to be the bearer of bad news at such an inopportune moment, "Valerie's group has disappeared off the screen."

I struggled out of my restfully slumped pose and strode across the flight deck to accompany him at his station. "Have you tried contacting them?" I asked, my eyes noticing the conspicuous absence of three dots, the other group looking to have just arrived back.

"Valerie? Come in, Valerie!"

I leaned across Tam, jabbing a button to broadcast my voice to everyone beyond the confines of the ship, "Immediate status report from all personnel!"

Silence.

"That storm's still raging up there," I commented as I withdrew my hand from Tam's console, "it's probably starting to cause malfunctions in people's locators."

I received a few incredulous looks as I walked back to where I was sitting to clear away the debris of my meal. I was confident in my assertion, though. After all, a weak leader offers empty words to reassure his troops; a true leader believes what he preaches.

My orders for the night were no different to those of the evening prior: pairs would watch the exterior cameras in three-hour shifts while everyone else slept. I took first watch with Sofiya, a squirrel who had spent the daylight hours assisting our resident geologist with her research. We saw very little of interest in the growing darkness, and were able to retire to our beds a little surer of our safety despite the knowledge that five of our number were still absent. I did feel a small twinge of worry however, as I began writing an MIA list: Kalle, Cassia, Saskia, Oskar, Valerie.

The third day on our planetary prison dawned just as bright and clear as those which had preceded it; according to Tadala, the storms our arrival had triggered were probably the cause of such otherwise fine weather: the electrical discharge was such that any budding rain clouds would be instantly dispersed, and this was likely the case around the entire globe.

When I emerged from my cabin, I found the flight deck packed with all my crew who seemed reluctant to venture outside as yet: the ramps leading to the surface hadn't been lowered and the doors that opened onto them remained firmly closed. This was good, as I intended to give rather different orders today.

"Morning, everyone," I said as I entered the crowded flight deck, all eyes turning to me and the soft rumbling of voices dying away, "In light of what transpired yesterday, I feel it would be prudent to have fewer, but larger groups out in the wilderness," there was a general murmur of agreement from those assembled. Once the collected voices had gone quiet again, I continued, "It will also be necessary to combine our regular duties of research and exploration with a search-and-rescue mission. As such, two groups of five will blink to the last locations those missing were known to be, while the remaining six will stay at base," fresh muttering had broken out at this, but my raised hand recalled all present to silence. I cleared my throat, then resumed giving my instructions, "Marcel will lead the group searching the ruins," despite looking nervous at the prospect, the wolf nodded, "Monty, Vijay, Stijn, and Sofiya will join him. Daniel, Kristoffer, Carl, Rory, and Rosalind will comprise the other party. If you've all had breakfast, work starts now."

Those who hadn't yet eaten quickly grabbed whatever food they could before going to gear up, many leaving a trail of toast crumbs on the way to their lockers. We who were once again not venturing into the wilds went about our duties in as similar a fashion as we had previously, but wisely stayed as close as possible to the safety of the ship: Tadala had set up her instrumentation just far enough from the ramp so as to avoid the ship obscuring her view of the still-electrified heavens, while Sanjit preferred to study the samples he had collected from the comfort of his medical bay. I chose the task of guarding the tiger this time, if only for a change of scene away from the heat and humidity of the outdoors, and a chance to take some of the weight off my shoulders for a short while: Tam would be keeping an eye on the progress of the search parties from the flight deck while Sanaa and Hiroki patrolled Tadala's vicinity.



“Found anything of use?” I asked the bespectacled feline as I pulled a chair over to a spot near the door that gave me a view down the hallway.

“Possibly...” Sanjit began in a non-committal fashion, head bent low over the eyepiece, a sliver of plant matter fixed to the stage, “A couple of species aren’t too different from some known anti-inflammatories, and the analyser seems to think their chemical make-up is quite similar too,” he informed me, gesturing towards a machine in the far corner of the room. As I nodded, he unclipped the sample he’d been examining and tossed it into what must have been a discard pile with a disappointed grunt, “That one’s as useless as they come, though.”

