

~ The Dangers of Pushing the Red Button ~

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A great thank you goes to our beta reader. Please send all positive comments and constructive criticism to yurmill@msn.com

Teaser: Everyone warns against pushing the red button. But it never fails, someone always pushes it.

"Self destruct sequence has been activated. Self-destruction will occur in 5 minutes..."

Swearing, Tanya ran through the hallways. "Not again," she muttered. This always happened when the mainline computer was being worked on by the Gremlins. Calling them Gremlins wasn't politically correct, their correct name was Pravi Diabolli, but she couldn't help but think of that old 1980's movie every time she saw them. Being the station's main troubleshooter had its advantages, but at times like these she wished she had stayed on her home planet. Skidding to a stop outside of the computer room, she frantically swiped her ID card while punching in the 16 digit code.

"Self destruct sequence will occur in 2.5 minutes..."

The door moved with agonizing slowness and she squeezed through the gap before it was fully open. Dodging around pillars and the random computer cord, she made her way to the mainline computer.

"By all that's holy, what the hell are you doing?" she demanded of the smirking Gremlins.
"What's the reason now for tripping the self destruct sequence?"

The response she received was some smirks and garbled mutterings.

"Self destruct sequence will occur in 1 minute..."

"Never mind. Get out of my way!" She shoved past the Gremlins and saw in a glance what had happened. She grabbed the mixed up wires and undid what the Gremlins had done.

"Self destruct sequence will occur in 30 seconds and counting..."

Tanya quickly typed some commands into the computer next to her.

"Self destruct sequence has been deactivated. Thank you and have a nice day."

Tanya swiveled around and leveled a glare at the Gremlins. "Now, would someone be so kind as to tell me what went on?"

Later that day...

Tanya glared at her supervisor. She was sitting at the weekly meeting and had just been informed by her boss that she was leaving on the space ship **M.A. Icarus** next week to lead the technology team on a scientific exploration. Needless to say she was not happy about this new development. Tapping her pen, she continued to stare at him. The lists of things that still needed to be accomplished by the end of the rain cycle ran through her head and she increased the wattage of her glare.

"Now Tanya, work with me here. This is a big opportunity for you. You'll be in command and not someone's second. There will be a lot of opportunities for you to expand your skill set," her boss said.

Increase my skill set? Yeah, it'll increase only because something will be going wrong every freakin' second of the trip, she thought resentfully. There's nothing wrong with staying here. I've got a handle on the systems and the Gremlins. And now you want to send me off to the unknown? Blah. She added a frown to her glare for good measure. She wasn't happy and she wanted him to know it.

The ship was the politicians' solution to the growing unrest in the population over the bad economies, low employment, increasing prices, and the incurable virus that caused cancer which ravaged the worlds under the Master Alliance. Even though the scientists of all of the worlds worked for hundreds of years, no one seemed to be able to isolate or even define this virus. Any treatments that worked quickly became obsolete as the virus mutated. People were growing increasingly desperate for good news, and the politicians thought a discovery of a new planet would ease that desperation. *Politicians my ass. I want to see them out there on a fruitless mission.* Tanya sighed and mentally gave in to the demand. Her expression didn't change as she wanted him to offer a better salary. The one he offered wouldn't feed a Gremlin, much less a human.

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Tanya looked at her face in the mirror. She looked tired and worn out. Her brown eyes had dark circles under them that contrasted with the bright red of her hair that marked her as a technician of the highest order. She gripped the edge of the sink and stretched out her back, hearing a couple of pops. She straightened her 5'6" frame and sighed.

Planning for the science mission in addition to her regular duties was taking a toll. But, finally, she felt comfortable enough that this wasn't going to be a bust. She finally had the profiles of the important people who were going to accompany her on this idiotic mission. The Head of Medicine, with experience in Xenobiology, was to be a chap called David. His picture showed a tall man with a powerful build. His green hair marked him as medical personnel. It was his eyes, though, that caught her attention. They seemed to be able to look into your soul. Tanya shivered,

feeling slightly creeped out, and turned his profile sheet over. *Those eyes must be why he's a medic*, she mused. The next person that showed up was her Head of Astrobiology. This woman's picture showed an unremarkable, average sized lady. Tanya flipped through the rest of the personnel files, feeling bored. She suddenly stopped, though, on the last profile, which was her Head of Engineering. Tanya groaned to herself. It was a Pravi Diabolli called Fishie. She only knew of him by reputation, but it was a reputation that already gave her a headache. His profile picture showed the Gremlin with alternating brown, black and blue stripes on his fur. His eye glinted mischievously and she knew, she KNEW, that he had pulled a prank that would be revealed right after the picture had been taken.

She shook off her musings, glanced at the clock, and realized she had 15 minutes to get to a meeting with the military commanding officer of the mission half way across the station. Even though she was in charge of the scientists, she had been told a military officer would have complete control over everything. When she had protested, based on the grounds that it was not a military operation, but rather a scientific one, she was shot down so quickly her head was still spinning. She sighed and splashed water on her face. She dried off, and then trotted out of the bathroom to get to her meeting. She went over to the lifting tubes and jumped onto a platform that was whizzing by. She rode it up to the white section and jumped off. And as usual, the platform clipped her on her butt as it went by. She turned around and glared at the tube, while rubbing her butt. She glanced at the clock again and realized she had 8 minutes to go 6 levels. She shook her head and took off at a fast trot, ignoring the posted speed restriction signs in this section. She was very adept at dodging people, inanimate objects and the police bots, having to utilize the skill on a daily basis while responding to emergencies in her own section. When she came to her level, she slowed down and began getting her breath back. She arrived at exactly the prearranged time and saw the future commander standing next to a lower ranking officer.

"Commander," she said with a respectful nod. He gave a curt nod to her and looked at the lower ranked officer, who opened the door with a salute. The commander and Tanya walked into the room. She mouthed a 'thank you' to the officer, who grinned. They seated themselves at the table and the lower officer pushed a button, securing the room from eavesdropping devices.

"Okay, let's begin," intoned the Commander.

As he began to talk about things she already knew, Tanya couldn't help but look at the younger officer surreptitiously. She couldn't tell the gender as the uniform was engineered to hide all signs. She couldn't remember the exact reason why this had to be so, but it had to do with providing a uniform front. Or something similar to that. And then she realized she had been caught staring, as the officer caught her eye and grinned wickedly with a raised eyebrow. She pretended to ignore the officer and turned her attention back to the commanding officer.

"... and all regulations will be followed in the prescribed manner. I will tell you now that I will tolerate no irregularities to this process....."

She tuned him out again and he droned on and on. She looked at the younger officer again and noticed a white stripe in the regulation black hair. *So this is my pilot?* She wondered. *Doesn't look old enough to earn the pilot's stripe. Huh.* She noticed that the commander's body language

told her that he had noticed where her attention was fixed and he wasn't pleased. She turned her eyes back to the commander and smiled sheepishly.

"As I can see you can't contain your curiosity anymore," he muttered something that sounded like damn scientist, "let me introduce you to your pilot on this mission. This is

Zad, sergeant fourth class. Aeri Division One. She will be piloting the ship according to the flight plan, so there will be no deviations from it...." Tanya tuned him out again to mull over this new tidbit of information. *A female pilot? There hasn't been one of those for years. Interesting...*

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Tanya stood looking at her new home for the next few years in disbelief. Oh yeah, she had been promised a ship alright... they just didn't tell her that it was an old, refitted vessel that looked like a frakking oversized tomato. Most of the outside looked replaced and none of the landing gear matched. *Oh yeah, I'm going to expand my skill set alright. I'm gonna expand it so rapidly, I'll be amazed if it doesn't explode.* She sighed and turned towards her companions. The identical looks of disbelief on their faces that mirrored hers a second ago made her snicker. That caused them to break out of their horrified trance and look at her.

"Tanya, you can't be serious. That thing wouldn't make it out of the station's dock, much less travel through space," said Billy, her second in command. Her best friend and engineer, Jessa, merely shook her head.

"Well, the powers that be have decreed it." She slapped him on the shoulder. "Might as well take a look at the pile of junk."

