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## **Chapter 5      *And Not A Drop To Drink***

We'd only planned this to be a quick exploratory mission, not to land here for good and ever. We hadn't even bothered to pack any supplies. I was suddenly glad I hadn't left my backpack on the ship. Not that there was much of anything of use in it, but its slight weight still made me feel better.

Popping it open, I rustled through what I'd brought. The only thing of even the slightest use right now was my towel. I ripped it into shreds and bound what of Crit's wounds I could.

It was hard to put any pressure to the lump on his head, but I wrapped it around his skull, covering one of his eyes and tying it off under his jaw.

He'd begun to mumble in his bestial snarling language as I patched him up. I couldn't make out a word of it, but every growl sent a chill down my spine.

Hearing him speak made me feel alone and vulnerable, like he was the proverbial wolf, and I was his prey. There was something about how he spoke that made me think of dark nights left hiding against things greater than I.

But when I looked into his face... there was something else. His voice left me shaking, but the expression on his battered features looked more like a month old kitten pulled from its mother. He looked as alone and scared as I felt.

We were still sealed tight in the craft, and, for who or whatever might care, we were still afloat. I took a moment to drop back into my seat, breathing heavily. The air in this place was getting a might bit too close and musty for my tastes. It had been alright enough for the journey here, but even then we had been pushing the environmental system for all it was worth. Not only did it need to fight to keep the scent of Crit's blood from the air, but also work overtime to scrub my extra exertion before I used up all the oxygen in the room.

The view through the front windscreen wasn't all that comforting either. There was still no land, and the blue ocean surrounding us kept reminding me of some of the cleaning solutions that I'd used to clear grime from engine parts. It had the almost luminescent colour that one would associate with manufactured chemicals, not some naturally occurring solution.

There was little to it now. All I could do was pop the top and hope that we weren't too far from someplace that we could scamper to. We couldn't stay here forever, adrift in our little craft.

Good luck more than good planning left us with the hatch on the roof, away from the water. I'd

been in ships before that had belly hatches, opening between the landing gear – I never did understand them. It always gave me the willies when they were the only way out – for reasons just such as this.

The hiss of breaking seals let in some slanting midday light. The sun was more orange than what I was accustomed too, and a shade dimmer, but I'd walked under enough skies that it hardly even registered.

What sent me reeling was the hard biting chemical smell that forced itself like a hot nail into my nose.

I scrambled up the small ladder that lead up to the hatch, almost stepping on Crit's still prone body in the process.

God, what was out there? It smelt like I was in the middle of the universe's worst chemical spill!

There weren't many working systems on this pile of junk, but I did manage to find an environmental analyzer. A small hand-held unit that was likely a good fifty years out of date, I could just make out its dim readout screen as I held it up to sniff the air.

Oh, joy. This was not good.

We were adrift in an ocean of  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ , hydrogen peroxide. There was just enough water mixed in to keep the whole of the sea from bursting into flames as a result of our passage. Well, that would explain its unworldly blue tint.

Wasn't hydrogen peroxide extremely corrosive?

Crawling out onto the wildly pitching bonnet of the craft, I carefully worked my way to the edge and peeked over, making sure to avoid getting a face full of acid.

The entire bottom of the ship was beginning to flake off.

People used hydrogen peroxide to bleach stuff, and what lay beneath me was far purer than what got packaged in any chemist's bottles.

And to think about that, I was breathing the air not five feet from a few billion gallons of the stuff.

I was back inside the ship without taking another breath, dragging the environmental analyzer behind me as I buttoned the hatch closed with a solid thunk.

These bloody things were supposed to wail like banshees whenever they were exposed to an atmosphere that couldn't support life. How could it have missed the  $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$  that must be in the air?

The screen was easier to read in the sudden darkness of the cabin. I'd only been outside for a moment, but I was already feeling cramped in this small space.

The analyzer beeped happily away in my hands as I poked at it. All it would say was that the air was breathable, and surviving for an extended time did not appear to pose a problem.

Yeah, right.

