**STRANDED**

They awaken to the sound of crickets in the morning.Atleast they sound like crickets; who knows what are they really. They’ve been stranded here for hours, there’s no telling exactly how much. The planet is much smaller than Earth. Marcus measured it’s rotation period to be approximately 14 earthly hours.

 -So we’ve been here over a day. Two cycles so far.

 -I guess.

 The ship’s ion drive has failed. Neither of them were skilled mechanics. Clara was going through the ship’s storage to find a manual of some sort. Marcus was looking at the sky. He gazed upon thousands of nebulae of fascinating, beautiful colors. There were two suns, a blue and white one. Their light was strong, and they were either huge, or very close to their planet. Any case, he was glad they had their suits to protect them against extreme temperatures and harmful radiation.

 -Everyone knew the ion drive was unstable- Said Marcus in an annoyed tone. -Hell, NASA even said it’s absolutely unsafe to use; but no, humans and their dumb curiosity. The thing might have ripped a hole in space and time, for all I know. I have no idea where the hell we are now.

-Thank god for the huge oxygen supply we brought.

 -It will run out eventually. However, how do you know whether the atmosphere is friendly or not?
 -Take off your helmet.

 -…

 -Exactly.

 The surface of the planet was mostly barren: it looked like a rocky desert, with slick, tall slopes resembling dunes. It was desolate, depressing. The hills were very tall, obstructing their view. There could be something else behind them, however, the rock was brown, textureless, and you couldn’t tell how far the hills actually are.

 -The sky is amazing-Clara said.-How is it possible for so many nebulae to be clumped up in one place? You almost can’t even see the black vacuum of space.

 -It is fascinating, indeed. But we can’t lay around and admire the sight. We need to move on.

 -Where to? There’s nothing but desert all around us.

 -There must be something behind those hills; and look there:
 Marcus pointed at a ravine between two of the hills. There was a faint light coming out of it.

 -Peculiar.

 -Might as well go check it out.
 -Not that we’ll accomplish anything if we stay here.

 Marcus pushed some buttons on the console. With the sound of hydraulics hissing, a hatch on the shuttle opened, revealing an ATV. He came up to it, and opened its door.

 -Wait a second; don’t we have an atmosphere analyzer onboard?- Clara asked.

 -Hell, we might even have one. I feel kind of dumb now.

Clara laughed, but immediately let out a short, painful shriek.

 -What is it?
 -My chest hurts… I might have broken a rib in the crash.

 -Is it bad?

 -Well it doesn’t hurt when I breathe, but when I laughed it felt like I got stabbed.

 -Can you move?

 -I think I’ll be fine.

 -Alright then. Let’s go, I guess.

 -The analyzer?
 -Oh right.

Marcus started looking for the device in the ship’s storage bay. After a search of a few minutes, he found it among some rifles, a first-aid kit, and canned food. –This should all be useful- he said, and grabbed 2 rifles, the first-aid kit, and some cans. He was just about to leave, when he remembered the EMP device onboard. Marcus remembered that it was given to them incase they meet a race of superior, intelligent creatures with developed electronics, to get them out of a potential sticky situation. The device’s pulse would short-circuit all electronic devices in a 200 meter radius. It was kind of heavy, about 20 kilograms. However, he didn’t put in much effort while carrying it-the planet’s gravity was considerably weaker than Earth’s.

The ATV would have been slow otherwise; this way, even with all the stuff they burdened it with, it managed to achieve a steady 80 km/h.

 -I found a first-aid kit in the cargo bay. It will come in handy if your condition gets worse. I grabbed some canned food, and I also found two 40. cals. in case we run into hostiles, and the EMP device.

 -Let’s hope they won’t be necessary.

 -And I forgot, the atmosphere is unknown. The scanner couldn’t identify it, might be some new element.

 -Interesting.

 It took them about an hour to reach the ravine. The faint, now blue light was becoming brighter the closer they got to it. While heading towards the entrance, the texture of the stone steadily changed from brown to light bluish.

 It wasn’t as much of a ravine as it was a cave: it was glowing bright, because of dozens of blue crystals pulsating with color. It was clumped, barely a meter in diameter; their transport couldn’t pass through.

 -I hate to leave the ATV behind.