They walked out of the viewing bay and down the steps. They hopped onto a descending lift and rode it down to the yellow sector. From there they set out down the long passage way. They followed the long winding corridor, took a left turn, another left and then a right toward the door marked "Docking Station". Outside the door of the loading bay, they stopped and put in the newest issued ear plugs. After receiving nods, Tanya punched in her code and they walked through the doors into a cacophony of sound. The noise from the cutting lasers, the screech of bending metal, the dull thumps from the riveting machines, and the roar of engines being tested, all combined to create a noise that pounded the senses. The trio hopped onto a floating maintenance cart and punched in their destination. The cart expertly guided them through the labyrinth of various disassembled star ships until they reached theirs. Eyeing the ship up close, Tanya was even more dismayed at what she saw. *I'm going to name this Rotten Tomato and there's nothing they can do about it.* She grinned evilly when she thought about the commander's reaction to the name. Quickly tapping into the computer's programming, she overrode the safety protocols and forced the cart to rise up higher than the prescribed two feet. She then caused it to circle the vessel, maneuvering it to each spot of interest as her friends pointed out another section to be examined. They were so absorbed in their examination that they didn't noticed Gary, Head of Station Mechanics, sprinting over to them. He slid to a halt, glared at them, and quickly typed commands into his pad. The cart shuddered to a stop and dropped at an uncomfortable speed for its passengers. Tanya's friends grabbed her arms in fright and she smacked the control consul,

trying to fix the supposed glitch. The cart stopped abruptly two feet off of the ground, and all three of them landed on their butts. As they shakily picked themselves off the floor of the cart, Tanya spotted Gary glaring at them. She tapped her friends' arms and pointed. All three of them exchanged a sheepish look and Tanya hit the button to return them to the dock's entrance. As they receded out of view, Billy glanced back and saw Gary typing furiously into his pad. Billy looked at Tanya and mouthed, "Frakking hell". She nodded in agreement. She would probably get chewed out for her unauthorized entry of the docking station, but damnit, she wanted to see the ship up close.

The next day, Tanya received her orders to inspect the Rotten Tomato before the crew was allowed to enter. She gleefully contacted her friends and told them to gather up some of their personal stuff and meet her at the docking entrance. She informed them of her orders when they met up. They chest butted each other in victory and found another floating maintenance cart. They waved cheerfully at Gary as they passed him on the way to their ship. The look on his face made Tanya wish for her photo capture camera. They arrived at the entrance and the trio made their way into the ship's airlock. Tanya stepped up to the entry pad and allowed the security protocols to identify her. The door slid opened slowly and with a lot of grinding sounds.

Stepping into the small and bare room, they looked around in surprise. From the outer appearance of the Rotten Tomato one would have never expected to see clean, bright, white walls inside the ship. Bewildered, the group continued out the opposite door in the small room and up the ramp toward the sealed door leading into the common room on the third level of the ship. They drifted toward the middle of the room and looked around shocked.

"Oh my..." Tanya managed to say as she dropped her bags loudly onto the floor.

The rather large room consisted of a kitchen area complete with stainless metal tables and bolted chairs, a lounge with plush couches and recliners on the opposite side and viewing portals on the side of the thick hull. Almost all the equipment was pure white. On both ends of the room, corridors led to places Tanya could only imagine looked just as superb.

In a daze, Tanya cleared her throat and stuttered, "I... well... uh, ok. Let's explore this shall we? I know this is a lot better than we expected so far, but let's check everything out and see what type of technology is installed on the ship. Billy and I will take this deck and the command bridge on the first deck. Jessa, why don't you head down to deck four and check out the engine room and medical bay? Then we'll meet up and check out our new lab on the deck two." At Jessa's nod, she took a deep breath and smiled at Billy.

"Let's see what toys we have to play with," she said with a wiggle of her dark eyebrows as she leaned down to grab her pack.

"You sure we're on the right ship? The maintenance cart didn't have a glitch in the program and take a wrong turn on the way here? Or maybe we're just all hallucinating," Billy said as they headed toward the lift tubes that they assumed would lead to the bridge on the top deck of the ship. They entered the bridge and Tanya commanded the lights to turn on. The intense white of glare reflecting off of the white painted bridge made them wince and shut their eyes halfway.

"Okay, this isn't right. No one can see worth a damn in here. Where are the environmental controls in here?" Tanya muttered. Squinting, the duo walked down the white metal walkway, framed by two white railings, leading to the center of the room. There were openings on the walkway that allowed crewmembers to reach their stations at the end. The various control stations were installed on a lower ground level than the ramp and were stationed in a half circle surrounding the Commander's chair and station. Tanya thought she spotted the most likely station to control the environment and headed towards it. Activating the station, she quickly typed in some commands and sighed in relief when the color of the room turned a pleasant green color.

"Much better," she said. She rejoined Billy on the walkway and they wandered around inspecting all of the stations and the technology profiles of each. She whistled.

"Incredible. This ship looks like a piece of junk but this equipment is almost top of the line. I'm going to have to make sure our whole department reads the protocol disks for these stations. I'm not even entirely sure how most of this is built or how it's supposed to work. What do you have over there?"

Billy had wandered over to a panel that looked like a door, "I'm not sure...hold on.." He pressed his palm on a metallic square to the left of the door and the panel slid apart exposing a gravity platform. "I take my comment from earlier back; this thing will do more than fly in space. They must have built in this secret route for the commander. This is so frakking great! I love this piece of junk. I just don't know how we got all this high end technology. What do you think?" He asked as he stepped away from the panel, which closed once again hiding its treasure, and went to check on the stations situated along the wall as well.

"I really have no idea, but I do know it must have taken some heavy persuasion. I just don't know why they would put all this expensive equipment in a ship that looks like crap," Tanya shrugged. "Must be politics. And that, my friend, is something I will be glad to keep myself out of," she said as she ran her fingertips slightly over the command consol and smiled brightly. "But then again, I'm not complaining. Come on. Let's dump our stuff and then go see what Jessa's up to. Maybe she got stuck in a missile shaft, and then we'd have to send a Gremlin in after her."

"She'd kill you if she came face to face with one of those things in that dark, small space. Or she might piss her jumpsuit and then kill you. Hell, I don't think a Gremlin would even help, you're the only one that can understand them around here."

"That's why they work for me, but trust me I'm not happy about it. They are wickedly evil, and yet amazing at dealing with machinery," Tanya explained as she lead them toward the newly discovered gravity lift. "Let's try this baby out before the commander does."

They stepped into the space that could hold three people at the most and Tanya stated their destination as deck three. After a moment, the doors closed and a protective energy shield enclosed the compartment. A strong air current pressed down on them and they felt the platform slide down to the lower deck. With their stomachs in their throats, they stepped out of the lift and

glanced around. Tanya was disappointed to find that the color change didn't work on the rest of the ship. She made a mental note to correct that as soon as possible.

"It looks like the sleeping quarters. They probably added the lift here for the Commander to get to the bridge faster," Billy stated as they walked down to their assigned quarters.

"I've got room B-43. You?" Tanya asked shifting her pack over her shoulder. An ache was forming between her shoulder blades.

"B-54. Why don't we ever have any luck bunking? I'll probably be bunking with a new mint straight from the academy," Billy groaned.

"At least they separated the rooms by department and all us techs will be together," Tanya said as they stopped at Billy's room. The door frame had two access panels to unlock the dead bolts. One was at shoulder height and the other was mid leg height for the Gremlins to reach. Billy typed in his access code and entered the plain room. Long twin sized sleeping chambers lined the opposite walls with two metal tables set next to each. Besides the two pieces of furniture, the room was completely barren.

"Home sweet home eh?" Billy said laughing and dumping his bag on his bed. "I'll have this place look like my office by the end of the week."

Tanya rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. She leaned back against the wall and chuckled, "In that case, this will be the only time I'll be seeing the original floor and bed."

Billy shrugged and stretched out in the sleeping chamber.

"I'll be back in a little bit. I'm going to go drop my stuff off at my bunk." Tanya pushed off the wall and stepped out with a wave behind her. She continued down the corridor until she spotted her door. Digging into her pocket she pulled out her official assignment transfer papers and typed in her code. The metal door slid away and Tanya saw the most dreadful sight she ever saw.

Her bunkmate was a Gremlin. But not just any Gremlin. Fishie, the Gremlin that she just knew would cause her life to be a living hell. *Frak my life. What was Billy saying about our luck? Wait...how the hell did he get onto the ship?* The demented replica of a twentieth century toy turned around to look up at Tanya quizzically. It maneuvered its tiny 3 foot high body around and hopped up onto the bed. Well, at least it tried to; it only took three attempts to get a good hold on the blanket to pull itself up. Tanya struggled to resist a laugh bubbling up. As if knowing Tanya's issue, Fishie turned around and snarled at her with his sharp little teeth. Tanya snarled back and laughed when Fishie's eyes widened and he plopped down on his rump. *Gotcha, ya little beast.*

She looked at him pointedly, "Mind explaining how you managed to sneak in here?"

