

Kyle awoke to fresh pain, and as he looked down, he noticed a branch protruding from his calf. He moved to get a better look at this new wound, and an eruption of pain surged through his shoulder, reminding him of the blast wound he'd received.

“Why does this keep happening to me?” he asked.

He fought through the pain, every minuscule movement sending fresh surges of pain through his shoulder and his leg. He unlatched the seatbelt holding him in his chair and stood up, keeping his weight on his good leg. Fresh waves of almost debilitating pain flooded through him, and he found it hard to concentrate. He took hold of the chair near him to steady himself.

The shuttle had broken apart. One entire side of the shuttle had been ripped off, revealing the forest beyond.

Jessica and Aurik sat unconscious at the two pilots' chairs, part of the console ripped up and shoved toward them by a massive tree branch that had broken through the shuttle windshield, which had sprayed glass shards throughout the shuttle.

Yin sat beside him, bleeding from cuts from the glass shards, as did Sarah, who sat unconscious opposite Yin.

He leaned toward Yin to try to shake her awake, but instead, the shuttle began to spin as a new wave of pain engulfed him, and he fell into her lap, his head throbbing. Yin woke as a result of Kyle falling on her, and she immediately lifted him back to his seat, ignoring the aching from the million cuts she had throughout her body.

“Kyle, are you okay?” she asked.

“You mean besides being shot in the shoulder, a splitting headache, and a branch through my leg?” he replied.

“What?” she exclaimed and sat forward to look at his leg. The seatbelt prevented her from doing so. She quickly unlatched it and stood, ignoring the pain from the cuts along her body.

She stared at it when she saw it, unsure of what to do, then she heard the moaning of Aurik as he stirred.

“Don’t move, Kyle,” she said and started to move around Kyle, then froze, hissing.

“Don’t got to worry about me moving an inch,” he replied.

She looked down to see the shuttle floor littered with glass shards from the windshield. She moved her bare foot off of a couple of shards and gently brushed them aside.

“Aurik, anything broken?” she asked as she carefully made her way to his side, brushing away the glass shards in her path.

He woke fully, immediately feeling his fresh cuts and sore face.

“Nothing broken, but every inch of me hurts,” he replied.

“Be careful where you step,” she said and made her way to Jessica, gently shaking her awake. Upon waking Jessica, she informed her and Sarah, who had started to stir by now, as well, of the glass shards.

The squad spent a few minutes gathering their senses, and then Aurik took a sitrep, learning of Kyle’s newest injury, which he knew would become deadly if they didn’t figure out a way to heal it soon. He didn’t want to remove the branch that somehow made its way, literally, through Kyle’s calf.

They cleared a path through the shards of glass and gathered outside, Yin and Aurik helping Kyle.

“I saw a settlement as we were crashing,” Jessica said. “I’m not sure how far away it is, but it’s that way.” She pointed.

Aurik nodded.

“We’ll help Kyle; you lead the way,” he said.

The hike was laborious and torturous as they were all still barefoot. The N’Roth never bothered to give them any clothes, and they still only wore undergarments.

It was hot, and they had no water. They had escaped the N’Roth ship successfully and survived their shuttle crash; now, they had to survive the wilderness with literally nothing. They hadn’t taken any of the alien rations because they weren’t sure what it was or how their bodies would react to the foreign food.

With every few steps, they were stepping on a thorn, sharp twig, or pebble. It was even worse for Aurik and Yin, who carried Kyle along as he hobbled on his one good leg, depending on the two of them for support.

Within a half-hour, they had to stop and rest, their feet cut, sore, and bruised. They rested for a few minutes keeping off of their bare, bruised, and torn feet, relishing in the few moments of relief. They were all soaked in sweat, and their dirty, black undergarments stuck to their bodies like saran wrap. They were beginning to get dehydrated as they hadn’t had food or water since they woke up from stasis.

They stood finally, Aurik and Yin helping Kyle to his feet and securing him between them so they could help him walk.