 -Because you hate walking or…

 -Because we can run away.

 -True. Should we take samples of these crystals to analyze at the ship’s lab later?

 -Yeah, let’s do that.

They picked a few samples with a small pickaxe. Marcus gave Clara one rifle, and put his own on his back, taking most of the supplies from the ATV,and then continued through the cave.The crystal didn’t stop glowing. Exiting the cave, as the light became less bright, they realized they were not on stone anymore, but on a dirt-like surface.

They found themselves in a huge rainforest-like environment: gigantic trees with wide treetops covered the sky, and rays of light penetrated the light-purple leaves of the trees with difficulty. The ground was purple because of the semi-transparent leaves. Constant, serene humming of an unknown source was like music for their ears. It was a heavenly place.

Clara came up to one of the trees, and as she tried to take a sample from it, she noticed that its bark was soft. She took a knife from her tool belt, and wanted to cut a sample. To her surprise, once she started cutting with it, the trunk started vibrating, almost as if trying to move. She jumped back in surprise.

 -Could this thing be alive?-she asked.

 -You never know. It’s an alien planet after all. These forms just look like trees, they might be animals, or fungi for all we know.

 -Maybe I shouldn’t touch it.

 -Probably. Let’s continue. If there is life, there must be water somewhere here.

 -Come to think of it, that’s actuallykind of an ignorant statement, on humanity’s behalf. If we need water to live, it doesn’t mean extraterrestrial lifeforms require it to survive like we do.

 -I guess you’re right. Let’s proceed.

 They continued their journey into the depths of the forest, a little more nervous than earlier.

 The forest got darker and darker the more they ventured into it; the light upon them turning from heavenly turquoise to fiendish purple with each step they take. The peaceful humming slowly turned into a threatening buzz.

 -This place is frightening. - Said Clara.

 -Definitely. I feel obligated to console you, but in this alien world, I have no idea what could be lurking; I’m scared too.

 As he said that, Marcus noticed shadows moving on the treetops. He pointed upwards, nudging Clara to shift her attention. It was very dark; they couldn’t even tell the silhouettes of creatures above them from the branches of the trees. At first, their movement was sparse; with time, more and more silhouettes appeared, sliding from branch to branch, at a faster rate with every passing minute. The sound of crackling branches and swooshing leaves distressed Marcus and Clara, as they felt their heartbeats intensify.

 Soon they realized they were surrounded by the creatures. They were dashing across the tree trunks with worrying speed. Clara grabbed Marcus’ hand and squeezed it tightly in fear. The creatures had long limbs, grabbing branches and doing acrobatics with ease. They resembled monkeys with their movement. Steadily they were climbing downwards the trees, and once close enough, they started dropping down from them. Marcus was counting them; there were more than twenty.

 He felt threatened now. With a shaking hand, he grabbed the gun from his back and unlocked the safety block on it. Clara did the same. They turned the lights on the muzzles of the weapons.

The creatures formed a circle as they descended down. Lighting them with the flashlight, they noticed that their skin was brown. Marcus figured that they have no claws on any limbs, and felt slightly less nervous; he couldn’t account for any teeth though.

Suddenly, as all of the creatures descended onto the ground, they all stopped, and propped themselves on two legs, their long arms touching the floor. They were fairly small, about two thirds of a meter tall in this stance. Their faces were small compared to the rest of their bodies; they had a white circle across it. Creepily, they stared at Clara and Marcus with black, bead-like eyes. Suddenly, they were enveloped in silence.

 Frightened, Clara subconsciously started backing off, but slipped due to her shaky legs. Her sudden movement startled the creatures. In a heartbeat, they were gone, rocketing up the trees like frightened squirrels. The two felt relieved, each letting out a loud sigh.

 -I don’t need this. I want to go back.-said Clara, still shivering with fear.

 -I understand. Let’s return to the pod and analyze the crystals.

 Packing fast, they backtracked their steps to the cave. They packed their accessories into the ATV, and returned to the ship.

 The ship was fairly large, designed to be a housing for a long time. They had food and water stocks, and could probably survive for a couple of months only with these supplies; a long time, but not forever.