He merely looked unrepentant and sat there looking at her. She sighed and gave up the idea of getting any type of useful information from him. The voices of her friends could be heard in the hall and she decided to join them before they saw how present her new bunkmate was.

"Hey Jessa, what did you find?" she asked.

"It's a frakkin' maze in some sections of deck four. I won't lie. Learning our way around will suck for a while. I got lost a couple of times trying to find the medical bay. Anyway, I found the recreation room on this floor! It's down the hall, next to the last section of bunks! It's a fairly decent sized room. It even has a racquet ball court!" Jessa grinned excitedly as she was one of the few who actually enjoyed playing the old game. "And each bunking section gets their own bathrooms! Isn't this great? No more standing in line for twenty minutes for a shower or the toilets." She bounced a few times like a little girl. Billy and Tanya looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Right, Jessa. Want to accompany us to deck four or do you want to check out the bridge? If we split, I figured that we could meet up on the deck two and investigate the scientific equipment and techie department together." Tanya asked.

"Eh, well... I might as well go back to that deck with you guys. I wasn't kidding when I said it's a maze," Jessa replied.

The three friends finished checking out deck three and then descended to deck four. Tanya and Billy gasped in dismay when they stepped off the lift and saw how many different doorways led to different parts of the deck.

"Yeeeeeah. That was my reaction," Jessa laughed. "I don't know who built this part of the ship, but I think they subscribed to the philosophy of the shortest distance being the longest way around."

"I'd put my money on a Gremlin having something to do with this," Tanya said.

"Wouldn't surprise me. Where do you guys want to go first?" Jessa asked looking between her two friends.

"How about to the medical bay and then we can work our way back here. Well... let's attempt to do that. Who knows where we'll end up," Tanya said and chuckled a little uneasily.

Jessa set off through one of the doorways and the other two followed closely. They quickly got lost as Jessa took seemingly random directions every time the corridors split into two others. A few minutes later they emerged from the corridor into the space next to the medical bay. Tanya overrode the lockout code and they entered it. Billy whistled as they took in the enormous medical bay.

"Wow, David should be happy about this," Tanya remarked. They split apart and wandered around the room.

"Who's David?" asked Jessa.

"The Head of Medicine. Looks like a decent fellow, even for a clover." replied Tanya absently. She picked up an instrument and examined it. When a long rod shot out the side of it and nearly hit her in the nose, she jumped, quickly put it back and wandered away nonchalantly. Billy yelped suddenly as ball of intense light almost hit him from an object Jessa was holding.

"Ookay guys. I think we ought to check out the engineering rooms before something gets cut off," Tanya said hurriedly. The other two nodded in agreement and all of them rushed out of the room. Outside of the medical bay they stopped and did a quick check to make sure all body parts were still attached. Satisfied, Jessa strode off into one of the many corridors, letting the other two scramble to keep up. She led them on a quick tour of the place, showing them each room and telling what purpose she thought they were for. They only got lost three times and discovered a random, awful yellow colored room that had no discernable purpose. However, there was a little red button set two feet high into the wall. Tanya stared at it for a moment. *That seems like a bad cliché.* Then she shut the door before her friends could see it. They continued exploring until they reached the kitchenette. They strode across it, pointing out all of the features, when their feet suddenly went out from under them and they all landed heavily on their backs. They heard evil laughter that was slowly fading away. Tanya tried to push herself upright. Her hand slipped on the slick floor and her head hit the floor.

"What the hell?" Jessa wheezed.

"Fishie," Tanya moaned as she clutched her head.

"Fishie? What the frak does a fish have to do with this?" Billy asked as he tried to get up himself and failed.

"No. Not a fish. Fishie. The Head of Engineering. Oh frak, that hurt." Tanya squeezed her eyes shut, hoping that would ease the pounding in her head. It didn't, so she tried to block out the pain and figure out how she was going to get up without injuring herself again. Slipping and sliding, all of them tried to regain their feet for a few minutes.

"Okay, okay. Stop. This isn't getting us anywhere," Jessa grunted.

All of them stopped and collapsed again. Breathing heavily, the trio tried to figure out how to get out of their predicament. Tanya looked around and spotted a discarded canister of concentrated super wax (Guaranteed to shine up any type of floor! No scrubbing needed.) lying in a corner.

"Frak. Jessa, you got your gekko clamp on you? Shoot it into the damn doorframe and pull us over there. There's no way we're getting out of this right here," Tanya ordered.

Jessa checked all of her various pockets and finally came up with it. She took careful aim and shot the doorframe. Billy and Tanya grabbed her clothes and she activated the device. It lurched and began to retract towards the doorframe. However, due to the slickness of the floor, the lurch

sent the three friends sliding across the floor and into the wall hard. Billy grabbed the doorframe and pulled all of them through it. They lay outside getting their breath back.

"I don't know about you, but I'm ready to go back to my quarters and get cleaned up." Tanya said quietly. The others nodded and all three of them rose and headed out of the ship.

Three weeks later

"Tanya please report to engineering room 3, Tanya to engineering room 3." the intercom squawked.

Tanya looked crossly at the intercom box set into the wall. *You'd think they'd have something more sophisticated than that to match the rest of the technology on here.* She shook her head and altered her course to head for the engineering rooms.

"Alright, tell me what's going on," she said to the nearest engineer. The man merely pointed to a yellow and orange gremlin that was next to another one near a consol. It took her a second to recognize the second one as her bunkmate. *Frak. How wonderful.* She gritted her teeth and walked over to the pair.

"Alright, what seems to be the problem?" She inquired. The yellow gremlin turned towards her and grinned, making sure to show her all of his teeth. He walked over to an empty consol and start gesturing towards it, muttering and chattering in his language. She sighed as it looked like he was going to be difficult and focused her other sense on his words.

"We can't figger it out. We was doing our checks and that there front landing leg ain't responding to commands. It's workin', but there be a glitch in the relay back to the consol." She heard the words over his chattering and mutters, sort of like a badly dubbed over movie. Why the dubbed over voice had an old earth country accent, she didn't know. She sighed and sat down at the consol. She typed in her password that allowed her access and reviewed the relay protocols. She sent out a test command and isolated the glitch.

"Huh... this is strange. Apparently the command is being routed... to the showers?? Oh no, it looks like people are getting random facefulls of cold water. Well, that's easy enough to fix." She typed in a few more commands and routed everything to their proper places.

"Alright. That should do it. Anything else I can help you with?" The yellow gremlin shook his head. " Okay, let me know if there are any more problems."

She headed out of the room and rubbed her eyes. It had been a long time since her last coffee break and... suddenly she stopped. She sniffed her hands. There was a faint odor on them that she couldn't place. Then she felt the burn begin. Letting out a huge yelp, she sprinted from the room. She heard a familiar evil snicker behind her as she left. She needed to get to the kitchenette quickly before the capsaicin from the pepper juice rendered her unable to see. She sprinted through the corridors, cursing and ignoring the outraged yells from people she knocked over. She knew she really looked a sight now, what with her face red, eyes crying and snot mingling with

the tears. Rounding the corner to head into another corridor, she tripped on her archaic shoelace, and fell into something that went "Oof!". They went down in a tangle of arms and legs. Gabbling out something like an apology, she brutally yanked out of the embrace and continued to sprint. She finally made it to the kitchen area. But by that time, she couldn't see very well and tripped again, doing a belly slide across the floor and into the replicator. She scrambled up and barked a command at the replicator for a large bowl of cold water. What came out of her mouth was so garbled that the machine merely beeped in confusion. She kicked the machine in frustration and opened her mouth to repeat the command, when a voice beat her to it.

"Water, cold, extra large bowl," came the command next to her. She grabbed the bowl and dunked her face into it. She blinked rapidly, trying to clear her eyes. She yanked her head out, grabbed a breath and repeated the actions a few more times. She then dropped the bowl, and bent over, putting her hands on her legs and gasped for breath. She blinked her eyes a few more times and zeroed in on a towel that was being held in front of her face. She grabbed it and wiped her face thoroughly. Rubbing her face, she turned to thank her helper.

"Hey, thanks for helping..." She trailed off to silence as her rescuer turned out to be no other than the pilot, Zad. She froze and wished that she could disappear on whim. Her eyes traveled down the pilot and her eyes widened in horror. When she dropped the bowl, a large portion of the remaining water had splashed all over the pilot.