Minutes later, they luckily found a heavily used trail and followed it. Shortly after finding the path, they came to a clearing that opened up into farmland. Sarah and Jessica knelt

low, and Aurik and Yin concealed themselves in the trees. They were up on a hill overlooking a valley. They could see off in the distance a house near the edge of a cornfield. After they observed their surroundings sufficiently, they returned to the others in the trees. They discussed their plan, relaying the layout of the valley to Aurik, Yin, and Kyle. After a few minutes, they decided they would follow the tree line as close as they could to the cornfield, where the hill was lowest, and make their way toward the house. They had not initially seen anyone working in the fields. However, they had noticed smoke rising from the chimney of the house, so they decided they would seek help from the occupants of the farm.

They reached the farmhouse, and Sarah knocked on the door. Jessica was behind her with Aurik, Yin, and Kyle behind Jessica. They heard heavy footsteps inside the house, and the door creaked open. A grey-bearded man in his sixties opened the door with a look of surprise as he saw the five in their undergarments.

“Sir,” Sarah began, “our friend is very injured and needs medical attention. May we impose on you to take us to the nearest medical facility?”

The old man looked them each up and down as Sarah spoke, and before she had finished, opened the door wide for them to enter.

“Set him on the bed in the back room,” he said.

“Thank you, sir,” Sarah replied and led the four into the back room.

The old man shut the door, grabbed a medical kit from another room, and followed the five into the bedroom.

The squad saw him enter with the medical kit and gave him room, recognizing many of the items as he opened the kit, and glanced at each other curiously. They watched as the old man observed Kyle’s leg and shoulder. He chose to address the leg first.

He took out two vials containing clear liquid, set one aside, and handed the other to Sarah.

“Have him drink this,” he said.

Sarah moved around the bed to Kyles' head and gently aided him in drinking the liquid.

The old man pulled out a quarter-sized sphere from the kit, then a metallic needle-like poker. He impaled the white sphere with the poker until it sat securely on its tip.

“Hold this.” He gave the needle-like poker to Jessica, who stood next to him. “Come around here.” He motioned for her to move to his other side. “When I take this branch out, shove the ball into his wound quickly,” he said.

Jessica nodded. He yanked the branch out, releasing a slight moan from Kyle, who looked as if he hadn't a care in the world. Blood began to squirt and flow. Jessica shoved the sphere into Kyle's gushing wound, and almost instantaneously, the white ball turned red and expanded, filling up the gaping wound.

The old man wrapped Kyle's leg with a bandage. It was identical to the dressing they had used to cover Kyle's shoulder. Again, the squad gave each other curious glances.

When he finished bandaging Kyle's leg, he moved to Kyle's shoulder.

“How did you clean this?” he asked.

“We poured one of those clear vials on it,” Aurik replied. The man looked up.

“You poured it on him?” Aurik nodded.

“That explains it,” he said.

“Explains what?” Aurik asked.

“Look,” the man said, backing away. Aurik moved closer to Kyle to take a look at his shoulder. It had blistered.

“You used too much. It should have healed, but because you used too much, the excess liquid got trapped underneath his new skin. We’ll have to pop the blisters and let them heal naturally. He will have scars there, as well as on his leg, most likely. Unless you want to take him to the N’Roth medical facility, but the blast wound to your friend’s shoulder here, and, well, your appearance tells me you probably would rather not,” he said as he moved close to Kyle’s shoulder and began attending to it.

“I didn’t think so,” he said after a moment of silence. “There are some clothes in the next room and a washbasin. Clean yourselves off and get some clothes, and I’ll attend to your injuries and your feet when I’m done here. You’re getting blood all over my floor,” he added.

The four looked down at their feet and the floor. They had almost forgotten about their cuts and bruises; they had become so used to the pain. They looked around, noticing a path of blood smears where they had been walking.

“Sorry about that,” Aurik said. “Thank you for everything you are doing.”

The old man nodded.

The four washed and helped themselves to the man’s clothes. After Aurik had finished washing, he returned to Kyle’s room, pulling on a shirt, having already donned trousers.

“He will be fine in a few days. He’s all drugged up and sleeping right now, but he’ll be fine,” the old man said as Aurik walked in. Aurik nodded.

