

Aurik went rigid as the N'Roth bounded over to him. He knew there was nothing he could do. He was unarmed and knew that if he tried to defend himself that he would not leave the room alive, so he prepared himself for whatever was going to come.

The N'Roth never slowed as he neared, Aurik sensing the primal rage emanating from the alien. The N'Roth didn't skip a beat as it came nose to nose with Aurik, grabbing a handful of hair and yanking Aurik's head back.

"Where was your ship headed to!?" It yelled in fury. "How did you acquire such technology!?" It yanked hard on Aurik's hair, bringing a cringe to his face.

Aurik knew he had to say something, but didn't know what to say. He could not reveal their mission. They would all surely be dead if the N'Roth found out what their mission was.

"We were on a mining mission," Aurik lied. The N'Roth loosened its grip slightly.

"From what planet?"

"What do you mean?" The N'Roth yanked back on Aurik's head again.

"What planet!?" It screamed.

Aurik didn't know what to say. What did it mean 'what planet?' Humans came from only one planet.

"Earth," Aurik replied, saying the only habitable planet he could think of that made sense. There were only two or three planets suitable for human life, but none of them were colonized yet.

Again, the N'Roth loosened its grip.

"Earth has no mining facilities or ships."

Aurik had to think of something quickly.

“It was our first time. We were supposed to stay in stasis until we got near the planet to land.”

The N’Roth released his hair and took a few steps away.

“If you were simply on a mining mission, where are the N’Roth commanders, and why do you have an arsenal of human weapons?”

Again, Aurik didn’t know what the alien was talking about. The N’Roth turned slowly towards Aurik. He knew he had better say something.

“I don’t know about the commanders, but our weapons were for protection against wild beasts.” The N’Roth stared at him.

“Hm,” it replied.

“All I know is that we went into the stasis pods on that ship, and we awoke here.”

“So you claim,” the N’Roth said coldly as it turned away, walking toward the stasis pods. “We have a team going through your ship, and we will find out everything we need to know,” It turned back toward Aurik and said with an icy stare. “if you are lying, you will die.” The N’Roth nodded to one of the two soldiers standing behind Aurik, who grabbed him by the arm.

“This way,” it ordered.

The N’Roth stared at Sarah, his pink eyes drilling into her.

“Tell me what I want to know, and I can help you,” it said, at last, its voice back to a friendly tone. It took one last gulp of his drink and casually walked towards Sarah. “You are only making things worse for you and your friends,” it explained. “Give me something, anything, and I can help you.” It stopped a few feet from her. “I can’t help you unless you help me.”

“You want me to give you something? Okay, I’ll give you something.” She lunged at the N’Roth, catching it off guard, and brought her elbow into the side of its face. The alien stumbled backward as Sarah kicked at its leg. It recovered in time to bring its leg up to block Sarah’s kick and backhanded her. She went stumbling toward the table with the fruit bowl.

The N’Roth, infuriated by her sudden attack, charged at her. Sarah quickly found her footing and spun, sliding her hand across the fruit table, just in time to dodge its attack by dropping to the floor. It quickly turned as Sarah backed away on the floor. The alien came at her fast and angry, not noticing the object in her hand; faster than she anticipated. It grabbed her by the foot before she could get far enough away to get to her feet.

It dragged her closer to itself, and she kicked it in the face, ignoring the wave of pain as her bare foot contacted its face. If it had been a human, she would have broken its nose, but she had no idea what kicking an N’Roth in the face would do, as their noses were indentions rather than a human nose. It didn’t seem to do much, other than cause the alien pain.

The N’Roth brought its hands up to its face as it stumbled backward.

Sarah jumped to her feet as quickly as she could and darted behind the bar. She grabbed a bottle and smashed it on the corner of the table, sending alcohol sprawling all over the floor and counter.

The N’Roth recovered from the kick in the face and again advanced. This time, it advanced with caution, realizing Sarah was not an ordinary woman. She had more spirit in her than any other human female he had encountered before.

She rushed at him with her arm out wide, bringing the jagged bottle down toward her opponent. She had no intention of killing him or even winning the fight. She had already accomplished what she had set out to do. She just needed to give the N’Roth a way to get the

upper hand without making it obvious that she had let it win. The N'Roth saw its opening and brought its forearm up to block the wide swing as it stepped into Sarah's attack, bringing its other forearm up across her neck. The alien shoved with all its might, sending her stumbling backward into the wall, forced her arm out as far as it could until her hand hit the adjacent wall.