"There are other ways of getting me all wet, you know," Zad said with a grin and a wink.

Later that week

The competition was fierce between the two players. Grunting as they hit the tiny ball and sprinting around the court during the rally, they continually tried to trick each other into losing track of the ball. The championship title was at stake on this final game and both players were tied 10 to 10 on the third match. Jessa smacked the ball so that it bounced off the two side walls in a 'Z' pattern. Her opponent countered by hitting the ball off ceiling and having it rocket straight down at her. They went back and forth for a while, neither gaining the upper hand over her opponent. Sweat flew off each player as they sustained the intense level of play.

Tanya snuck into the gym. She had promised Jessa that she would watch her in the racquetball championship tournament. Scanning the audience, she spotted Billy towards the back of the crowd. The original plan was to watch the entire tournament and cheer Jessa on as she defeated her opponents. However, she didn't anticipate having problem after problem with the computer programming dealing with how the aft thrusters responded to the bridge's command. Then when she went to change out of her uniform, there had been a light coating of blue powder on the inside of her shirt. She discovered this after she had pulled the shirt over and felt a slimy feeling against her skin. When she finally got the powder off her skin and went to put on her shoes, the laces had been gnarled into such a knot, that it had taken a while to get the laces unknotted. Working her way through the small crowd towards Billy, she finally caught a look at Jessa's opponent. She stopped and stared. Jessa's opponent was none other than Zad! Her eyes took in the sweaty, flushed figure as Zad rushed around the court. Zad's muscles flexed through her soaked tank top as she delivered a pinch shot and Tanya's mouth went dry. Feeling eyes boring

into her back, Zad risked a glance into the crowd. She spotted Tanya and locked eyes with her for a second. Then Zad spotted the ball whizzing by out of the corner of her eye and she lunged sideways to intercept the ball. She nicked the ball and landed heavily on her side. The crowd roared in its applause. The match was over and Jessa won. Lying there, Zad flopped onto her back and just focused on her breathing. A hand entered her vision and she followed it up to Jessa's sweaty, grinning face.

"Hey Champ, good game! Want a hand up?" Jessa asked.

"Sure," answered Zad and she grabbed the offered hand. She was boosted to her feet and slapped Jessa on the back. "Good game Jessa! You gave me quite the work out. And what's up with calling me champ? You're the one who won."

"I dunno, seemed to fit you somehow. And I think it was about even on who was going to win. I just had a bit more skill and lady luck on my side of course," Jessa said with a cocky grin.

Zad rolled her eyes. "You keep thinking that. How about if we go greet our adoring fans and sign some autographs?"

"Good idea!"

Three months later

The crew of the **M.A. Icarus** had found an unexpected solar system that was only a half a month away from their current position. The Head of Astrology named it the Orkiron System. The scientists were thrilled and demanded an immediate and thorough exploration. The Commander and his officers disagreed with them. The shouting match that occurred between the opposing sides caused the crew to place a flurry of bets on which side would be victorious. The compromise that was finally agreed upon satisfied neither side, but did break the stalemate. The ship would fly to the system but only to examine the outer most part of the system, which consisted of an asteroid belt that passed between two gaseous planets. They would return to their previous course after a week. The ship changed its course. The frenzy of activity that consumed the second level of the ship was awe inspiring. Many of the crew members snuck onto the level to watch the scientists test out their instruments as it was more interesting than watching the same old holovids again. Machinery beeped, buzzed and groaned constantly. The unlucky crewmembers that were spotted were coerced into helping. They calibrated instruments and created large amounts of concentrated stock solutions, among other things. The scientists refreshed themselves on the latest protocols to correctly collect and preserve the samples. It was agreed among the recruited crewmembers that the hover balls (that were used for gas collection) were the best to watch as exhausted technicians occasionally played games with them to keep themselves awake.

Weeks later, the ship entered the solar system. It stayed next to the first gaseous planet for two days and the scientists sent out a multitude of instruments to collect samples. One probe they sent into the core of the planet found a new type of inorganic compound. The chemists among the scientists nearly had heart attacks from excitement. Some scientists disobeyed the

Commander's orders and sent probes towards the planets in the interior of the system. The preliminary information gathered caused them to go to the Commander and demand to explore those planets. They received a negative response despite their best attempts at persuasion. In a huff, one of the scientists threw his information on the table and left. The others followed suit, glaring at the Commander as they left. The Commander sighed and picked up the data pad. He read the results and the locations of the planets. He was faintly surprised as one of the planets looked promising for finding living organisms, however he had his orders. The ship left after the second day and the scientists began frantically labeling individual samples and preserving them. The ship arrived at the belt and Zad carefully maneuvered the ship close enough for the scientists to gather samples. Different collection instruments were used in this part. Here, they were able to find small chunks of frozen elements. Also, tiny particles were pulled from the belt as well as samples of the bigger rocks. One scientist even got more ambitious and attempted to crack open a huge rock the size of a small planet.

By this time, Fishie was thoroughly annoyed at the scientists because they kept abducting engineers and not letting them work their shifts. After thinking over the problem, he decided that his original plan to annoy the scientists could be implemented now and it would stop that nonsense. As the ambitious scientist was positioning the explosive device on the rock, Fishie made his way to that beautiful yellow room where he had placed the button months ago while the engineering equipment was being installed. He quickly determined that everyone was watching the entertaining scientists in their mad quest for complete sample preservation. He opened the door, making sure to not leave his code in the computer memory. He marched over to it and shoved the red button. The result was the immediate shutdown of all external sensors on the ship and most of the power to the deck two. The scientists screamed in frustration as stasis chambers shut down; their unpreserved samples melted, became goo, or were otherwise destroyed. The ambitious scientist freaked out as the information coming from his device stopped. Everyone on the bridge stood in shock as their sensors suddenly shut down. The sudden shaking of the ship from the explosion also shocked everyone as the scientist had not submitted his plan. The controllers on the ship flew into action, attempting to get the sensors up again so they could meet and see their attacker. Since she remembered that they were next to a thin part of the belt, Zad threw the ship into a roll to go through it to avoid the assumed hostile fire. The shock wave from the exploding rock shoved a portion of the asteroid belt towards the ship. Since Zad rolled the ship, most of the debris only hit one section of the ship. The external sensors snapped on just as the debris was hurtling towards them. Zad desperately tried to avoid it, but only managed to roll enough to avoid the bulk. However, it still destroyed one of the main engines and clogged a secondary engine. A big section of the hull was crumpled or ripped away. The emergency force fields snapped over the holes. The Rotten Tomato spun towards the second gaseous planet, where the gravimetric pull grabbed the ship and pulled it into orbit. By this time, machines were being overloaded and the circuitry fried. A second engine overloaded and exploded outwards into space. The explosion caused the ship to sling shot out of orbit and towards the inner planets. Fires erupted in the last engine. The collision and explosions had all but incapacitated the ship and it started tumbling helplessly through space. The force fields started losing power and they couldn't prevent the air and fuel from leaking into space, leaving behind a deadly trail.

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Tanya was sound asleep in her bunk as the scientists had kept her up for 24 hours straight earlier; trying to figure out how to program the computers into doing stuff they had never been intended to do. The shaking of the ship tossed her onto the floor. She was extremely disoriented when she awoke and found herself on the floor. Then the rolling of the ship started to throw her around until the artificial gravity kicked back in and she landed back on the floor with a thump.

"Ow. Ow ow ow ow ow!" She moaned, "Hell of a way to wake up."

She then heard the emergency sirens and scrambled into her clothing. She raced through the ship to her section of deck two and spotted Billy.

"Billy! Billy! What's going on?" She screamed at him, over the sirens and the yelling.

"We're under attack! The power shut down and there's no input from the internal and external sensors!" He screamed back at her. The ship suddenly shuddered and the rolling sensation increased. A few consuls in their section randomly started exploding or emitting sparks. The consul behind Billy exploded and the force threw him into Tanya. She lay on the floor, stunned, and then pushed him off of her. His body flopped over and she stared horrified into his stunned, dead eyes.

"Oh shit! Oh shit! NOOOOO! Billy! Oh my god!" She screamed as she scooted backwards.

"Tanya! TANYA! Get here now!" screamed one of her technicians. "Help me! I can't route the power away, more things are going to explode!"

With one last agonized look at the body of her friend, she shakily got up and headed for the technician.