I fought with it some more before finally getting at least a halfway readable answer out of the device. Looks like the stuff beneath me was mixed with some form of substrate that kept it from atomizing. Just my luck. It would eat the flesh off my bones if I touched it, but I could spend my life a pace away and never feel any ill effects.

Oh, yeah, and it was highly reactive if it came in contact with either metal or ceramics. Exactly like the stuff this ship was made out of.

Oh bugger.

I was sealed away, with the hatch buttoned up above me, but I could still smell something in the air. Below me, even Crit's nose was twitching as he continued to mumble in his sleep.

It smelt like burnt wiring.

The cabin took up almost all of the internal space of the craft, but there were a couple of access panels in the floor.

Space craft are a odd breed in that you need to be able to get to any and all of the critical systems without ever leaving the pressurized cocoon. That had the advantage that I could get almost all the way to the outside hull in any direction if I tried hard enough.

Not that I really needed to this time. I shoved one of Crit's limp arms out of the way and pried up a floor panel. I almost wished I hadn't.

The rancid smell of melting insulation and ceramics immediately came up to hit me in the face. Behind me, I could hear the sound of the environmental scrubbers kicking in overtime to try and pull the poison from the air.

Not a foot below me a light blue stream was happily bubbling in through an ever widening hole in the hull. It was eating everything it came across.

I slammed the panel back into place and began pulling open drawers and cupboards around me, searching for any kind of emergency kit.

What had the analyzer said? Especially reactive against metals and ceramics? Well, that put most of my technology out. It hadn't said polycarbonates or plastics though. And every ship was *supposed* to be equipped with an inflatable life raft.

If only I could find it.

Crit began to stir on the floor beneath me. Apparently the scent of death was enough to wake even someone with a bump on his head the size of a golf ball.

His eyes didn't open more than a crack, showing nothing but whites, but his voice steadied. The occasional word slipped through in Standard, but not enough to make sense of anything. The most I was able to pick up was 'family' and 'home'.

Okay, don't panic. I can do this. All I need to do is find the emergency life raft and get it inflated before the acid that made up this planet ate us alive. There was land, we'd seen it before we crashed, not far away. If we could get there we could survive.

Aha! A fat, bright orange package almost fell from the shelf, sliding towards me as the ship pitched, the sound of groaning metal echoing around us.

The scent of burnt insulation and ceramics finally overpowered the environmental systems. They committed suicide in a puff of thick black smoke that wafted from the air vents.

"Crit! We're leaving, move it!" I gave him a soft kick to the side as I scrambled past him and up to pop the top again. I could see drops of blue starting to creep up in the lowest parts of the cabin.

Tossing the life raft onto the roof, I turned back to shrug into my pack and lift one of the azlin's

massive arms over my shoulder.

He must have gained some level of awareness, at least he didn't fight me as I pulled him to his feet. A few seconds later I was getting a way better look at his backside than I ever wanted as I shoved him up the ladder. He seemed to be running on autopilot, moving, but without direction. I just hoped that he wouldn't wander into the drink once I got him topside.

We didn't make it with more than a moment to spare. The great golden lug was just clearing the hatch when the peroxide began to invade the floor that he had been laying on. He'd left some of his fur behind, shed on the ground. It didn't even hiss as it dissolved away like sugar in hot water.

The blue devil nipped at my heels as I followed Crit up. Fortunately, he had stopped dead once he'd gotten on the roof, his eyes slowly starting to clear.

"Wha..." His voice was an ungodly mix of Standard and whatever that other thing was he spoke.

"Just get in the raft." I pulled the draw string on the orange cube, praying that it would inflate faster than the acid could eat through the ship.

I was almost ready to scream when the bloody cube that was supposed to auto inflate into a raft just... sat there. It wasn't as if I was expecting it to get up and dance or anything, but it would have been helpful if it... well, you know, inflated.

A swift kick to the side of the box clicked something deep inside it, causing it to poof up and flower out seconds later.