As I had assigned myself arguably the easiest job of the day, namely sitting in an airconditioned room and chatting idly with Sanjit to pass the time, I took it upon myself to leave my post occasionally to deliver refreshments to those outside in the glare of the midday sun that still made its presence felt despite the ever-growing bolts of electricity in the atmosphere above us. I would check up on the status of our search parties with Tam on these occasions too, who assured me that all was well every time.

I was just returning from such an excursion, a cup in each hand with a pre-packaged snack balanced on top of each, when I heard a shout from the flight deck: “Sir! It’s happened again!”

After depositing my deliveries on Sanjit’s desk, I hurried back down the hallway in pursuit of Tam’s voice. One look at the main screen, on which the map I’d become so used to keeping tabs was being displayed, made asking for any further explanation of the hare’s cry pointless: the area around which we knew the ruins to be was devoid of dots.

“Call the others back!” I commanded at once, already starting towards the shaft of sunlight blazing through the open hatch, “Tell them to make no detours, just straight back to base.”

I could hear Tam relaying these instructions to the remaining search party as I strode down the ramp in Tadala’s direction. “Pack up, we’re going into lockdown,” I informed her, waving Saana and Hiroki over to me as they patrolled a short distance away.

“But my resear-“

“I don’t care. Marcel’s group has vanished from the map, so my orders are that everyone return to the ship and stay there until further noticed. Do I make myself clear?”

The finality of my tone and the glare I was giving her seemed to convince the impala not to argue further. With the help of Sanaa and Hiroki, she dismantled her apparatus and was soon back on board. The moment the last of their feet had left the ramp, I sealed the hatch, entombing us in our stranded craft.

Somehow the fresh turmoil we had been thrown into seemed to focus my mind, every course of action to be taken becoming clear in my head: “Tam, tell the others not to blink back to the ship without informing us first. Hiroki, guard the blink room. Open fire on anyone who appears if I haven’t given them clearance,” the salamander nodded and immediately marched purposefully off to man his post, “Sanaa, watch the hatch for any sign of entry being forced.” I took up my position in the captain’s seat, my eyes firmly fixed on the screen.

The minutes snailed by. The progress of those five dots towards the closest eye-shaped icon seemed agonisingly slow, as if I could count how many infinitesimally small pixels of hologrammatic ground they had covered.

When they were barely more than a centimetre away from their goal, the dots' progress seemed to cease. They were almost entirely stationary now, apart from tiny jitters around a central focal point at which sat one of the five clusters of pale greenish-yellow pixels.

After they'd been in the same spot for several minutes, I opened comms, "What's the hold up?"

Silence rang in our ears as we awaited a response, every fraction of a second we sat in suspense increasing the tension hanging in the air.

"There's been...an incident," the sound of Daniel's voice elicited various noises of relief from all present, even if it seemed he was the bearer of bad tidings, "Rosalind took a tumble and has cut herself quite badly. We've administered first aid, but Sanjit will probably have to take a look at her."

"The quicker, the better. The last place she needs to be right now is out there, so I want you back aboard as soon as you can. We'll alert Sanjit," Tadala flicked me a swift nod before hurrying down the hallway to the medical ward, "and don't forget to tell me when you're ready to make the last blink."

With the connection terminated, my attention left the map briefly to give Tam fresh orders, "Tell Tadala to stay with Sanjit in case he needs an assistant, then watch the blink room with Hiroki." The hare immediately scrambled out of his seat and disappeared from the flight deck too, leaving me to watch the screen intently as the five dots resumed their progress. Within ten minutes they had made their first blink, then their second, lingering at each station only to punch in their next destination.

At the last and nearest ocular icon there was a more pronounced pause, punctuated by Daniel's voice returning to the speaker, "Ready to blink, sir."

"Ten seconds," was my succinct reply, which I then followed by a yell of warning to those anticipating the group's arrival.