“Sir, may I ask what you are doing with N’Roth medical supplies?” Aurik asked.

“What do you mean? It’s standard medical equipment,” he replied. “Like everything else N’Roth. Where are you from?” The man asked, furrowing his brow.

“Earth.”

“Ha, that’s impossible. What are you doing way out here?”

“What do you mean?”

“How did you get here, I mean. You are obviously on the run, but there’s no way you could have gotten all the way here on the run from Earth. Not through the heart of N’Roth occupied territory.”

At this, Aurik’s own confusion showed.

“Who are you?” The old man asked.

“What do you mean, occupied territory?” Aurik asked.

“You really don’t know?”

Aurik shook his head.

“Where have you been for the past two hundred years?”

Aurik’s face lit up with exasperation at the comment, realization finally setting in.

“Two hundred years, what do you mean? What happened two hundred years ago?”

“Well, we surrendered. We were concurred.”

Aurik stared at him.

“Son, who are you?”

Aurik soaked in the revelation, putting two and two together. It all made sense: waking up on the ship, the list of inhabited planets, the N’Roth interrogating them.

When he finally spoke, Aurik explained their mission from Earth during the war, being put into stasis, and waking up on the N’Roth ship. They had been in stasis for over two hundred years rather than a mere few months. They had failed their mission.

After that, the old man gave the squad a brief history lesson, explaining that the humans had lost the war with the N’Roth. The N’Roth colonized Earth and spread what was left of the

human race over about a hundred or so planets. The N'Roth had occupied Earth's solar system and surrounding solar systems, making Earth an N'Roth military planet. The humans were put into labor camps on various worlds and forced to serve the N'Roth farming and working. He explained that they were on the outskirts of the N'Roth territory, so there was not very much N'Roth presence on the planet, except for the station a few miles away conducting routine patrols and inspections to "keep the peace."

The squad took it all in as he spoke, their minds racing in every direction as they contemplated the ramifications of all that they heard.

The next day, the old man, Benjamin, woke as he usually did for the beginning of the farming week and prepared breakfast.

Kyle's shoulder was feeling almost as good as new, and his calf was throbbing but no longer felt as though he had been impaled.

The rest of the squad had not yet woken but soon woke to the smells of bacon and eggs. They had come to terms with the revelation that the human race had been enslaved, and after a lengthy discussion, they decided they would not just lie down and assimilate into this new existence of servitude and a conquered people.

Benjamin had explained that all humans were given an identity chip placed in their forearm at the age of five, and if they were caught without it, they could be imprisoned or put to death, so they couldn't go into the city.

He had offered to show them a well-hidden cave he knew of that was just a couple of miles into the forest, but they would have to wait until dark when the workers had left.

“Ah, good morning. Breakfast is almost done,” Benjamin said as he noticed them stirring in their makeshift beds strewn about the living area.

“Smells delicious,” Sarah replied, the rest agreeing.

Benjamin finished cooking breakfast and motioned toward several plates and cups set on the table. The squad served themselves breakfast at Benjamin's prodding as he delivered a plate to Kyle, who still lay in bed, the effects of the drugs still not entirely worn off.

“I'll be going to town today to get you supplies,” he said as he returned. “When it gets dark, I'll take you to that cave I told you about yesterday. No doubt, the N'Roth would have at least sent word to keep an eye out for you.” The squad nodded as they stuffed their faces with breakfast.

Soon, Benjamin was about his daily business, supervising the work in the fields among his other daily duties.

The squad spent the day cooped up in Benjamin's crowded home. When Kyle appeared lucid enough, they relayed to him everything Benjamin had explained. Kyle took the news about as well as the rest of them had, then agreed with his comrades that they weren't just going to lie down.

They began planning what to do next. First, they needed weapons and shelter, which, hopefully, Benjamin's cave would supply the shelter. The weapons they left in the shuttle they crash-landed in would begin their supply, and the five would strip the shuttle of what they could that might help them. Jessica had explained that generally sensors—unless the N'Roth had significantly improved them in the two hundred years they were in stasis—were not very strong and could not penetrate solid rock, so at the very least, the N'Roth wouldn't be able to find them in the cave.