**Meanwhile, chaos reigned on the bridge.**

"Where's the auxiliary power, damn it? I want thrusters online, NOW!" shouted the Commander. "Tanya! Report!"

"Power levels are fluctuating wildly, Commander. We're trying to contain it, but I need time. Fishie, get someone into those shafts and see if you can do something about that."

"There! There! I think that's the uninhabited planet. Head for it Zad," ordered the Commander.

"But the navigational systems are down! I'll be flying blind into an atmosphere that has unknown qualities to it. We have no idea what's down there Sir!" Zad glanced behind her quickly while struggling to buckle herself in more securely.

"Damnit, Zad, we have a choice of dying here or having a chance of surviving this down there. Take her down."

Zad turned back around to her consul and began typing in commands with shaking hands. She switched the ship over to manual control and hooked up the two control sticks. The ship slowly turned toward the planet with a groan of tortured metal. Power levels continued to spike randomly, causing uncontrolled bursts of speed that slammed everyone around even more. The gaping holes in the side of the ship continued to leak air and fuel. The ship almost made it to the planet, and then what everyone dreaded happened... the leaking fuel ignited.

"ZAD!! THE FUEL IGNITED!!" screamed a controller.

Out of desperation, Zad dumped the last of the fuel before they came any closer to the planet and ignited the atmosphere, too. The flames shot up the leak trail and ignited the fuel. The resulting explosion tumbled the ship and shoved it hard into the planet's atmosphere. Zad tried frantically to stabilize the ship, but the explosion took out most of the systems involved with steering. The slow tumble of the ship, disguised its high velocity as it shot towards the surface.

"ALL HANDS! INTO YOUR SAFETY SEATS NOW! BRACE FOR IMPACT!"

The last thought that occurred to Zad was that this was going to hurt...

### **After crashlanding...**

Coughing and wheezing Tanya stumbled to the nearby tree line in the late afternoon sun. The sharp pain in her left arm caused her to clutch it close to her body. Turning around, she coughed and strained to look through the carnage of flame and obliterated metal in hopes of finding any fellow survivors. The ship had hit the ground hard, deeply gouging the earth. Huge chunks of metal debris littered the surrounding area, destroying the vegetation and creating a clearing in the middle of a forest. Tanya's eyes rested on the ship and she had to stifle hysterical laughter. The rotten tomato was no more. Instead, it looked like a fried egg, sunny side up. Her honey brown eyes scanned the wreckage and the surrounding area until movement to the right caught her attention. A brown and blue stub of a tail wiggled itself from under a scorched slab of metal, which was then followed by a black, brown and blue striped body that popped out, bouncing a few times like a ball.

*Holy shit! They're like frakking cockroaches! They don't die,* Tanya thought as yellow beady little eyes turned toward her and grinned evilly, showing small jagged edged teeth. It wobbled a little and then started moving toward her. Tanya narrowed her eyes. *Wait a minute, I know that little devil anywhere. Unfrakking believable, Fishie lives!* Shaking her head, Tanya limped in the opposite direction desperately trying to avoid Fishie for the time being and to search for more survivors. She spotted the outline of David in the distance, trying to drag someone out from underneath a slab of metal. She headed towards him, in an effort to see if he knew what had happened.

"David." She rasped, coughed, and tried again. "David!"

His bruised face jerked up sharply and saw her. He motioned her closer, "Come help me." He gave up trying to simply pull the man out and looked around for a pole. Spotting a long shard of hull metal, he grabbed it and stuck it under the metal covering the man.

"When I hit three, pull him out," he rasped. She nodded and grabbed the man's uniform with her good hand.

"One. Two. Three!" He shoved down forcefully on the lever. Moving backwards, she pulled the man out from under the metal and then abruptly sat down. She clutched her broken arm in agony and suddenly there was a cool sensation over her arm. She shuddered when the pain receded somewhat and looked up. David was bent over her. He passed his right hand over her arm and then grasped her bad arm gently on either side of the break. His hands suddenly yanked outwards and her bones realigned sharply. Tanya let out a wordless shriek of pain and passed out. She woke up a few moments later.

"What?" She mumbled, confused. He looked at her sadly, and grabbed the emergency kit. He reached inside and took out one of the bandages. It was a prototype that stiffened into rigidity after the end was touched by a medic's ring. He quickly wrapped her arm. The bandage stiffened after it was activated and then he bound her arm to her body with rags cut from a dead space farer's uniform. She shuddered and decided to not think about it. When she focused on the world again, David was crouched over the man they had pulled from the wreckage. The man laid in a pool of blood, his femoral artery severed. David shook his head and closed the man's dead eyes. David remained there for a moment with his head bowed. Tanya pushed herself onto her feet and went over to him.

"Come on, there are too many more to rescue," she said gently. He looked at her and gave a curt nod. They left the dead and searched for more survivors.

A short while later she found Jessa sitting against large debris that had been driven into the ground. She sat next to her.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Shitty day, huh?"

A snort of laughter. "Yeah."

A weary silence ensued.

"Jessa?"

"Yeah?"

"Billy... Billy's dead... he died in front of me when a consul exploded."



Jessa looked at her and shook her head slowly. "Frak." She leaned her head against the metal and closed her eyes. Tears slowly ran down her cheeks.

"Tanya? Tell me this is a nightmare and we'll be waking up on the RT still hunting for political fool's gold," she said in a choked voice.

Tanya scooted next to her and pulled her into a hug. They sat for a while in mutual sorrow.

Jessa pulled away and wiped her eyes. "Guess we should continue looking for people, huh."

"Yeah. C'mon," she got herself to her feet and offered Jessa a hand up.

For the next four hours, Tanya discovered the dead, or what pieces remained of them, the living and the injured. Out of the hundred personnel, only 50 remained. She had set up a gathering area next to a tree and away from the crash site. The survivors gathered underneath it and sat in shock. Most of them were too shocked to even weep.

She limped from the wreckage and over to the gathering place. She sat down next to Zad's body. The commander's body had been found thirty minutes ago, the only thing recognizable was the insignia on what was left of his uniform. Part of the bulkhead had been ripped off and crushed his head, killing him instantly. Then, when the fire moved onto the bridge, his corpse had burned until only the insignia on his shoulder identified him as the commander. Tanya shuddered; she had been part of the search party that managed to get to what was left of the bridge. They had found Zad, unconscious and still strapped into her pilot's seat, in the corner. The chair had protected her from the worst of the heat and as a result had minor burns along her arms and hands. Currently she was laid out and still unconscious. Tanya brushed a lock of black striped hair off Zad's forehead. As the sun began to set, a strange noise began in the distance, soft chirping sounds that seemed to come from the forest behind them. She had no idea what was causing the sound, but she found it strangely soothing.

The last search party left the wreckage and made its way towards the group. Jessa separated from them and limped over to her. She carefully sat down on the other side of Tanya.

"Any luck locating resources?" Tanya asked.

"Some. Not enough though." Jessa sighed and looked away from her, "We managed to find a couple of working replicators. If we get the backup power running, I think they'll provide us with basic food and water for a while. Some of the dorms are inaccessible and the others are barely habitable. I have no idea what's not damaged in the medical bay. David will have to assess the area. It looks bad, though. We weren't able to get close enough to the engineering section in deck four to assess the damage; it's still too hot from the fire. I have no idea about the robo soldiers; you'll have to ask someone in our escort force about that. I'm still waiting on Donna to get back and report about the surrounding area that we're in." Jessa sighed and closed her eyes.

"Hmmm. Hey Jessa?" asked Tanya softly after a moment.

"Yeah?" Jessa replied.

"Do you know what's causing that chirping noise? It's rather soothing." Tanya murmured.

"No idea. Maybe some kind of bug?" came the reply.

Tanya watched as the flames from the wreckage continued to die down. She shifted against the tree and sucked in a harsh breath. Her abused body protested the movement and her left arm reminded her that it was still broken.

David and his remaining assistant were wandering through the crowd, providing what care they could to the physically injured. Tanya watched him with dazed eyes. It seemed unbelievable that only four hours ago they were in space, happily collecting samples from the edge of the asteroid belt. Now they were stranded on an uncharted planet, without food, and barely alive. Things couldn't be any worse for them.

"Frak," she sighed. "All right. I'll get a party together and go strip the bedding from the dorms that we can get into. It's getting dark and who knows how cold it'll get tonight."

"I'll go with you," Jessa immediately replied, opening her eyes.