The next thing I heard as an indistinct mumble of voices, but with a clearly discernible tone of distress. Leaping from my seat, I rushed to join them, indicating that Tam should take the helm in my absence once I'd reached the crowd ushering the injured lioness into the medbay. Once she'd been eased onto the bed, I was able to push my way to the front of the throng to join Sanjit at her side. My eyes raked her body for the wound and were soon drawn to the blood blossoming from beneath the hastily applied dressing upon her leg, the scarlet shining like a beacon beneath the bright illuminations above the geologist's prone form.

The tiger reached out, gently grasping the fabric which bound the absorbent pad to Rosalind's leg and started to unwind it. With the wound exposed to the light, he bent his head low over it, examining it minutely.

I allowed him a few moments of consideration before breaking the silence, "How does it look?"

"I'm not sure," he replied frustratingly, "The cut itself seems fairly ordinary, not particularly deep. However, I don't think I've seen this kind of reaction before," he indicated the skin that was visible beneath the lioness' short fur along the edge of the gash which had assumed a yellowish hue.

He straightened up, turning his attention to the others who were gathered in the doorway, a look of deep concern on every face. "What cut her?"

"Just a jagged rock."

“With moss,” Rosalind croaked weakly, her eyes closed.

“Moss...” muttered Sanjit to himself, glancing briefly at the haphazard piles of samples strewn across his desk. He appeared to ponder the best course of action, his attention now on the selection of treatments available to him. Finally, he donned surgical gloves and picked up a swab. “You probably won’t have any immunity to any kind of infection you might have picked up, so I’m going to take a sample, clean the wound as much as possible, then give you some antibiotics,” he informed her, to which she nodded. As he started work, I ushered the onlookers out of the ward to leave him undisturbed but for the assisting Tadala.

After deactivating the blink hub in the interests of keeping any unwanted visitors out, we retired to the flight deck. I resumed my seat of command from which I joined in with the pervasive activity of scrutinising the exterior cameras. As half our number were now missing without trace and another was lying prone in the medical ward, the atmosphere was understandably subdued and nervous and remained so for the rest of the day; some made an attempt to talk or to eat, while others preferred to sit in silence.

This gloomy air persisted throughout the afternoon and was still very much present as night began to fall. Not a word had been shared between us for some time so, needing a change of scene and an update on Rosalind’s condition, I rose from my seat and left the others to their contemplations, feeling their eyes chasing me into the hallway.

I knocked lightly on the wall outside the ward before entering, not wanting to startle. “How is she looking?” I asked the two figures huddled by Rosalind’s leg, the tiger bent low over where I knew the wound would be why Tadala stood slightly to the side, appearing to be cleaning an implement.

At my words, Sanjit straightened up, plucked something from a nearby tray which he then passed to the impala. “Keep that pressed on the wound, not too firmly,” he instructed before moving over to me, shedding his bloodstained gloves in the process. “Not good,” he began succinctly, dropping the soiled latex into a sterilisation chute and starting to wash his hands, “something has infected her bloodstream and I think it has already spread to her brain: she started having minor convulsions so we had to sedate her,” he sighed as he rubbed the fur on the backs of his hands dry, turning to face the unconscious feline upon the bed, “The antibiotics I administered are slowing the infection a little bit, but it would take weeks to know enough about the infection itself to be able to do anything more.” He lapsed into silence for a few moments, simply staring anxiously across the room at his patient. Then he turned to me, “I don’t hold out much hope for her.”

“How long?” I asked, unwilling to articulate my question any further: it was one thing having crewmembers vanishing, but quite another to face the cruel finality of death.

“She might last the night, if we’re lucky,” he answered, sounding defeated, “I’ll continue doing what I can for her: not knowing much about the infection means I can’t give a definite prognosis.”

I nodded and raised a hand to pat the tiger’s shoulder, “Best of luck, I’m going to take first watch.”

Returning to the flight deck, I announced the commencement of the usual night-time routine. While the others filed down the hallway to their cabins, Hiroki and I settled ourselves as best we could in front of the security monitors for our three-hour shift. It proved to be entirely uneventful however, as neither of us saw any more movement than a few breaths of wind rustling through the treetops. As such we were very glad when Daniel and Tam arrived to relieve us of our posts and the monotony that had gripped us.