Sarah screamed at the sudden pain from her hand slamming into the wall and dropped her weapon. The N'Roth held its forearm at her throat, pressing in until Sarah lifted her hands in defeat. Despite her act of surrender and the sounds of her choking, it pressed in for a few more seconds, fueled by rage. Finally, the alien released her and spun her around, throwing her hard against the wall. It quickly grabbed both of her hands and forced them around, high on her back until she screamed in pain again, its pinchers digging into her hands as it held her tight. Without a word, the N'Roth pulled her backward, hard, directing her by yanking on her arms. It roughly shoved her to the door and handed her off to the two soldiers who had escorted her from the brig.

"Take her back to her cell. If she struggles, kill her," it told the soldiers. They nodded and escorted her back to the brig.

The door to the brig hissed open, and the two soldiers pushed Sarah into the room. Aurik and the others immediately noticed the bruise on Sarah's face. They all stared in concern and anger as the two soldiers released the force field, shoved Sarah into the cell, and re-instated the force field.

"Are you okay?" Aurik asked when the soldiers left.

"I'm fine," Sarah replied as she pulled a small paring knife from her underwear.

“I noticed this in the room where I was being interrogated. The only way I could think of to get it without being noticed was to lose a fight,” she said with a smile. She handed the paring knife to Jessica.

“Will this help with those crevices you were talking about earlier?”

“It might.” Jessica smiled.

“Well, we need to find a way out fast. The N’Roth are going through our ship as we speak, and when they find the mission files we are dead,” Aurik reported.

“Understood,” Jessica replied and immediately went to working on the cracks with the paring knife.

It wasn’t long before Jessica successfully manipulated the three slits with the paring knife. It had been slow at first, but after she figured out how the crevices worked, it went quickly. She saw that the long cracks in the floor passed under the threshold of the force field. She hadn’t noticed before because of the constant bouncing “lightning bolts” impairing her vision beyond the field. She had prodded inside the three openings, for which the paring knife was just small enough. She found that the middle slit felt slightly larger than the outside two, so she began working the knife in the center slot, surmising it to be the lock or latch. She had finally loosened the openings, which, in turn, enlarged the outside two, which she now saw ran several inches past the force field. After closer inspection, she realized the force field itself stopped about an inch from the floor.

Aurik and Kyle waited and watched, unable to see clearly through the force fields; but they knew not to disturb Jessica as she worked. Yin and Sarah, though they had a much better view of her progress, also knew not to distract her. They all stood quietly watching.

Jessica was uncomfortably close to the force field, her face just inches away from the bouncing lightning, and her fingers dangerously close as she worked at the outside slits. She wedged the knife in and gently pushed up. She was conscientious not to exert too much pressure on the blade or the floor panel. She did not want to slip and accidentally touch the force field with her knife tip.

After several long minutes, she finally backed away.

“Well,” she said as she stood. “I peeled away enough of the panel,” she continued, stretching her limbs. “to know that if I keep trying to get into the guts of the thing, it will take forever, and I’m willing to bet that someone will walk in before I can make any progress. But I have an idea. No guarantee it will work because I am not very familiar with this technology, but it might work. I don’t know. I don’t think you are going to like it either,”

“What is it?” Aurik asked.

“Well, if I can connect the panel with the force field, there is a possibility that it could short out the force field.”

“Wait a minute,” Kyle replied. “This whole place is metal. Won’t it shock us, too? You know, metal?” He circled his hands around the floor.

“I said you weren’t going to like it. There is a very small chance that it won’t do anything to us at all.”

“Do it. We need to get out of here,” Aurik ordered. Jessica nodded and knelt down by the force field.

“Ah, man,” Kyle protested.

Jessica balanced the edge of the knife on the panel, readied herself, then let go of it. The knife fell over, the opposite side of the blade contacting the force field with a crackle and a pop, as Jessica hurried away.

The knife shot past her and clanged into the far wall. The force field flickered, and the lightning vanished.

“Come on!” Jessica ordered as she darted across the threshold, Yin, and Sarah right behind her.

Kyle stood in shock, fully expecting to be electrocuted and thrown against the wall as he had been before.

“What happened?” He asked.

Jessica found the control panel for the cells and, after a moment of investigating, turned off the door to Aurik and Kyle’s cell.