 -When we applied to test the ion drive, I knew what the contract meant. And I really felt like I have nothing to lose. But now, on this strange planet, I experienced true fear. I was scared for my life, Marcus. I don’t want to die here.

 -I know.

 Marcus went to the ATV and took a crystal. With a tiny drill, they drilled a bit on the surface, leaving blue, sparkly dust. They carefully collected it into two vials. Clara placed one vial into the mineral analyzer. It just played an error sound.

 -Unknown mineral.- said Marcus. -Well, not that we expected something else.

 -Let’s try and dilute some of it?

 -Sure.

 Clara took a pint of water into a pipette, then slowly dropped some of it into the vial with the crystal powder. Immediately it started hissing and fizzing violently. It was nearly crackling with electricity.

 -This looks dangerous. –said Clara.

 -But powerful. Let’s check its electrical properties.

 They submerged a tiny LED diode into the dilution, wanting to connect it to another device. It glowed with a strong light.

 -My god, this can power electricity! – exclaimed Clara.

 -Without a current. This is fantastic.

 -What if we can power the ion drive with it?

 -Even if it could, we would need insane amounts of those crystals.

 -Well let’s get on with it then.

Over the course of the next 2 days of the planet, they steadily mined the crystals of the cave, exhausting its supply.

 -This is the last of them- said Marcus, returning with the last load of crystals from the cave.

 They had earlier made a pile of the crystals near the ship. Including this batch, they had nearly a hundred.

 -Our tools are not meant for mass refining. It would take us forever to grind and dilute all the crystals.- said Clara in a sad tone.

 -That is true. But we have to prevail. Don’t you wish to go back to Earth?

 -I do. But do you even realize how far-fetched that is right now?
 -Still, we must have faith. Just believe that we will succeed.

 -Okay, I guess.

 -Now let’s start refining.

 Marcus, motivated by an unknown force, started working very eagerly. Clara, on the other hand, had nihilistic thoughts, and was working just because she cared for Marcus. While Marcus would break up the crystals into smaller pieces with the pickaxe, Clara would grind them into dust. They talked about their lives while working.

 -So where did you grow up?- asked Clara.

 -On a farm near Cleveland.

 -No wonder you’re so hard working.

 -You?

 -Yukon.

 -Oh, I didn’t know you were Canadian.

 -I hate it. It’s cold there, and there’s nothing but snow.

 -Well where would you like to live?

 -Somewhere sunny. Doesn’t really matter where, as long as it’s warm.

 -I get it.

 They had grown very close over time. Days passed by like minutes, and soon the crystal stocks were exhausted.

 -We’re out of crystals.

 -Really?

 -You seem surprised.

 -Well, I thought we would work very long. This was… fast.

 -See, it wasn’t even that hard.

 Clara smiled.

 -We should go find more crystals.

 -Surely not through that forest?
 -Not there, no.

 Marcus started going through the cargo bay again to find some binoculars. He wanted to scout the desert for more faint light, indicating the presence of crystals. He managed to find a scope for a rifle. –It will do- he thought, and went out.

 However, as he was coming out of the ship, he tripped on the frame of the storage bay’s hatch, hitting the ground with his helmet’s fragile visor. It started cracking slowly in front of his eyes, as he stared in shock. After seconds of tormenting silence, the visor broke, and all the air inside the helmet was sucked out.

 Marcus fell to his knees, choking, and grasping his neck in horror. Millions of thoughts were racing through his mind, in this final hour of his. However, instead of asphyxiating or dying from the unknown gas that made up the planet’s atmosphere, he was actually able to inhale it as if it was air.

 His heart was beating incredibly fast. He still wasn’t realizing what just happened. He kneeled on all fours for a whole minute before standing up. Clara was finishing the grinding of the last crystals, when she saw Marcus outside, with his visor pierced. She screamed and ran outside.

 -Marcus!
 -Clara, I’m okay.

 -What the.,,?
 -I can inhale this gas. I don’t know what is it, but I can breathe.

 Clara couldn’t believe what he was saying, yet he was obviously breathing.

 -Take off your helmet.

 -No way in hell.

 -Trust me!
 -Why would I take off my helmet?
 -Well you see we can breathe this gas, why not?
 -What if it’s poisonous?
 -We would run out of oxygen eventually anyway!