Night finally fell, and Benjamin led them through the forest to the cave. The hike was slow due to the lack of light, as well as Kyle's injury. Though his leg was healing, it was still very sore and painful to walk on, but he refused to be cooped up in the house any longer.

"Let's see," Benjamin said. "Where's that entrance?" He glanced around, trying to remember. "I haven't been out here since I was a kid. It's around here somewhere."

He spent several moments searching through the overgrown shrubbery, looking for the familiar cleft between one of the trees and a large boulder that protruded out from the cliffside.

"Ah! Here it is," Benjamin exclaimed as he lifted a thick, densely grown branch aside. They all took notice that the rock looked as if the cliff had grown around it as it protruded, literally, from inside the cliff face. "Looks like the forest has grown. I don't remember this tree being so full, or this place being so hard to find," he said as he squeezed himself into the small space.

The rock, tree, and cliff were indeed deceptive. From the looks of it, the opening appeared only as a cleft. When they climbed into the cleft, however, it dropped into a massive cavern a good twenty to thirty square feet large.

"There are more rooms down that way," Benjamin reported as he shone his flashlight across the cavern. "There are even more rooms deeper in the cave, but I was never brave enough to go that far."

The five slowly shone their flashlights across the cavern, examining the space. Small sections of the cavern opened up into more rooms of varying sizes, and there were a few tunnels that led farther than their flashlights could shine.

“Alright, let's check this place out. Kyle, Sarah, Yin, take that side.” Aurik flashed his light to the opposite side of the cavern. “Benjamin, Jessica, and I will take this side.” The three nodded and began investigating the rooms and tunnels while Benjamin led Aurik and Jessica into the next chamber.

“I used to come in here to get away from it all. The N’Roth, the work, my parents,” he said as he led them into the next chamber. He shone his flashlight in the corner of the chamber, finding an old, rotted sleeping bag. “I used to sleep there on occasion when I was really upset,” he shone the flashlight directly ahead of them. “That’s the next room,” he said.

The chamber wall opened into an opening several feet wide into another room, spanning about seventy to eighty square feet. The far wall beyond that opened up into smaller compartments, and several tunnels extended beyond the rooms at varying lengths. Some connected rooms together, and others opened up into new chambers. They didn’t venture far for fear they would get lost in the labyrinth of tunnels.

When Aurik, Jessica, and Benjamin returned to the central chamber, they found the others waiting on them.

“How does your side look?” asked Aurik.

“There are so many tunnels, ya’ll wouldn’t believe,” Kyle replied.

“Oh, we’d believe,” Aurik said. “There’s a labyrinth on our side, too. We’ll have to create a map or something, so we don’t get lost.”

“Yup. It’s big. We could make it cozy,” Kyle said.

“It’s agreed, then?” Aurik asked.

“Yup,” Kyle said.

“Good enough for me,” replied Sarah.

“Yep,” Jessica answered.

“It’s a little dirty, but I guess it will do,” Yin said with a smirk.

“Alright,” Aurik said. “We stay here tonight.”

“You guys are really going to do this?” Benjamin asked.

They all nodded.

“Okay, well, if you need anything, I’ll help when I can. I hope you all know what you are doing.”

“So do we,” Kyle said.

“Thanks for all that you have done for us, Benjamin. We will repay you someday,” Aurik said.

Benjamin extended a hand.

“I’m going to start heading back. I hope the best for you and your cause.” They each shook Benjamin’s hand and thanked him, then Benjamin climbed out of the cave, disappearing into the night.

“Alright, let’s start setting up what we have. Tomorrow, we will get what we can from the shuttle,” Aurik said. The squad nodded and went to unpacking the supplies Benjamin had procured from town.

They each had sleeping gear and food, as well as a couple of changes of clothes. Benjamin had provided a handful of pots and pans and a medical kit for them, explaining its contents. He had given them boots in their sizes that he had bought in town, along with the clothes.

After they had decided where they were going to sleep for the night, they each found their sleep rather quickly.