Tanya grabbed Jessa's shoulder with her good hand and shook it gently. "No. You just got back. Rest a while and keep Zad company."

She looked at the slightly toasted pilot and then at Tanya. She started grinning evilly. "You like her don'tcha?" She began singing, "Tanya and Zad, sittin' in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G" and dodged Tanya's lunge. Feeling her ears burning, Tanya stood up and, pointedly ignored Jessa, she walked to the front of the group. Making her announcement, she nodded in approval as several less severely injured people got to their feet. The group started making their way to the wreckage when a young woman jumped up from the rest of the group and made her way directly towards Tanya. When Tanya saw who was headed towards her, she mentally groaned and increased her pace slightly.

"Tanya! Tanya! Stop. Stop right now!" A high pitched voice squeaked, "I must protest like this complete violation of people's privacy."

Tanya slowed to a stop and turned to face her questioner. She waved the rest of the group on. The young woman standing in front of her was the same height as Tanya with a thin build. Her bright yellow hair announced that she was a trainee scientist.

"In case you haven't noticed Natalie, we've crashed on an unknown planet and if we don't have a way to keep warm tonight, we will freeze." She interrupted the tirade that she could see coming. Natalie closed her mouth, glared at her, and opened her mouth again.

"No, we can't sleep in the ship. It's not habitable; the frame of the ship could collapse any minute. And the last thing I need is for everyone to get trapped in there, with no way to get them out. Look. Since you're feeling well enough to be up and about, why don't you go help David? I'm sure his assistant could use a break." Hoping that would make Natalie back off, Tanya turned back around and walked after her pillaging party. Natalie stood there with her mouth open. She snapped it shut and marched back towards the rest of the survivors. "Damn communicator," she muttered, "can't believe she like totally read my frakking mind. I am totally like going to lodge a complaint against her like when we get out of here." She stomped back to where she was sitting before and glared at anyone looking in her direction.

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Jessa watched the confrontation from where she sat. She was glad that she wasn't the one in charge and had to deal with Natalie. The wind had picked up and she glanced up into the darkening sky as she brushed her hair out of her face with her hands. Movement in the distance caught her eye and she looked over. A woman appeared from the trees and moved purposefully towards the survivors' group. Her red hair shone dully in the firelight as she looked for someone. Jessa waved her over and Donna headed towards her. She sat down next to Jessa and wiggled her strange looking shoes at Jessa.

"Who would've thought my recreational invention would come in handy," she mused. "Just turn on the anti-grav and skate along the ground, pretty as you please."

"What did you find?" Jessa asked as she rolled her eyes.

"There are some caves north of here, about a mile or two. There's a stream less than half a mile to the east. I didn't see any kind of animals and some of the vegetation looks mean."

A moan caught their attention. Zad stirred and opened her eyes. She blinked, groaned, and clutched at her head. Jessa pushed herself to her knees and leaned over Zad.

"Hey Champ. How're you feeling?" She asked.

"Frak. You get the code number of the hovercraft that ran me over?" replied Zad.

Jessa laughed softly and looked around for David. "Lie still and I'll get David over here to check you out again. Donna? David's over there, could you go get him please?"

Donna nodded and glided towards him.

"What happened? We were collecting samples, but something went wrong. Wasn't someone shooting at us? I don't remember," Zad asked plaintively.

"I'm not sure what happened. I was down in engineering, running a diagnostic on the spec inducers when all hell broke loose. Suddenly, we were being thrown around like flapper balls and the alarms were screeching about hull breeches. The backup anti-grav kicked in and when I

got to my station, half of the computers were offline. Someone started screaming over the intercom about leaking fuel, there was a boom, and I blacked out when I hit the wall," Jessa explained. She shrugged. "Hey, here's David."

Tanya and the scavenging party managed to access the least damaged dorms. Tanya stopped inside the entrance to the dorms and located the computer grid. She pulled out a small backup power supply and rigged it to the computer. She managed to get the dorm computer running enough to push through the security protocols and cause all of the doors to unlock and open.

"All right. Let's do this quickly and professionally. Grab only the blankets and other bedding you deem necessary to help us survive the night. Don't touch anything else and remember to respect people's privacy. Try to fold what you can so we can handle the bundles more easily." Her group all nodded in agreement and set out. A little bit later, the group had big piles laid on the floor next to their exit point. Tanya grabbed a few of her volunteers and assigned them to carry the piles back to David so they could be distributed at his discretion.

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True night had fallen and three moons rose. Its light was bright enough that it was an eternal twilight in the clearing. Tanya suddenly stiffened and pulled her blanket around her more tightly. She realized what had been bothering her. The soothing background noise from those strange looking insects had stopped. She started scanning the surrounding area. Zad noticed the change of body expression and looked at Tanya in a questioning manner.

"Something's wrong," Tanya said. "The chirping bugs have stopped. The wind is blowing stronger out of the east."

"Tanya, we don't know this planet. Maybe the bugs always stop around this time of night," Zad replied in a reasonable manner.

"Zad... do you trust me?" Tanya asked quietly, still scanning the treeline.

"What? Of course I do. Why?" Zad asked, confused.

"Activate the soldiers. Something's coming and it's hostile," she requested.

Zad looked at her in a measuring manner and sharply nodded her head. She limped over to the command post and started relaying her orders. The pods containing the few remaining robotic soldiers glowed green as they began their activation sequences. The pods split and transformed into 7 foot tall humanoid looking machines. They were used as the infantry shock troops in the military. The heavy artillery built into each one, with precision guidance and instant communication systems, was one reason the Master Alliance had gained supremacy over the other warring factions so quickly. Zad activated the multiple defensive programs and set the parameters around the survivors' group. The machines moved off into defensive positions and stood as silent sentries.

Zad limped back over to Tanya and said quietly, "As horrible as this sounds, I hope you're right and something is coming. Otherwise they will run out of power soon and we will be helpless if something nasty comes later on. Without being hooked up to the ship, they've got enough power to last the week if they don't do anything except guard."

Tanya looked at her sharply and then sighed. "Thank you for doing it anyway. I'll ask Jessa to see if one of the repair crews can take a look at the soldiers' area and see if they can get the recharge stations running again."

A lightening of the sky began to the south and the ground began to quiver. Everyone bolted to their feet and looked around nervously. The robotic soldiers switched from standby mode to active mode.

"Alright people, settle down. It's just an earthquake and it'll be over before you know it," Zad called out reassuringly.

The earthquake did not subside, but rather started increasing in strength. The people, who hadn't sat down, were forced to sit down before they lost their balance. Yells of confusion and fright came from the group. Tanya and Zad grabbed each other for support as they were slowly forced to their knees. The robotic soldiers' support field was unable to cope with the rapidly shifting ground and each robot slowly fell over. Alert alarms began to screech from the torso of each soldier. In the distance, the ship's middle, which had survived somewhat intact, began to moan in an alarming manner and suddenly metal screeched as the supports gave way under the swaying weight. Tanya felt a fleeting emotion of satisfaction as she was proved correct against Natalie's assumption of the ship's safety. All the different sounds combined together to creating a mind numbing cacophony that caused people to close off their ears. Zad fumbled with the robots' command device to silence the alarms. The earthquake suddenly stopped, leaving the clearing even messier and leaving the group in even more disarray. The alarms from the robots, the frightened yells, and the groaning metal were suddenly shut off also, leaving the clearing in an eerie silence. Everyone looked at each other, afraid to move or speak, in case something as insignificant as breathing would set off another earthquake.

The southern part of the sky had lightened in sync with the increasing strength of the earthquake. Tanya noticed the bright light first. She squinted at it, and saw something that looked like it was glowing in the distance and looked like it was rapidly approaching the group. She grabbed Zad's arm and pointed towards it. Zad rose up from the ground and stared at it. She began snapping out orders to the other military officers to get the robotic soldiers upright and to start moving the civilians to the backup caves. The yelling and shouting that had abated returned full force as people started scrambling up and grabbing their meager belongings. They began to follow Donna as she knew where the caves were located. The officers groaned and grunted as they lifted the dead weight of the robots up and onto their support fields. As soon as the soldiers were upright and seated on their platforms again, they moved into a defensive semi-circle formation between the perceived threat and the humans. Meanwhile, the survivors started moving in a ragged fashion towards the caves in the north. Zad put the robots on automatic defense and gave a warning shout as three glowing red beasts lumbered out of the underbrush. The huge monsters looked like a cross between a bear and a tiger that used to live on old Earth. People saw the

beasts and the semi-orderly evacuation degraded into running chaos. Zad grabbed Tanya, kissed her hard and then shoved her towards the main group, screaming, "RUN!" The bear/tigers didn't seem affected too badly by the weaponry being fired by the soldiers. The first creature rammed a robot and the machine burst into flame. It snarled in triumph, showing massive canines, and began tearing the robot to shreds. The others followed suit, and soon half of the robots were destroyed. The civilians had made it to the other side of the clearing with the military officers forming the rear guard. Suddenly massive roars split the air and Zad looked up and back as she ran.