Before I reached my cabin where I hoped some rest awaited me, Tadala emerged from the medbay. "Sir," she said very softly, hardly more than a whisper, "you're needed." I stepped into the room she had just vacated, immediately seeing what was afoot: Rosalind was now merely an indistinct shape beneath a couple of surgical gowns that had been draped across her in an approximation of traditional respect. Sanjit was sat at his desk, prodding and scribbling on his tablet without a vestige of conviction or enthusiasm.

"We lost her," he said without looking up, his voice flat. I felt incapable of a response as I stood two steps into the room, my gaze taking in the lifeless form, the dejected tiger, the grisly spatters and smears of scarlet on his surgical gown.

With one final tap of a finger upon his screen, Sanjit stood and shed the last evidence of his ultimately failed efforts to keep the lioness alive. "When's my watch?" he asked, pushing gently past me to dispose of the bloodied garment.

I blinked, surprised that he would even think that I would ask him to perform the task of security guard after all he had done already. "You don't need to worry about—"

"I want to," he said firmly, cutting across me.

I stared at him for a few seconds, then gave the slightest of shrugs, "Well, if you're sure. You can take the last watch with Sanaa."

He nodded his understanding, then retreated to his cabin without another word. I remained rooted in place for a minute or so longer, then, after taking a final, lingering glance at Rosalind's blanketed body, I found my way to bed.

It took some considerable time for sleep to envelope me that night, and I very much doubted that I was the only one. My mind busied itself for a good hour with plans for the next day: I could think of few means of remedying or escaping our predicament, but the one certainty in my head was that no one could venture far from the ship any longer. Once I had exhausted myself of energy and ideas, Somnus took me into his warm, comforting arms to ease me until morning.

I was wrenched from my state of peace by a loud drumming far sooner than I was ready. My eyes flashed open, my ears pricked up and quickly identified the noise as a fist hammering on the closed door of my cabin. Scrambling from my bunk, I opened the door to reveal Hiroki in a state of great distress: "The last watchmen are gone!"

I hurried to the flight deck in the salamander's wake, pulling on one of my mission-issue tops to cover my otherwise bare, red-furred torso. Sure enough, two empty seats sat in front of the security monitors where there should have been a tiger and a wolverine.

"Wake the others," I ordered without hesitation, a decisiveness Hiroki appeared to share as he sprinted back down the hallway and began banging on every door he came to. Within minutes, he had assembled all the remaining crew: eight of the original twenty-one, including myself.

"Sanaa and Sanjit disappeared during the night, we can no longer guarantee our safety on board the ship," I told them as I marched to and fro before my silent audience, "My priority now is to ensure that everyone present can return home safely, so we must seriously consider abandoning the mission and escaping this planet," my eyes immediately settled on Tadala, "What are our chances?"

"I think I'm close to a breakthrough," she replied immediately, instantly raising my hopes, "I just need to run one last test."

"What is it?"

"I want to launch a small rocket which contains a cannister of powder which will disperse throughout the atmosphere. If it behaves how I expect it to, we should be able to escape the atmosphere."

"That sounds promising," I said, nodding with genuine enthusiasm at the prospect of imminent departure, "You run the test and the ship will be ready to launch when you're done."

"Ah..." the impala responded with the air of someone about to reveal a major catch in a plan, "I need to launch it from a flat, elevated location above the canopy: I have to be able to see from horizon to horizon, and avoid even the remotest chance of damaging the ship," she explained as I glared at her, "There's a suitable hill about a kilometre away."

I eyed her for a few moments longer, weighing up the danger of what she was proposing with my eagerness to get my crew to the safety of space. "There and back as fast as you can? No detours?"

"Of course, sir."

"Alright," I said grudgingly, "Take Hiroki, Daniel, and Christoffer with you."

The four of them were suited up, armed, and had blinked to the nearest marker to the hill in question within five minutes, leaving Tam, Carl, Rory, and I to perform pre-flight checks and have the ship set for departure the moment Tadala returned with her findings. Apart from a hurried visual inspection of the ship's exterior, checking for any previously undetected damage or buried landing gear, the main hatch remained firmly shut against the dangers of the planet; how Sanaa and Sanjit had disappeared with a depowered blink hub and a locked hatch remained a perturbing mystery.