The raft was growing so fast that we were quickly running out of space. The whole ship was pitching forward now, its nose well under the tide. The space we had to stand on was shrinking as the ship descended. I didn't know if it did any good, but I slammed the hatch closed under me. It gave us a little more space to stand, and I wanted to trap as much air in the hull as I could to try and keep it afloat.

Crit was standing now, that was a good thing, but he was starting to wander, too. I had to hold onto one of his hands, pulling him back from the ever encroaching edges as we waited for the raft to inflate enough to be able to hop aboard.

It was likely no more than a handful of heartbeats before a space opened up in the center of the expanding orange plastic, but it felt like an eternity.

"Move it, Crit." I gave him a shove, but he teetered at the edge, refusing to step forward over the bright orange bumper.

By the descended gods, what had happened to my head?

I could barely see, and all I could hear was the rush of my own heart in my ears.

Someone was grasping my hand, insistently pushing me forward... but who was it? It was too small to be Mother or Father... could it be one of the family?

I stopped. No. I wouldn't go anywhere before I knew what was happening. That had gotten me in more than enough trouble already.

I drew the back of one hand across my eyes, trying to force them clear by sheer will alone. It did help... a little.

All that I could see was blue. A pale blue sky and bright blue water. I knew this... I'd seen this before, but where? It was nothing close to the deeper tones that I had grown up with.

Another shove came from behind me. I had to claw back a growl from my lips as I reached a free hand back to grasp who or whatever it was. I would have no more of this.

I heard a squeak as my fingers wrapped around something soft. I pulled, lifting it off the ground as I brought it before my eyes.

James?

Another wave of nausea washed over me as I tried to pull forth the events of the last few hours. I wished I hadn't.

Two deep breaths and I was ready to start facing the world again. Whatever world this might be. Oh, and I let go of James' throat. I'm sure I'd read somewhere that human's didn't care much for being held aloft by the neck. He dropped heavily into the bottom of a neon orange raft that had just finished inflating before me.

The words took a long time to form in Standard, but I forced them out, "What's... what's going on?"

"Get in, you moron!" His voice was ragged and ruff, sounding as though I'd dented it.

I took a single step forward, coming to stand in the little raft just before the crystal blue water lapped at my toes.

Sitting down gently, careful not to nick the soft plastic of the raft with my claws, I settled next to the human. "Again," my voice was stabilizing now. "What's going on?"

"How much do you remember?" He was still clutching at his neck, breathing heavily.

I scratched behind my ear, feeling the massive shell of a bump just starting to go down.

"About to attempt a water landing." Then it occurred to me, a grin splitting my face, "And I made it, apparently. Sort of."

"It's not water." He looked up at me, a scowl on his face.

"What?" I bent over, about to dip a finger to the waves, he shot out a hand to hold my arm.

"Look what it did to the ship." He pointed his thumb. I could just make out the desecrated hull of our little tug starting to fall below the tide. It was dissolving into pieces as it sank, flecks of metal sluicing off slowly at first, but growing so quickly that it was little more than a haze long before it had sunk from sight.

I couldn't even find the words in Standard. All I could do was let out a long curse in my native tongue. It roughly translated into something along the lines of having a creeping plant crawl its way into your body and lay seeds there.

"James..." I poked carefully at the plastic liner between us and the hungry ocean, "If it can consume the ship whole, what's keeping us alive?"

"Good luck." He was searching around in a small flap in the side boom for a collapsible oar. "Apparently this stuff has a real appetite for metal and ceramics, but it's a little less interested in plastic."

"Less interested?"

"Yep." He threw the oar to me and began assembling the other one, "As in, 'this would be a really good time to start rowing', less interested."

Taking the plastic oar, I carefully dipped it into the devil's spit beneath us. "Got it. What direction is land?"

He didn't answer for a moment. "I was hoping you knew."

I let out a long breath. "No clue. The last thing I remember is shooting parallel to the coast. I was hoping at some level that we would be able to do just this." I brought a shaking hand up to my brow, warding off some of the light as I scanned the horizon. There was nothing. "Only four choices. Two won't help or hinder us, one will deliver us safely to land, and the last to death. Any preferences?"

