

Stardate 8.3.2200, Tau Cati system

The swirling vortex spun slowly in the viewscreens of the two Zootopian vessels. Blue light emanating from deep within its center distorted by the swirls of gas particles swimming around the great rift in space-time.

“So, what is it?” Judy asked her mate on the other side of the viewscreen 200 million miles away. Even on the far side of the solar system, Judy could see the thing with the naked eye, without visual enhancement.

Nick shrugged, “some of the guys think it’s a proto-star or a gas giant, maybe some heretofore unknown version of a black hole. However,” he paused to make sure she was listening. “Some of them think it might be a wormhole.”

Judy thought for a minute, trying to remember where she’d heard the term before. “That’s like a tunnel in space or something, isn’t it? Like maybe it could take us to an entirely different part of the universe?”

“Sort of,” the fox replied. “They tell me it’s more complicated than that, but that’s the basic idea. Unfortunately, it appears to be unstable. We don’t want to risk getting torn apart by gravitational waves or blasted by stellar radiation, so we’re preparing to launch a probe to check it out.”

“Good idea,” the bunny thought. “What do you know about the rest of the system?”

“Pretty typical really... A yellow star, two gas giants, a couple rocky planets, an asteroid belt and...” Nick sent an image of a blue, brown, and green orb rotating slowly in space.

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Stardate 12.3.2200

A porthole opened in the science ship *Vagabond*’s side and a small metallic object jetted out towards the distant space-time anomaly. As it streaked closer to the possible wormhole sensors and radar dishes unfurled from its sides and began scanning the anomaly. Swirling gases illuminated by blue light swept across its sensors, sending data on their composition back to the mothership. As the probe neared the source of the blue light it slowed, careful not to miss anything. But, as the probe came ever closer to the wormhole’s mouth, internal sensors registered stress on the probe’s frame. Alarms blared as bolts sheared loose from tidal forces as opposing gravitational forces pulled on the fragile device. The probe’s last transmission before it was shredded was a glimpse of what lay beyond the event horizon, an entirely new sun and stars.

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Stardate 15.3.2200

“You know, I can’t help but be disappointed.” Judy commented, her legs dangling over the side of the bunk.

“What’s there to be disappointed about?” Her spouse asked, nuzzling her dewlaps. “We found a potential new gateway to distant stars. Some of the guys even have a theory for stabilizing the gravity currents so ships could pass without getting torn apart.”

“Yes,” Judy conceded. “But there’s no guarantee that we’ll live to see it implemented. It might be our grandchildren or even great-grandchildren who get the chance to go through that wormhole.”

“So, you do want to adopt kids after all?” Nick inquired.

“Well, not right now.” The bunny started to backpedal, looking a bit flustered. “Maybe in ten years or so, when I’ve been promoted out of captaining a starship.”

“Maybe we can retire to that planet over there.” Nick pulled up the image he’d sent a few days before. “Looks fairly nice from here.”

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Stardate 25.3.2200, Tau Cati II orbit

“Radiation readings make it unlikely that there is mammalian life on the surface.” Judy rolled her eyes as she recalled Nick’s suggestion from a few days ago. They were both on the *Vagabond* this time, surveying the supposedly inhabitable planet’s surface through its’ monitors.

Nick gave a sigh as he looked over the scans himself. “I suppose that means it wouldn’t make much of a “New Zootopia” then. Would it?” He asked the scientist who’d given the assessment.

“Um, no.” He admitted sheepishly. “Not unless you think a colonist population would be willing to live in sealed pods and go outside wearing lead-lined pressure suits. A small research outpost maybe, but I don’t see anything larger than that.”

Something on the map caught Judy’s eye as the scientist spoke. An array of lines in the soil radiating out from a central location on the shores of a lake in a grid formation. “Hold on,” she interjected. “What is that? Could you zoom in any closer?”

The monitor magnified the region the bunny had indicated. With increased magnification they could make out long stretches of smoothed earth, lined on either side by raised structures that could not possibly be natural. “That’s not possible,” the scientist exclaimed in disbelief. “No mammal could...”

“The Xenos weren’t mammals.” Nick reminded his subordinate. “Who’s to say they wouldn’t think it was like home?” The fox studied the map more closely. “We’ve got planetary probes don’t we? Drop one down there.”

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Stardate 26.3.2200

"They're dead..." Judy watched the feed from the probe flying through the streets of the city they'd spotted. They saw motionless ground vehicles covered in dust, through one relatively clean window they'd spotted a group of skeletons, still sitting in their chairs. The only signs of life some sickly plants and a bug the size of a wolf, rooting through the spoiled foods of an abandoned store.