Two hours passed and all was in readiness for take-off, but for Tadala, her guards, and her vital research. While Carl guarded the lone, blocked entrance to the ship, Tam and Rory went to the medbay to move Rosalind's body to a cryochamber, I was left to seat myself in the position of command and bring up the map as I had done so many times before.

"Launch positions!" I yelled over the low hum of the engines that were anticipating our departure. I heard two pairs of footsteps pounding up the hallway towards me and the click of a harness.

"Are they back?" I heard Rory's ask, the hissing quality of his reptilian voice noticeable even in the absence of sibilants.

I shook my head, gesturing to the map on the screen, "Only four dots left." They needed no further explanation: Tam hurtled to the front of the flight deck as I cleared the map from the screen to give him clear access to the forward-view camera and the metrics that would help guide us. Three further harnesses clicked into place, signalling the hare to get us airborne. The planetary drive roared as he pumped power into it; soon we were clear of the ground which was a haze of billowing dust clouds beneath the jets of our thrusters. The treetops quickly vanished from sight as we continued to rise quickly, approaching the storm Tadala had hoped we would be able to traverse.

*BANG!* The whole ship shuddered as we encountered the first bolt of electricity, but Tam's sure hands held us steady and continued to urge the craft upwards through the inflamed atmosphere. Only seconds passed before we were hit again, then again, and once more, furious fists pummeling on the outside of our only refuge harder and faster the higher we tried to go. Every impact threw the

ship about more violently than the last until we were spiralling through the hail of blows, the hare's best attempts to right our course doing nothing but enraging the beast beyond the walls.

I shut my eyes tightly, willing us upwards through the storm and into the endless ocean of black that was so excruciatingly close; sweet relief was being dangled above us as if we were Tantalus and the cosmos was the sweetest, most succulent fruit.

Then the planet's rage ceased, the tempest no longer unleashing its anger upon us. Had we done it? Had we reached the promised land? However, I heard no shouts of celebration, of delight. My eyes opened. My head had fallen back onto the cushioning of my seat in the chaos to which we had just been subjected. I lowered my gaze from the stark white ceiling to the screen which still displayed the forward-view camera. Tam had stopped us spinning, but his control over the craft seemed dreadfully limited as he hurtled towards, not gloriously dark infinity, but an expanse of royal purple through which a pale green serpent slithered. I could see the hare desperately trying to pull the ship out of its nosedive, but our descent back towards the hell which we had so unwisely tried to flee was inexorable.

A small groan passed my lips as my brain slowly chugged back into life. The back of my head was sore, a throbbing pain momentarily blocking out all other sensations. I tried to remember where I was and what had happened, but my brain was filled with a kind of odd buzzing, like white noise on a faulty connection. It slowly ebbed away however, making me gradually more aware of my surroundings.

I tried opening my eyes, but it didn't seem to work: all I could see was absolute, unfathomable darkness. Then a light flashed across my vision, illuminating a path across the ceiling for a fleeting second, followed by the sound of footsteps stumbling away from me in the darkness.

A few moments passed before I heard another soft moan, much like mine, from nearby. I groped around on my chest, searching out the buckle of my harness. Just as my fingers found the familiar lump of plastic, a dim, orangey glow faded into existence along the walls and floor, marking the locations of obstacles and objects of importance. In front of me, slumped against the front-most console of the flight deck, was a long-eared figure.

I got my harness unfastened as the footsteps I'd heard earlier returned. Getting groggily to my feet, I turned to see the dimly-illuminated form of Carl returning from the hallway that led to the bowels of the ship, the antlers atop his head making his identity plain.

"Are you okay, sir?" he inquired, the browns of his short facial fur looking almost black in the half-light.

"Alive," I replied. I rubbed my head as I staggered down towards the front of the flight deck. Placing a hand on his shoulder, I lit my torch to get a better look at Tam who had still not stirred. The light flashed over his face, eyes half closed, mouth hanging open. Now that I was close by, I could hear something splashing onto the floor. Kneeling down, I saw a pool of blood on the floor which was being fed by another upon the console, a sickening drip falling every few seconds.