"None." He did perk up again after a moment, "Only that whatever we pick, we might as well keep for as straight line as we can. And, if we don't find anything, let's do a ninety degree turn and try again. If land is more than an hour off, we're dead anyway. At least if we try a couple different directions we'll have a fifty-fifty chance, rather than a one-in-four. I don't like those odds."

I tried to think back to my days of hunting on the long grassed plains, but nothing there could even hope to apply to this. Back home one always had a scent, and firm ground underneath to rely on. Not here.

"Agreed." I pointed a claw towards the off-orange, almost green, sun on the horizon. I wasn't sure if it was rising or sinking. "Towards the light?"

The sun wasn't all that hot, but it fell down upon us mercilessly, never letting up, never a single cloud crossing it. The only thing that gave me even the slightest cheer was that I couldn't smell anything from the raft under us. It wasn't a guarantee, but we might at least have a little time to find some sort of salvation.

Neither of us had a clock. That was a bit of an oversight, but not as much as being without both food and water.

My arms were getting tired, sunburn already starting to turn my skin pink. We'd already changed direction once, and I wasn't looking forward to doing it again – that would mean rowing back over the distance that we'd already covered.

It didn't help that we couldn't see much further than a few waves ahead of us. There could be land no more than a few hundred meters away and we'd never see it.

The splash guards on this little raft were doing their job, keeping the acid from giving either of us an unwanted facial, but they poked up so high as to make the world nothing more than a dichotomy of bright orange and light blue. Not that there would have been much else to see anyway if I could have gotten a better view, but at least the waves changed.

Crit was taller than I and could at least see a little bit more, if not much.

"Is there anything out there?" I stopped rowing and took a moment to lean against the edge of the raft.

"Nothing that I can see." His mouth hung open now, tongue out and panting. It made him almost look like a dog, like some kind of animal.

"Figure you might get a better view if you stood up?"

He shrugged. "I thought about it, but I'd just as likely pitch over in the waves."

The bottom of the raft was soft plastic, nothing solid or rigid holding it in place. It simply rested on the ocean, the buoyancy of the inflated rim holding us afloat. I could feel the divot under me where I sat. It was even deeper under Crit, his greater weight pushing him further down.

"Might as well try," I suggested. "It's not like we've a lot to lose." I set my head back and stared upwards at the empty sky, "We're going to be down and out if we don't find land soon."

"Hold me up?" He cocked an eye-ridge to me as he shifted around, getting his feet beneath him. "Just help me make sure I don't puncture the raft." He wiggled one toe before my face, showing off a set of long, nasty looking claws.

"Yeah. That would be a bad thing."

A moment later he was on his feet. I was wrapped around his legs, trying to keep him from pitching forward and landing face first in the hungry drink.

He didn't say anything for long seconds. Just stood there, slowly twisting at the waist while he held his hands up to cup his eyes.

"Just wait for it..." His voice was tight, "We need to get atop another wave..."

I wrapped tighter around his legs as another swell washed under us, pitching us to the side as we were forced upwards into the air.

"There!" He almost roared it, nearly falling back into his own tongue, "I can see land!" He thrust out an arm before falling heavily back down into the boat.

I didn't bother to waste any breath to say a word. I just began rowing.

I did however notice a few moments later that the colour of the plastic under where Crit had been standing was a darker orange than it had been a few moments ago.

And the dark splotch was spreading.

I wasn't honestly sure what it was I had seen over the waves, but it had been brown, and not too far distant.

Even standing upright like that had given me precious little to see. I could only hope that it hadn't been a trick of my eyes, a vain desire for something that would deliver us from this small island of relative safety in a sea of death.

Thankfully, we didn't have long to wait. Soon the dry capped mountains were poking their heads again and again above the waves.

"Uhh, Crit?"

I twisted an ear towards him as I shifted slightly, never slowing my determined rowing. "Yes?" The word came from me too hard, too harsh.

James didn't bother to say anything else, only to point down to the craft between us.