Nick sighed from where he stood next to her. "I was afraid of this." He muttered. "The craters the Xenos left back home were radioactive, remember? The emergency iodine supplements for months afterwards?"

"Actually, sir," another of the ship's technicians approached them. "The radiation we're detecting here doesn't match that from the Xeno attack. We're picking up more alpha and beta particles and stronger gamma and x-ray readings than our craters had even during the first week. Though radiation does seem concentrated around these craters all around the planet." He called up a series of pics of craters that seemed to be the size of cities.

"So," Judy thought. "Something much more radioactive exploded on this planet and killed everyone. But what?"

"Well, Captain Hopps." He suggested. "The *Chimera* is armed with missiles loaded with atomic fission explosives, right?"

"Yes," Judy grudgingly admitted.

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Back on her own vessel, the bunny surveyed the site designated for the test. It was an empty desert, little radioactivity compared to the rest of the planet, relatively untouched. "Fire on my command," Judy ordered. "Launch in five, four, three, two," she silently hoped there weren't any sort of survivors she was about to vaporize. "Launch."

The nuclear missile streaked across the screen towards its' target, detonating in a blinding fireball just as the heat shield was starting to break up.

"Okay," Judy said as the fireball died down. "That's done, now Nick's scientists can make their scans..."

"Captain, multiple rocket launches detected. All across the continent!"

"What?" The screen confirmed it. Multiple red dots were appearing on the map. "Get me *Vagabond* now!" Her husband's worried face showed on the screen almost instantaneously. "Nick, are you seeing this?"

"Already withdrawing." He replied.

"Good." Judy turned to her gunnery officer. "Prepare to fire upon any rockets approaching the *Vagabond*. Sensors, can you give me a time to impact?"

"They're not coming for us."

"What?" Judy turned back to the screen tracking the rockets. Their projected trajectories arced back to the planet, on the opposite hemisphere. As she stared, puzzled the first rockets landed and detonated with even larger versions of the same atomic fireball she'd produced. The blasts were followed shortly after by more launches from the targeted continent. "They're attacking themselves..." She noted, then the realization hit her like a brick. "They blew themselves up!"

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Stardate 27.3.2200

Back in Captain Hopps' cabin Nick tried to console his wife. "They're pretty sure it was an automated system. The rockets all hit existing craters. Whoever aimed those things probably died ages ago."

"But they died!" The distraught bunny exclaimed. "They died, at the hands of other beings from the same planet. Would we have done the same?"

"We haven't yet." Nick replied. "We've even made it to another star system entirely."

"Only because two other planets had a war over us!" Judy protested. "If it wasn't for Bellwether we would still be at each other's throats over differences in diet."

"Maybe Bellwether's people killed this planet." Judy perked up a quizzical ear in his direction. "Think about it, she was from a planet that managed to get into space without blowing themselves up, she exacerbated interspecies tensions between us to the point where civil war seemed like a real possibility, and the planet right next door is a Tomb. Why waste your own ships and weapons when you can make the enemy kill themselves off?"

"I suppose that makes some sense." The bunny replied. "Which makes it fortunate that we were spared that fate by another world, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes it is." Nick said outwardly, but privately he wondered what motivated the second fleet. In any case, he didn't think he would like to meet them.

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Stardate 2.4.2200

Nick was reviewing the final report on the surveyed planet, tentatively named "Necropolis", before it was to be sent back to Zootopia. Something caught his attention as he scrolled down the document, one of the Xenobiologists had noted unusual behavior in one of the giant insect

colonies. It appeared that they had learned the use of simple tech, like a crow, but with notably more complex organization. The probes had observed them making repairs to a structure cobbled together from the rubble after the shockwaves from the second atomic holocaust had toppled it. The reporting Xenobiologist thought they might be useful if domesticated, and given a few million years on their own they might have even developed sapience.

“Life goes on.” The fox commented as he sent the report off to Zol.

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Stardate 20.4.2200

Judy found herself letting out a sigh of boredom, after the experiment at the tomb world they'd been left surveying the remainder of the star system for weeks. As with Zol it seemed that only the one planet had been inhabitable and the rest were barren rocks or gas giants. Some of the mineral deposits or gas mixtures might be of use to the future economic development of the ZSR, but they wouldn't be suitable for large-scale colonization, not by the long shot.