“Looks like that slim chance of that force field doing nothing to us happened,” Jessica replied.

Aurik opened the door to the corridor and peered down both ways.

“Come on. There’s a room just down here,” he ordered as he darted down the corridor.

Aurik stopped at the door entrance, and it hissed open. The five rushed in.

The N’Roth were busily working, and most of them paid no attention as the five rushed in. Two aliens working at consoles near the door did spot the five, and a third making its way across the room noticed them as well. They were the first three to be knocked out. The last five

N'Roth heard the commotion and screams of their counterparts and panicked as they realized what was happening.

The five humans downed the closest two of the remaining aliens almost the instant they looked up from their work. The last three tried futilely to fight their attackers but found themselves unconscious on the floor seconds later.

“Jessica, take care of that door,” Aurik ordered. Without hesitation, Jessica headed for the door and began manipulating the controls.

“Everybody, take a station and see if you can make heads or tails out of them,” Aurik ordered. They all began searching through the ship’s databases, each at a different terminal.

Although they had learned the basics of the N'Roth language in training for their mission, translating the information on the consoles proved difficult.

After a few minutes, Jessica, who had successfully figured out how to lock the door, pulled up a schematic from the main terminal along the wall.

“Over here!” She exclaimed. “Look.” The rest of the squad circled around her.

“Are we on a ship?” Yin asked.

“Looks like it,” Jessica replied. “I think we are here.” She pointed to a small room on the schematic. She moved her finger over the schematic a few inches. “That looks like the brig,”

“Okay, we’re on a ship. Where is the hanger bay, then?” Aurik asked.

Jessica zoomed the schematic out, and after a moment, pointed to the rear section. “I think that’s it,” she said.

“That’s a long way. How are we going to get all the way over there?” Kyle asked.

“We might be able to make it most of the way using the maintenance tunnels,” Jessica explained as she pointed to a section of lines, following the lines with her finger. “It looks like

there is one that runs pretty close to the hangar bay. It looks like we can get in from here.” She pointed back toward their location. “I don’t think it’s far from here,”

“Okay. Put up the maintenance tunnel we need to use,” Aurik ordered. Jessica nodded, and a few seconds later, the specific maintenance tunnel route appeared.

“We can access it from here.” She pointed again. “Right around the corner,”

“Okay. Let’s try and not to be seen. The longer they don’t know we have escaped, the better,” Aurik said.

The squad of five raced down the corridor toward the maintenance hatch and rounded the corner right into a pair of N’Roth. Seconds later, they were continuing down the corridor, Kyle, and Aurik dragging the aliens with them. Jessica unlatched the maintenance tunnel, and the five climbed in, Aurik and Kyle dragging the unconscious N’Roth with them still.

Once inside, Aurik shut and re-latched the door, then ripped the sleeves off of one of the N’Roth’s uniforms and tied their hands and feet together. When he was sufficiently satisfied that they were secure, Aurik stood.

The maintenance tunnel itself was less of a tunnel and more of a corridor. Though they could not stand straight up without hitting their heads on the ceiling beams, they didn’t have to crawl. They leaned forward as they walked.

The N’Roth ship was not very intricately designed. It was shaped more or less like a rectangle. This made it easier to get around, that was certain, as the squad learned quickly. The schematics showed only two left turns to get to the hangar bay, one of those turns was after the maintenance tunnel.

Although they were still in only their undergarments, they were not cold. It seemed that these maintenance tunnels were even warmer than the rest of the ship. The N'Roth preferred warmer climates, that much the squad already knew, but the tunnels seemed to be stifling hot, and they were now sweating. Of course, this was partly because of the intensity of the situation in which they found themselves. They still needed to complete their mission or the entire human race would be in jeopardy. They needed to find their ship and escape.

They finally reached the hatch, which was their exit when they heard an alarm.

“Well, they know we escaped, I guess,” Kyle remarked.

“Everybody Ready?” Jessica asked, ignoring Kyle, as she readied to unlatch the hatch.

They all nodded.

Jessica cracked the hatch and peered down the corridor. “It’s clear,” she said and jumped out of the maintenance hatch, followed by the rest of the squad.

Just before they rounded the corner into the corridor that the door to the hangar bay was located, several N'Roth soldiers appeared behind them and, upon seeing the humans, opened fire.

Kyle let out a scream of pain as a rifle blast struck him in the back of his lower shoulder. He tumbled to the floor in a heap.