*DRAGONS?!?! She thought, No fraking way. This is getting freaky.* She shouted out a

command to the officers to get out their laser weapons. She skidded to a stop and began firing at the aerial danger. The huge, sleek creatures shot over head, causing the civilians to scatter. Arrows rained down onto the group from some of the riders on the dragons' back. Other dragons swooped down, grabbed people, shot up into the sky, and dropped them. All of a sudden, one of the dragons bucked in midair and then crashed into the earth. It burst into flames as soon as it hit the ground. As Zad switched out her empty clip for a full one, she saw a small blue/brown/black body bounce from the back of another downed dragon and start purposefully toward the other diving dragons. He seemed to effortlessly snag the tail of a swooping dragon and climb up it to the dragon's back. Zad had no idea what he did, but it bucked, too, and began to fall. The gremlin jumped from the falling dragon's back onto another dragon. Zad returned her attention to her targets in time to throw herself flat to avoid a swooping dragon. A couple of arrows streaked by two inches from her head as she rolled into a crouch and returned fire. She raced for a dip in the ground that would provide more cover from the swooping dragons. Arrows from the same dragon rider struck the ground right behind her, almost clipping her. She dove into the dip and then immediately returned fire. She managed to hit the dragon in one eye and it started to fly in a crazy pattern, the rider clinging desperately to the harness. The dragon barrel rolled into another dragon. That dragon took offense and started clawing and biting the other dragon. The injured dragon retaliated and they both crashed into the ground and then burst into a large bonfire. Zad panted as she scanned the area for more enemies. Seeing none that were an immediate threat, she checked how her officers and the civilians were faring. Her eyes widened as she saw a dragon about to grab Tanya from behind. Her shout fell short and she knew that the dragon was out of the firing range of her firearm. A little figure appeared out of nowhere and smacked into the dragon's head. The impact threw the dragon off course and a wing clipped Tanya across the back. She went flying and impacted the ground fifty feet away. She rolled and then lay still. Zad screamed and then raced towards her, not caring of the danger to herself. As she reached Tanya's prone body, the earth shuddered violently and Zad was thrown off of her feet. She landed next to Tanya and quickly rolled over her body, protecting it.

The earth made a deep, moaning sound and something rocketed from the ground into the air. It was a green and dark brown dragon that clamped its mouth around a fire dragon's neck. It plunged back into the ground, taking the fire dragon with it. The attacking fire dragons suddenly halted their attack and circled the sky around the meadow. Two more earth dragons popped from the ground and took two more fire dragons down with them into the earth. The rest of the fire dragons screamed in rage and began to attack the earth dragons as they propelled themselves out of the ground and into the sky. Two of the fire dragons caught an earth dragon between them and

ripped the unfortunate dragon into two. The pieces started to crumble as they fell down to the earth. They hit the earth and turned into dust. The battle raged on between the two factions.

Once Zad realized what was happening, she picked up Tanya and ran for the tree line.

The surviving humans saw Zad and followed. They huddled around a huge old tree. A comparison of the size and shape for reference would be the extremely old Redwood trees that were once found on old Earth. Zad laid Tanya down and looked at the survivors. She saw shock and fear in their eyes. Many bodies were trembling from the adrenaline high and pure exhaustion. She spotted David towards the back of the crowd, attempting to stem the blood from a severe gash in someone's upper arm. She knew she had to get them to the caves: they weren't too far away from Donna's description earlier. The earth trembled under their feet and someone began whimpering. She cleared her throat and tried to pitch her voice over the roars and screams still coming from the meadow.

"Alright. We need to continue to move. The caves aren't too far away from here. We'll be safer there. Support and help each other. It isn't far. Let's move out."

A movement caught her eye and she looked sharply over to the left. She tensed and clutched her firearm tighter. She then relaxed as she saw it was Donna, in her anti-grav boots and carrying something smallish and furry. Cradling Tanya, Zad started in a northern direction farther into the gloom. The group lumbered into a half trot behind her. Donna skated around the group and took the lead from Zad. They wound through the forest, dodging the trees and various mean looking thickets. The group had to stop to rest a few times, which allowed David to continue working on the injured members. The ground started sloping uphill, making it harder for the group to maintain their pace. Finally, the forest broke and they spotted the ground rising sharply towards the sky. A small, goat path wound around the boulders and zigzagged towards an opening in the side of the cliff. Zad stopped the group while they were still in the shadows of the giant trees. Everyone sank down to the ground, grateful for the rest. Zad looked the group over and saw a few of her officers had survived. She motioned all of them to join her in the front. She also spotted the lucky few whose injuries were minor and indicated that they should also join the group. When everyone had sat down in a circle around her, she started outlining her plan to get the entire group into the relative safety of the cave. She organized the officers to provide what protection they could as she would have Donna use her skates to get her up to the cave quickly and scout it out for the suitability of habitation. She organized the others into scouting parties for any material that could be fashioned into any sort of weapon. David walked up to her as she was explaining the last details for the material search and requested that they also look for any type of useful plant that could be used as splints or bandages. She sent off the scouting parties with a warning to watch out for the wildlife and each other. Zad grabbed David's arm gently as he tried to move back towards the injured.

"Has Tanya woken up yet?" she asked softly.

"No, there's nothing else wrong with her except that she isn't waking up. Without my equipment, I can't tell what's wrong," he replied in quiet frustration.

"Alright. You're doing your best. Thank you," she replied and let go of his arm.

She turned her attention back to Donna and the problem of getting to the cave. She took point with Donna and had the rest move to flank them. Each officer had a directive to watch the sky or the sounding area and to shoot at any threat.

"Move out," Zad commanded.

Donna and Zad cautiously moved away from the trees, intent on locating any threat. The other officers moved out with them, making an upside down V behind them. They reached the bottom of the path without incident. The officers fanned out, as Donna went up the path, clutching Zad's firearm tightly in one shaking hand and Fishie in the other. He snorted at her nervousness and made incoherent sounds. Donna ignored her package and carefully eyed the vegetation surrounding her. She reached the cave entrance and listened for the sound of any movement inside. Hearing none, she turned the light on the gun and cautiously entered. She swept it around the large area. There was a fire pit off to the side of the entrance and firewood stacked neatly against the wall close to the pit. The floor of the cave had blue sand covering it in a soft layer. The light flashed across the walls and primitive pictures took life briefly. Donna moved toward the back of the cave slowly, looking at the walls. She heard running water and moved the light towards the back. A small stream bubbled up from one side of the cave and flowed smoothly toward the other side where it disappeared into a hole at the bottom of the other wall. Deciding that she had seen enough, Donna backed up quickly and made for the entrance as fast as she could. She deposited Fishie at the cave entrance. She figured he would do whatever Gremlins did to keep himself occupied till the others came. Unburdened, she went down the path a bit recklessly and all of the officers tensed, expecting something to be chasing her. When nothing appeared they relaxed slightly and looked curiously at Donna. She slid to a stop and excitedly reported her findings. Zad grinned briefly and they all jogged back to the main group. Looking slightly better for the rest, the group eagerly looked at the cave with its promise of relative safety. All of the scouting groups had returned. Some had been successful, others not so much. Zad had them group together and posted her officers around the perimeter of the group to meet any threat. They moved quickly toward the trail leading up the side of the cliff. They managed to get everyone into the cave, moving slowly for the more severely injured.

David directed the severely injured members to be placed around one side of the fire pit. He immediately began tending to them with the help of his assistant. A filthy Natalie knelt down next to the pit and began a fire. Zad set up a shift rotation for her officers and posted one as a guard near the front of the entrance. The former scouting parties dropped their loot on the other side of the cave and staggered towards the water source in the back of the cave. They collapsed there and drank their fill. Zad crouched down next to Tanya and brushed her cheek lightly with her hand. Working on the patient next to her, David remarked. "She'll be okay you know. The gash on her back didn't go deep into the muscle. She should regain consciousness before long."

Zad looked at him, but he didn't pause in his healing.