 Clara stopped to think, for a second, but then simply thought ‘Oh, what the hell’, and simply took her helmet off. At first she gasped for air, but soon adapted to the new atmosphere.

 -How can we breathe in here?- wondered Clara.

 -I have no idea. The atmosphere analyzer didn’t find traces of oxygen at all.

 -I can’t get my mind off thinking that the gas is poisonous.

 -Well if it is, we can’t be sure now. No use crying over spilled milk. We should go find more crystals.

 Marcus climbed the ship, and used the scope he found to scout the area. In the distance, he saw another cave like the one they had mined, and something very odd. Among the dunes and rock, there was a large cube, the same texture as the desert. –That explains why we didn’t notice it before.- thought Marcus. Its edges were perfectly sharp; it could not be of natural origin.

 -Clara!

 -Yeah?

 -Come up here, I need you to see something.

 Marcus passed her the scope and pointed at the structure.

 -What’s that?
 -No idea. But it’s not natural.

 -Do we go check it out?

 -Yep.

 They packed the ATV and mounted it again. On their way towards the structure, they noticed it was very large - almost 10 meters tall. When they arrived to it, Clara inspected it to find out that it’s actually floating off the ground, some 10 centimeters up.

 -Look, it’s floating.

 -Woah, it is. I wonder what makes it hover.

 -What do we do?

 Marcus approached the cube, and slowly touched it with his hand. It was hard, just like the rock below their feet. After further inspection, it seemed that there was nothing special about the cube, except the fact that it hovers.

 -Is there nothing to it? - asked Clara.

 -There must be something about it. Its edges are perfect, and we don’t know what makes it hover.

 -Try pushing it?

 -Hmm.

 Marcus leaned onto it slowly, and then started pushing. It was floating, so he could move it with ease. He then attempted moving it vertically, but to no avail.

 -Should we try to mine it a bit?- asked Clara.

 -Yeah, let me get the pickaxe.

 He grabbed the pickaxe from the ATV, then tried hitting the cube with it; nothing, however, happened. The cube was impervious to physical damage.

 -What now? –asked Marcus.

 -I don’t know. We leave it, I guess, since we cannot find a use for it.

 -Time well wasted.

 They sat back in the ATV then went towards the second crystal cave.

 This one was more plentiful than the other. It was larger, with lots more crystals. It took them a long time to mine and refine them all. It was hard work. Every few hours they would take a break to rest a bit. Clara, however, noticed something odd one day.

 -Marcus, I’m pretty sure the cube is different.

 -Really?

Marcus stood up from his bed to look at the cube through the window. There was some hardly noticeable orange smoke rising around it.

 -You mean the dust?

 -Yep.

 -We ought to go check it.

 -Sure.

 Once again, they packed the ATV and head towards the cube. They started to hear a soft buzzing noise at some 500 meters from the cube. By the time they arrived there, it was very loud. The source of the smoke was from under the cube, as if someone was drilling it from underneath.

 Marcus and Clara exited the vehicle and approached the cube. It was rumbling. They started walking around it, to notice any difference. Suddenly, the cube’s sides started splitting in a plus pattern. White smoke began to come out of the sides, and a hissing noise could be heard. With the sound of steam releasing, the cube split into 8 smaller parts, revealing a black sphere inside, about two meters in diameter. The sphere then split into two parts horizontally. Its top half started spinning very fast and lifting up, almost like it was unscrewing.

 With a ‘pop’ sound, the sphere’s top burst upwards, and fell to the ground after a few seconds, revealing the sphere’s interior. Marcus and Clara glared in awe. Inside the sphere was a creature.

 It was much like the being they saw in the forest. However, its limbs were shorter, and it had pale brown skin. It was clumped in the tight space of the ball’s interior; its head was buried in its knees, and its arms wrapped tightly around them.

 -What the hell is that thing? - asked Clara

 -It’s a lot like the creatures we met in the forest.

 -But what is this entire cube? Is it possible that this creature made it?

 -I have no idea.

 Their conversation was interrupted by something that sounded a lot like a yawn. They turned to see the creature stretch, as if it was in a long sleep. It slowly opened its eyes, only to see the terrified two staring at him.