I didn't linger by the hare's side, instead finding my way back to Carl who was now examining the extent of Rory's injuries. "How is he?" I asked, lighting the lizard's head with my own torch to allow the reindeer to use both his hands.

"I'm no expert, but I think he'll be okay. How about Tam?"

He seemed to understand the answer from my silence. With a sigh, he unfastened Rory's harnessed and heaved him onto his feet. I slid one smooth-scaled arm over my shoulders to help transfer the dazed zoologist to a cabin. Once we had him settled on the lower bunk and a healthy dose of painkillers down his throat, Carl and I turned to each other.

"What's the plan, captain?" his voice carried no hint of frustration or anger with me, so I was sure all he wanted was something to keep him occupied and no admission of defeat: a good soldier to the last.

I took a moment to consider, glancing down at the lizard who now seemed well enough to help himself to some more of the cup of water by his bed. "Assess the damage, see if we can fix things up," I said at last, "and hope nothing comes to get us." The cervine gave me a grim smile which I returned, stepping out into the hallway.

"I'll see if everything's shipshape down below, you run a few checks from the flight deck," he nodded in agreement, heading back the way we had come while I turned left towards the far end of the hallway, "And umm...see if you can clean up," I left it at that as I stopped just before the door to the locker room to open the trapdoor that led to the narrow maintenance corridors.

Even at the best of times, this part of the ship was dimly lit and there was no emergency lighting, so I had no choice but to conduct my inspection by torchlight. Fortunately, it didn't look as though any of our drives had been damaged by the crash, although the computer system was operating in 'safe mode' which meant that we would have to cope with only the little illumination we already had and the most basic food and drink until it had cleared itself, a process that would take in the order of hours. However, the bright side of my findings was that the extensive armour the hull had been provided with had borne the brunt of the impact, thus the structural integrity of the ship still appeared to be sound.

With everything more or less in order, I found my way through the labyrinthine corridors to the ladder that would bring me back to the living areas. Emerging from the shaft, I glanced around to see Carl striding down the hallway towards me. He stopped at the now-closed door to Rory's cabin. He placed a hand on the access panel, and the door slid aside with a soft hum. Before it had even finished opening however, the relative silence was torn asunder by the unmistakable sound of an energy weapon discharging. Streaks of red flashed past my eyes, over which I'd thrown an arm in surprise. Upon lowering it, I saw the reindeer's crumpled, lifeless form upon the hallway floor, his chest singed where the shots had hit him.

Slipping into the locker room, I drew a pistol from the gun rack before beginning to take cautious steps towards my fallen comrade. My footfalls were near silent but for the slight creak of the soles of my shoes. Reaching the door, I peered around at the room's interior, doing my utmost to reveal as little of my face as possible to the occupant. Kneeling on the floor, a weapon just like the one I had just retrieved having fallen from his hands in shock, was Rory.

He looked up when he realised I was there, but didn't reach for the gun. "I...I panicked," he said weakly, clearly horrified at what he had done.

Dropping my guard, I stepped into the cabin and kicked the pistol away from the shaken lizard, then held out my black-gloved hand. "It's okay," I began gently, ushering him out into the hallway and towards the flight deck, "you were scared, maybe still a bit confused. You felt you had to defend yourself." He nodded tremulously as I guided him to a chair, into which he sank. "Deep breaths, okay? I'm going to put out a distress signal."

Resuming my usual seat, I used my priority override to bypass the computer's safe mode and activate the distress beacon. At the visual prompt, I began to speak, "This is Captain Luca Lloyce of the research vessel Poseidon. We are stranded on the planet Tallus 179b and require urgent assistance. Of the original twenty-one crew, two are dead and seventeen are missing," a purple glow briefly illuminated the consoles in front of me, "Adverse weather conditions caused our ship to crash land on attempting to leave the planet," a scuffling and muffled cries behind me, "Approach with caution: unknown hosti-"