"I hope so doc. I hope so," she said quietly. She sat down next to Tanya and held her hand. One of her off duty officers handed her a cup of water and walked back to his friends.



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Tanya opened her eyes in the pre-dawn gloom. She shifted and gasped as her arm and back protested the movement.

She panicked for a split second when she couldn't recognize her surroundings or how she got there. Even more, a warm arm was wrapped around her waist. Her head snapped to the side to glance behind her. She let out a puff of air in relief. It was only Zad. Immediately she began to enjoy the position she was in. Perhaps a little too much. She leaned back into the warm body behind her and had to stifle a whimper as her back wound protested the increased pressure. Instantly the body behind her jerked in response and Zad's concerned face appeared into her field of vision.

"You're awake! How are you feeling? Are you ok? Did I hurt you holding you? I..I'm sorry for invading your space but I wanted to be here and I didn't think you would mind. But now you're in pain and I'm really sorry. You sure you ok?" Zad babbled incoherently. Tanya's fuzzy brain took a few seconds to catch up to Zad's outburst. She smiled and then placed her fingers gently against Zad's lips.

"I'm fine. A little fuzzy around the edges, but it's clearing up." Tanya chuckled slightly. "I'm a little bruised up, but I don't ever mind waking up like this."

Zad smiled behind Tanya's fingers and blushes slightly. "You sure?" her arm unwrapped itself from Tanya's waist and rubbed the back of her neck shyly with her hand.

Tanya nodded in response and removed her fingers. She leaned up and kissed Zad's flushed cheek. "Thank you for watching over me. It was very sweet. Could you tell me what happened and where we are at?" She indicated with a tilt of her head around the cave.

"Oh. Ah." Zad's blush deepened. "After you were knocked out, some other dragons appear and started fighting the ones that were attacking us. I used the distraction to move us from the clearing into the trees. After a bit we found the caves and well... here we are." She absentmindedly captured Tanya's fingers and began gently playing with them.

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The dozing sentry suddenly jerked awake. He grabbed for his long range weapon and started scanning the surrounding area. He heard the sound that woke him up again. A whooshing sound was coming from the area to the left of the cave opening. He frowned, puzzled at this new sound. And then he paled suddenly. He recognized the sound. The red dragons made that sound right before they attacked.

"ATTACK! ATTACK! EVERYONE UP! ATTACK!" he screamed as he raised his weapon into a firing position.

Zad grabbed her laser next to her, leapt to her feet, and ran for the entry. She started barking out orders to get everyone except the officers away from the entrance and towards the back and sides of the cave. The officers took up positions on either side of the entryway. One belly flopped on the floor and took up a sniper's position. He aimed towards the floor of the clearing. Zad felt a light touch on her back and she glanced back briefly. Then she snapped her head back and stared at Tanya.

"What are..." she started to ask, but the whooshing sounds became louder. She pushed Tanya against the side of the cave and positioned herself and another soldier at the opening of the cave.

The dragons came. The middle dragon obviously led the pack as he was flanked on both sides by three other dragon riders. They passed in front of the opening, circled the cliffs, and raced past the entrance once more. They pulled up into the sky before circling once and then descended to the large clearing in front of the cave. The dragons touched the ground at a sprint and folded their wings against their bodies. They slowly trotted toward the frightened group and came to a stop at the opening of the cave. The sentry who had sounded the alarm quivered in fear and accidentally fired a round at the leader. The laser bolt hit the ground two feet in front of the lead dragon.

Zad quickly bellowed "Hold your fire!!" as the others seemed like they were going to follow the sentry's lead. The head dragon looked at the scorch mark on the ground and then snorted at the cave in disdain, blowing hot air at the group. The head rider studied the officers and the weapons they bore. He dismounted from his dragon and motioned the others to stay put. His lanky frame was covered with protective clothing, similar to the color of his dragon. There was a white marking on the breast of his shirt that might be an insignia of some sort. Light green color covered the rest of his exposed skin. His eyes were a dark shade of green and had black hair. He had a sword strapped to his back and a couple of daggers on his belt. Arms away from his sides and weapons, he called in his native language to the officers. When that got no response, he called out something else. All of the officers started looking at each other in confusion as none of them understood his language. Tanya pushed herself through her protectors and into the opening to hear what he said. Zad, startled at first, tagged along closely. Her laser aimed for the leader's head with deadly intent. Tanya mimicked his pose as close as she could with an arm in a cast and called out "What did you say?"

He called something back and this time Tanya was able to bring her gift to bear.

"May the Mother embrace you and bring you safety," he said with an air of expectation around him.

"Aaaah. Thank you. May the Mother embrace you and bring you safety," she parroted back.

He looked at her in a confused fashion for a second and then decided to move on. "I am Tolene. Fifth Flight of the Yorhans. We do not know you, we do not recognize you. How did you come here? From which clan do you belong?"

"I am Tanya from the Master Alliance. We came from space. We were studying your solar system when our ship malfunctioned. Our ship crash landed a ways from here. We have been trying to survive ever since. Some kind of animals, red dragons, and riders attacked us yesterday. We were saved when some other dragons attacked them. This is the first safe place we have found," She replied. "Please leave us be. We mean you no harm. We just are trying to figure out how to get back into space," she pleaded.

He looked at her in puzzlement. "From space? I do not know this "space" you speak of. Is your ship the one that the Taryans have tried to claim? They did not succeed, but we were on our way to provide more support for our brothers if the cowards tried again."

He studied her again and then moved his gaze to her protection. "Stand down; I am not here to harm any of you."

Tanya whispered to Zad "Put your laser down, they don't mean us harm."

Zad stared menacingly into Tolene's eyes and then slowly lowered her weapon. She gestured the others to do the same.

Apparently making up his mind, Tolene suddenly said "I cannot make the decision about what to do with you. The Mother's representative, our Queen, will have to make the decision. All of you will follow us."

"But we have wounded," Tanya protested, "we should not move them yet nor travel far."

He studied her again. "Leave the ones who are too ill to travel. I'll send a medical team to fetch them."

When Tanya relayed his command to Zad, she responded with a "Hell no!" and took an aggressive step towards Tolene. He looked at her with mild amusement while his riders put their hands on their weapons.

"I see your protector doesn't agree. Very well. You two shall come with me to meet our queen. I will leave half of my men here to help protect those you leave behind. I will still send a medical team back to look after your wounded people." He turned around sharply and strode back to his riders. Tanya relayed what he said to Zad. Zad glared at his back and then turned back to her own men. Tanya relayed the conversation to everyone in the cave, ignoring Natalie's attempts to interrupt. Zad put Shamus, a retired intelligence officer, in command while she was gone. When Tanya was finished, Zad made it very clear to the entire group that Shamus was to be obeyed at all times, and that none of the Yorhans were to be approached first. She reminded them they were still considered to be in hostile territory.

"We are here only until we can figure out a way to get home. So no one adopt any pets okay?" Zad concluded.

The sentry on duty alerted Zad that the Yorhan leader was approaching. Zad and Tanya met him at the entryway.

Tolene looked around at the ragged group. Nodding at Zad and Tanya, he strode into the room, under Zad's unyielding gaze. He went towards the back of the cave directly to one of the paintings on the wall. He held up his hand over the center of the illustration and a misty, green ambient light engulfed his hand. The figures on the wall started shifting around in a circular pattern until they hit a certain combination. The entire painting radiated a bright green glow for a moment. When the light faded, the wall was gone and in its place was a dimly lit tunnel.

"Come," said Tolene and he strode into the tunnel. Tanya and Zad looked at each other for a moment. If they followed this stranger, not only would they be at the sole mercy of these Yorhans, but they would never be able to go back to their old lives. The chances of them leaving this uncharted planet were slim at best, and without the proper equipment, it was nearly impossible. Tanya and Zad looked at each other solemnly and then glanced behind them at the group of anxious people who depended on them for guidance. Together they would face this new world, and try to make a new home for the marooned group behind them. They both sucked in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. Steeling their determination, they pushed past their fears and turned back to face their unpredictable future head on. They stepped into the tunnel after Tolene. Tanya smiled at Zad and reached for her hand. Zad looked at Tanya. *Being stuck on this planet sucks hardcore, but being stuck on this planet with Tanya makes it a whole lot better. Everything happens for a reason and I'll have to make do with what I have. Who knows? Maybe something will happen between us, but I know we will have to stick together no matter what. Just, please, please let me be the right person to lead these people. I don't want to fail them.*