She was starting to think that she would be better off exploring the next star system without the *Vagabond*, despite the claims that they would need the science vessel's instruments to chart out the hyperlanes first. Surely it would make more sense to have an armed ship be the first vessel in just in case they encountered hostile life like the Xeno bugs than to send an unarmed craft full of scientists? After several hours on watch Judy was interrupted from her reverie by the chime of her mate calling on her from half a million miles away.

The fox opened comms with a “hey, Carrots” as the bunny expanded the window on her monitor. “Take a look at this.” Nick threw her an image of a patch of gas giant clouds with a scale noted that suggested the one image was as large across as the whole of Zootopia, the planet.

Judy scanned the image, but all she could make out were some swirling multi-colored clouds. “That's... pretty.” She replied tentatively, looking for some special feature her husband might be trying to highlight for her.

Nick smirked. “It is, and do you see that one tiny little speck in the exact center of the screen?” The image zoomed in rapidly on the center, after several seconds Judy's eyes finally caught on the dark speck in the middle that he'd tried to point out.

Judy tried to examine the tiny object, it was long in one dimension and short in the other. As it zoomed in further she could make out rounded edges and bulges. “What is it?” She finally asked.

“We're not sure.” Nick replied. “But whatever it is, it's metallic. And regular.”

Judy thought about what that could mean. “Regular, you mean regularly shaped?” At the fox's nod she continued her line of thought. “That means it's artificial then?”

"That's what it looks like at least." Nick confirmed. "Whatever it is though, it's about four times the size of the *Chimera* and somehow hanging in space right in the mid layers of a gas giant. It's also too dense to be a balloon so our best guess would be a ship bigger than anything we've managed to fit anti-grav onto."

"A ship?" The rabbit exclaimed with no small amount of surprise. "Is it the Xenos?"

"No idea." He confessed. "It's too far down to make out fine details, but they did make ships this size, and larger. We're sending probes down to try and make sense of the thing. If possible, we'd like to salvage it and bring it up for study."

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Probes scanned the ship where it lay deep in the thick atmosphere of the gas giant. They transmitted back images of its bulbous hull and flickering lights. Plans were made to attach carbon-fiber cables to the craft and gently lift it back up into space with the assistance of its own anti-gravity.

After several days of calculations and fabrication, the cables and grappling hooks were affixed to an array of probes and the two orbiting ships. Slowly, the lifting crafts' engines roared to life and began to carry the derelict up from its' resting place in the seemingly endless clouds. For the first few thousand miles, things seem to be rising smoothly, but suddenly a cable breaks and the array jolts as the derelict sways. Only the quick reactions of the *Chimera*'s sloth helmsman keeps the ship from being lost forever.

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Stardate 30.4.2200

Judy stepped out of the docking tube into the alien craft, her movements awkward in her spacesuit. The interior of the ship seemed almost like it was organically grown, though metal the winding corridors were smoother and rounder than any welds she'd seen even in the Sahara district. One of her marines, a wolf like most of the squad brought in to do initial reconnaissance of the craft, approached her.

"Captain, we've swept the whole ship. There's no sign of a crew anywhere, just some fungus growing on the floors and walls. It's possible they evacuated before the ship sank."

"Do you think it's safe for the scientists?" The bunny inquired, taking note of a few traces of red and brown mold growing from the walls.

The lupine marine shrugged. "So long as they don't poke anything I don't see what could hurt them in here."

Judy nodded, she gave the signal on her radio for the science team to enter. A minute later her mate and a half-dozen mammals with twice as many degrees came out the docking tube she had just entered through. Nick took a sweeping look around as best as his helmet could allow.

“Interesting choice of interior decoration.” He turned to one scientist who already had his scanning equipment out, “is the air safe in here?”

The goat with a chemical sampler in his hooves adjusted the settings and watched the screen as the gases flowed into the device. “Nitrogen 75% and oxygen 20%. Close to Zootopia’s atmosphere in composition.”

“Oh good,” Nick started unbuckling his helmet at that notification. “I was suffocating in this thing.” He drew the helm off and took a deep sniff with his canine nose, and almost immediately started retching in pain.

“Nick! What’s going on?” Judy looked with panic from her husband to the scientist with the gas sampler. “What else is in that air?!”

“Something,” the fox gasped, “that smells horrible.” He shoved his helmet back on and started trying to buckle it back in place. “It’s like that time we were investigating the sewage treatment plant. Who was flying this thing?”

The bunny snorted at her mate’s dramatics. “No idea, there’s no bodies, at least that we can find. But at least it’s not the Bugs or the Lizards, right?”

Nick shrugged. “Great, another alien race we know next to nothing about. Well, let’s hope they don’t mind us picking over one of their ships.”