The floor had previously been a bright orange, now it had fallen to a splotchy, cut black. More disturbing even than that were the bubbles of white that formed here and there. I could almost see the ocean rolling under them.

"Kreeap!" The curse escaped my lips unbidden. A foul thing to say at the best of times, it seemed to fit the moment.

I scrambled back from the stain, even as it continued to grow.

"Maybe we better..." James never even got the chance to finish before a single drop of bright blue wormed its way through the floor.

Seconds later it was joined by another and another. A tear began to form in the centre of the raft.

"Get on the pauldrons!" I reached out and dragged James towards me, careful not to wash him in the quickly growing tide.

The cylinder shaped inflated edges of the raft raised almost a meter above the surface of the ocean, providing the only safe haven that wouldn't drop down the moment we put weight on it.

Unfortunately, the edges had never been designed to be used for seating. They were coated with something that was supposed to make them tare proof – and resist the pressure of inflation. It seemed to provide a little more resistance to the acid beneath us, but left the surface slippery and slick.

Not to mention that a misjudgement of balance would send one either into the hungry waves, or back into the false safety of the main compartment.

"How much further was it, Crit?" I did give the little human credit, he kept rowing.

"Not far now, not far now." I didn't know what else to say. I couldn't see landfall any better than he. We could just as easily be a meter as a mile.

We were both on the same side of the raft now, and that left us going in little more than circles.

Every fibre in my arms ached as I put my head down and just rowed harder.

The acid that passed for ocean here was thicker than water. It had left my arms stinging hours ago, and redoubling my efforts now, after straining for so long already, made me almost cry out in pain.

I spared a glance behind me, James did his best to keep up, stride for stride.

The raft beside us slowly filled with liquid, pulling it downwards and pivoting us around on our axis. Not to mention that every drop of liquid in our ship was one more thing that we had to drag forward.

I hadn't even looked up for what seemed like hours when I felt a rumble underneath me.

I was shocked from my stupor, almost tumbling overboard. It was James who reached out at the last moment, placing a hand on my shoulder.

We were almost there.

Land was not ten paces away. We'd run aground in the shallows. There was less than a foot of sea here, so little depth as to prevent us from pushing forward any further.

I was about to roar out a cheer when I realized what that meant. There was a good ten strides of acid between us and safety, and we could row forward no further.

"Could we..." James stared across the same, shallow channel that I did. He dipped the corner of his backpack in the ocean. It sizzled and dissolved. The same with his ship uniform. We hadn't anything but the plastic under us that could even hope to resist the acid.

"I'm open to suggestions." I let my face fall to my hands, glaring up at the safe haven no more than a couple of leaps away.

Nothing but the empty rush of the wind answered me.

"What about boots?"

"What?" I shifted carefully around on my perch to face him, not a foot away, almost pressed up against me.

"Are your claws sharp enough to cut through this reinforced plastic?" He poked a finger down at the pauldron beneath us.

"Likely... but that would drop us in the ocean all the faster."

"Not if we took it from the other side." A slight grin was working its way to his lips, exposing his dull human teeth.

The pauldrons wrapped around the small vessel on all four sides, but each side was more or less self contained. We could pop the seal on any one side and the three others would remain inflated.

I crawled to the side furthest from shore. The journey couldn't have been more than a couple of meters but it took forever as I slowly inched forward, just one slight motion at a time, always careful to keep all my limbs and tail clear of the bright blue surf.

Tossing a glance over to James, he gave me a thumbs up after hunkering down on his perch.

I sat on one side of the divide between two sections, gauging where the weakest spot in the plastic was. This was nothing like what my claws were truly for. I was born and raised for hunting, for leading my family and defending their honour. Not attacking an oversized orange beach-ball, surrounded by a sea of acid on an alien planet.

I was hungry, I was thirsty, and I was tired. And I wanted to go home.

My outstretched hand came down towards the plastic, leaving a long strike on its surface. My claws were for just that – clawing, not digging. I couldn't poke or force them through the material, the muscles that let me sheath and unsheathe them would never stand for it.

