

Aurik Shulz shivered awake, the air hitting his wet skin with a biting force. He brought his arms up to his chest in a futile effort to warm himself.

The air itself wasn't cold, but the watery fluid that covered his entire body was. When the air collided with it, it seemed to get even colder.

He knew the cold sensation would pass shortly, just like his blurry vision, when his body adjusted to being out of suspended animation. He had to adjust from months of being in stasis. His eyes began to focus, and though he was still cold, it didn't seem as severe as before.

He noticed, when his eyes finally focused, that the room he was in wasn't the stasis pod room that he and his counterparts were supposed to wake up in. The room was large and white, and there was a window on the far wall. It was dark beyond the window, but he felt that someone was watching him.

He immediately knew something was wrong. The stasis pod room contained no windows and was not white. He stepped out of his pod, bringing a fresh sensation of cold as he moved through the air. He was almost naked, wearing only underwear. It was soaked through, itself, which did not allow for any reprieve from the cold currents of air. As Aurik moved, even his undergarment seemed like it was soaked in ice water as it clung to him.

He still wasn't fully recovered from stasis, and as he stepped out of the pod he stumbled, more than walked, to the large window. He leaned his hands against it to steady himself as he looked around the room.

He saw four more pods, the rest of his squad, with the doors open. They were beginning to stir. He heard one of his crew gasp awake, then another, and finally the last two. He walked over to the closest.

"Sarah," he said with a heavy German accent as she started glancing around.

“Where are we?” She asked.

“I don’t know, but we are not on our ship,” he replied.

Sarah’s long soaked wet hair even darker than its usual deep brown that matched her eyes. She was dark-complected, contrasting with Aurik’s pale skin.

“Aurik, what’s going on?” Came a deep Texas twang from across the room. Aurik peered around Sarah’s stasis pod to see the rest of his squad carefully stepping out of their pods.

The one who spoke, Kyle Jackson, was a burly built man with short, brown hair. Next to him was Jessica, an African American, whose long, straight black hair, weighed down from being wet, clung to her ebony skin. Next to her was a Chinese woman with hair that hung heavily down to her jaw and bangs that fell to just above her eyes, framing her face, Yin Shou. They all wore black undergarments soaked through with the water like stasis liquid.

“Where are we? Yin asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what happened,” Aurik replied.

The window suddenly illuminated, revealing an observation room with half a dozen N’Roth staring at them. The squad each stared in shock at the creatures that held them captive.

The N’Roth were humanoid in appearance. However, that was about where the similarities ended. There was no mistaking them for humans. The N’Roth were genderless and hairless with pink eyes. Their hands and feet – if you could call them that – had three digits that looked more like fleshy pinchers than toes or fingers. Their skin was pale with an icy blue tint that gave them a look of a dead, lifeless human. They had thick, black, scaly veins that ran along their bodies, and made them look like a decayed, cracked, dry, desert lake bed. Instead of ears,

they had bumpy scales with several slits in them. Instead of a nose, an indentation with several slits.

Like humans, though, they wore clothing. The half dozen in the observation room wore brown, form-fitting garments that clung to their bodies. On the center of their chests was an insignia of some sort.

The crew of five stared back at the half-dozen alien creatures observing them. Moments later, a large door to the left of the observation room slid open, and a half dozen armed N'Roth rushed into the room.

The squad stepped back as the N'Roth raised their weapons toward them.

“Follow the soldiers to your cells,” came a scratchy voice from the intercom. One of the soldiers motioned with his gun for the squad to move.

The weapon was unlike anything they had ever seen before. It looked to be a rifle of some sort. Its buttstock rested under the armpit of its wielder curving upward around the inside of the arm until it rested against the forearm of its user allowing for a snug fit against the wielder's forearm. At elbow length, protruded a grip of three to four inches long, which the wielder held with his off-hand, securing it tightly in its pinchers. A few inches farther, the muzzle widened into an oval-shape with a trigger on the underside of the weapon and a notch on top into which the N'Roth pinchers rested.

Aurik obeyed, knowing that the only other options were to disobey and likely be shot on the spot or to fight their way out, and they were ill-equipped to fight their way out.

The rest of his squad followed suit. The warm metal flooring slippery under their wet, dripping bodies.

Aurik noticed that the corridors were massive, more than enough room for a row of three. The doors, as well, were oversized, and the ceiling was much higher than the N'Roth needed them to be. He could tell that it was a massive facility. He was taking note of everything he could remember. The soldier's weapons, how they moved, the doors, the corridors they passed by, the N'Roth who stared as they walked by. He tried to be discreet as he glanced around and hoped the N'Roth did not notice him peering into each room as they passed by open doors. He noticed several maintenance hatches, again oversized, as well.

Though the corridors were clear of any consoles, it seemed the rooms he peered into had consoles and workstations, and he counted the steps at each turn, each door, each passing corridor, trying his best to memorize his steps and turns.

He knew the rest of his team were similarly already plotting their escape, though, in truth, he had no idea how they were going to get out of this mess – whatever mess it was that they were in. He had no idea – yet. If there was anyone who could find a way out of this, it was his team. They were the best of the best. That was why they were put together.

They were finally led into the brig and separated into two cells, the men in one, the women in the other. The second they were in the cells, they heard the buzz of power. The cell entryway lit up, and what looked like tiny bolts of lightning bounced back and forth along the entryway threshold.

“Well, at least the N'Roth like it warm,” Jessica said. The rest of the squad either ignored her or smiled in response, their conundrum weighing heavily on them.

“What is going on, Aurik? How did we get here?” Sarah asked.

Aurik shook his head.

“I don't know. I woke up right before the rest of you,” he replied.

“One thing’s for sure. We have to get out of here, wherever here is. Jessica, you think you can figure this security system out?”

Jessica glanced around her cell and investigated the entryway. “I will do the best I can.” Aurik nodded and started studying the cell himself.

Kyle, who had already been examining the cell, was fixated on the miniature lightning bouncing around the entryway.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” He asked Aurik.

“No,” Aurik replied, “But I wouldn’t want to -” Aurik’s reply was cut short by a sudden, loud crackling, pop, and thud. He spun around to see Kyle unconscious, leaning against the back wall. He rushed over to him, immediately realizing what Kyle had done. He pressed two fingers to Kyle’s neck and felt a shockingly strong pulse.

Kyle suddenly lurched forward with a gasp, startling Aurik, who fell backward.

“That was a stupid idea,” Kyle said more to himself than Aurik. “I hurt all over.” He stood to his feet, cringing, his heart pounding.

“You are so stupid!” Yin angrily hollered, her Chinese accent heavy. “You should know not to touch that!”

Jessica smiled at Yin’s outburst. Though Yin wouldn’t admit it, she had feelings for Kyle, and Jessica knew that was why she was so angry. Kyle shrugged as he slowly stood to his feet, every inch of him in pain.

“Well, at least we know what that force field does,” Aurik said.

Jessica started feeling along the frame of the force field, being careful not to touch the field itself. She felt an edge right before the energy barrier, assuming it to be the frame for the force field itself. She thought it as good a place as any to try and find a way to turn it off. She

closed her eyes as she ran her hands along this edge, feeling for anything, for bumps, scratches, dents, screws, anything that might give her a clue about the wiring or mechanics of the force field. She ran her hands down one side of the entryway frame, then started along the opposite side, going up until she came to her starting point at the top, taking particular notice of each imperfection.

After she finished with the entryway frame, she started feeling the flooring. She noticed in the corner nearest the wall, a slight temperature difference. Upon closer inspection, she felt and saw tiny slits where the entry frame met the floor.

“I found something. The floor is slightly warmer here, and there are four slits in this corner. It might be something like screws,” she informed the others.

“Better than nothing,” Aurik replied.

The door at the main entrance to the brig hissed open, and five N’Roth entered. Two walked over to Kyle and Aurik’s cell, two walked over to the women’s cell, and the last one stayed near the door, its weapon at the ready.

The two at each cell raised what looked like weapons at the entryway and turned the force field off. The devices looked similar to the rifles they saw earlier. The barrels were wide and oval-shaped with a grip behind the barrels on which the N’Roth’s pinchers rested naturally.

Each pair selected one of their corresponding cell occupants with a wave of their pistols, ordering them to step out of the cells. Aurik and Sarah stepped out as ordered and cooperated with every demand as the N’Roth soldiers escorted them out of the brig. The soldiers escorted the two down several corridors, then the two N’Roth escorting Sarah veered off down an adjacent corridor.

A few moments later, Aurik found himself back in the room with the stasis pods. An N'Roth stood among the pods, peering into the back panel of one.

“Ah, Aurik, is it?” The N'Roth asked in a familiar, scratchy voice. “That is what the female called you,”

“You were the one who spoke through the intercom earlier.”

“No. We all seem to sound the same to you humans,” he explained.

“Why were you in these stasis pods?” It asked. “This is remarkable understanding of technology for humans. How did you make it?”

Aurik could sense the hostility in its scratchy voice, despite the calm, friendly tone in which it spoke.

Aurik didn't answer.

The N'Roth interrogator had been admiring the mechanics of the stasis unit more than paying attention to Aurik looked up when he didn't answer.

The two locked gazes, the N'Roth sensing the defiance in Aurik and Aurik noticing the cold, heartless, and ruthlessness behind the N'Roth's pink eyes.

The N'Roth stalked over to him, an aura of rage emanating from it, a scowl on its face and its black, scaly veins pulsing in fury.

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Sarah was left alone in a large room. No soldiers, no forcefields, no security. She glanced around the room, noticing a couch on the far wall and a cocktail bar on the adjoining wall. There was also a large table in the center of the room that held a bowl of apples, grapes, mangos, oranges, and several other alien fruits she didn't recognize. She thought it curious how human everything looked.

The door behind her hissed open, and she turned around.

“Please, take a seat, have some fruit, relax,” The N’Roth said in its scratchy voice as it walked past her, seeming almost to ignore her.

She followed the alien with her eyes, unsure of what to make of the situation. The N’Roth’s countenance seemed that of a friend and not of an enemy, and its voice, though scratchy and forced as it was, was kind.

She watched it rummage through the fruit bowl and snatch up two. One was blue in color, squiggly, long and scaly. Its shape resembled two S’s put together. The other was an orange. He walked over to her and offered her both fruits.

“Do they have Zeret on the planet you are from?” He asked. Sarah didn’t reply. The N’Roth smiled and walked back over to the table.

“I understand why you don’t trust us. Whatever planet you come from, they probably told you we are evil.” It sat down on the couch.

“What is your name?” He asked.

She didn’t answer.

He smiled.

“Very well,” it replied, crossing its legs.

“Let me be honest with you.” The N’Roth’s demeanor suddenly changed. Its face grew stern, its body, more rigid, and its voice harsh. “We will find out everything we need to know. It is better for you and your friends if you tell us now.” It stood up, seeming to change personalities again.

“Do you want a drink? I have grown fond of your human drinks,” it said as it walked over to the bar.

“You know, we have a team of scientists going through your ship right now.” The alien grabbed a glass and poured itself a drink. “It is quite old. We are curious as to where you found it.” It took a sip as it glared at Sarah, noticing the confusion on her face. The N’Roth set the glass down.

“You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?” It remarked, surprised. “Who are you, and where were you going in that old earth ship?” It asked, its scratchy voice suddenly ice cold, sending a shiver down Sarah’s spine.