For a long moment I thought I hadn't had any effect. I raised my hand for another strike, but never had the chance. Small bubble lines were beginning to form on the neon surface.

"Hang on! It's going to blow!"

I had just enough time to back away before my scores grew, exploding outwards, releasing the massive pressure that had inflated the craft. The rupture sent the whole vessel shuttering, rocking us both and nearly throwing me free.

I had to scramble forward to catch the deflating fabric before it began to sink into the sea. Working quickly, I did my best to slice what I could, long strips of plastic. Enough, I hoped, to wrap around my legs for the journey to shore.

The muscles of my claws felt like liquid fire in seconds, but I kept cutting, slashing again and again down until the plastic tore.

I was left with two large squares of bright orange. Just enough to wrap around my legs up to the knee. The only uniform I had ever worn on the Serius was a loose vest. I tore that into shreds now. Tying it around the hem of my new boots, there was just enough to hold them in place.

The plastic was stiff and slippery. I could barely keep my toes in place as it was, but at the same time I had to retract my claws so they didn't poke holes in the cladding. It was a constant effort to hold my claws in place, they always wanted to spring forth of their own accord whenever my footing threatened to give way.

I looked over at James before setting my first boot into the sea. He hadn't said a single thing the whole time. He simply sat on his little perch and watched me.

"If I lose my foot in this," I told him as I glanced over, "Just jump on my shoulders and I'll see how far I can take you. There's no reason both of us have to be stranded out here if this doesn't work."

His face turned a shade of green when I said that.

Tentatively, I dipped one toe quickly into the ocean. No burning pain. I lifted the foot up to my face, careful to neither upset my balance or drip anything onto my belly.

The boots had held. There was a small amount of damage, but I hoped that was just wear and tear from the last few hours.

"Hop aboard." I reached out a hand towards James. Not twenty-four hours ago carrying a human on my shoulders like this would have been an unthinkable indignity, but I was long past that now. He'd saved my life more times than I could remember since I'd awoken, cold and bleeding in the engine room. Carrying him to shore like a sack of meat was truly the least I could do to repay him.

Every step threatened to send me tumbling forward as his slight weight shifted about me. Looking down into the waves, I noticed for the first time that there wasn't a speck of life. I suppose that shouldn't be a surprise, considering what it was – but that meant this planet couldn't be too far through its terraforming.

It had to be a terraformed world, as the chance of a liveable planet naturally appearing was vanishingly small, and any that came about through the process of nature would have life filling in every crack, evolved to fit wherever it could. This planet had to be artificial. But, if that was the case, why would they have permitted the oceans to form into such a dangerous concoction?

It just didn't make sense. If one went through all the trouble to turn a planet, it was foolish to leave vast swaths of it uninhabitable.

I felt a slight tingle on the pads of my toes. The plastic under my feet was turning softer, almost to the point of becoming squishy. The upper sections of the boots were turning hard and brittle, but the bottoms were soft as leather. I sped up.

The shore was only a couple of strides away when I felt something drip on my big toe. It was as if pure fire had come done upon me, burning through to the bone.

A yip, and I was clear of the sea, having jumped nearly straight up. I had to fight for all I was worth when I landed, not to kick up a spray of acid that would have washed over us both. The last few steps were a scramble, but I was on land less than a second later, pulling the gods' forsaken boots from my feet.

There was a nasty burn across my toe where the acid had caught me, but it barely burnt past the fur.

"Let me see." James was off my shoulders, kneeling on the hard packed grey ground. He pulled a strip of cloth off my head that I hadn't even known was there. Flipping it out, he gave it a brush off and wrapped it around my foot, tight enough to keep the swelling down, but not so much that

I couldn't walk on it.

Sitting on the grey earth, no sand in sight, I took a moment to gaze around as the foul waves lapped not a meter from my flicking tail.

To one side of us was the iridescent blue that we had only just escaped from. To the other dismal brown peaks rose in the distance. They were uncapped by ice or snow, we hadn't seen a drop of water, or another living thing, since we'd crashed on this gods' forsaken place.