 -AAAAAHHH! - The creature yelled in a frightened, but surprisingly human noise.

 -GAH! - Marcus and Clara jumped backwards.

 The creature said something in an alien language. The two looked confused at each other.

 -It’s intelligent! - stated Clara.

 The creature looked at them in wonder. It then proceeded to press some buttons on the inside of the sphere.

 -Ah, English. – It said in a rough accent.

 Marcus and Clara glared in wonder.

 -You can speak our language? –asked Marcus.

 -It took me some time to analyze your speech, but I recall how to speak it properly, more or less. What are Humans such as yourself doing on this planet?

 -Our scientists discovered a new method of interplanetary transport, the Ion Drive. But it’s still very experimental, and we are among the first to use it. We...

 -OH FINALLY. You invented the ion drive. Took you long enough.

 -What do you mean?

 -We’ve been watching you for so long, earthlings. We have found about the ion drive ages ago, waiting for you to invent it. We even worried that you might not even be that intelligent. However, we are a civilization considerably older than yours, It is understandable. We planned to contact you once you once we deem you worthy. Interestingly, you found us; but what interests me is, how did you find this planet? How did you know we were here?

 -… we didn’t. We ended up here on accident?

 -What? Explain.

 -Well we said that we are still testing the ion drive. We have no idea how we ended up here, or where exactly are we.

 -Haha, you cannot even use it properly yet. –the creature let out a sound similar to laughter.

 -Are you mocking us?
 -Pardon my manners. Firstly, let me introduce myself. My name is Zaahlg, of the Haldivri race.

 -Pleased to meet you. I am Marcus, and this is Clara. We are of the Human race, but you already know that.

 -So you landed here on accident?
 -‘Landed’ is a relative term. We fell unconscious the moment we activated the drive, and woke up on this barren place. What do you call this place, anyway?

 -Err, we don’t actually have a name for this planet. We just call it ‘home’.

 -Funny. And how long exactly have you been watching us?

 -Well, in Earthly years it’s… around 500 years.

 -And why didn’t you contact us earlier?

 -I explained that we didn’t find you intelligent enough. You have improved over time; but not enough.

 Marcus started thinking. For a few minutes, they did not talk. He and Clara took some time to think about what they had just learned.

 -So what now? –Marcus asked.

 -We will contact your race at a later time.

 -And what about us? Will you return us home?

 -Sure, I could give you a ride to Earth. It’s only a dozen light-years away.

 He laughed at their surprised faces.

 The two were still in shock. They were the pioneers to contact an alien race. Clara still wasn’t believing what is happening.

 -I guess we mined all those crystals in vain, Clara.

 -Heh.

 -Did you say crystals? - Zaahlg interrupted them.

 -Yes, we found blue crystals in caves not far away. We figured we could use them as a power source; we intended to use it as fuel for the ion drive.

 -Thankfully, you awakened me from my slumber just in time. The crystals are incredibly unstable as energy sources. Who knows what would happen if you used them in the ion drive; for all we know, you could have opened a black hole.

 -Oh my god!

 -Well, you didn’t, so it doesn’t really matter now. I shall return you to Earth now.

 -Wait a second. Where are we exactly?
 -Look here.

 Zaahlg called them toward him. He then showed them a three-dimensional hologram of the galaxy inside the sphere.

 -We are here; and there’s your planet.

 -Woah. And this is your ship, I guess?
 -I guess you could call it that way.

 -Are you ready to go?

 -I am. Clara?

 -I guess. What about our stuff?

 -Oh right. Zaahlg, can we bring it along?

 -Well, if your ship is designed to withstand interplanetary travel, I could pull it back. Actually, we have to bring it along; my ship is not designed for more than one individual.

 Marcus and Clara, with mixed emotions, returned to their ship. They packed all the stuff they have unpacked, and returned the ATV into its bay. Clare was cheerful; Marcus on the other hand, felt a little down.

 -Are you glad we’re leaving? –asked Marcus.

 -Definitely. I miss Earth. I’ve grown sick of this stupid desert.

 -I liked it here. It was calm.

Then they stopped talking again.

While Zaahlg was pulling them upwards, tethering their ship to his with a plasma rope, they marveled at the sheer number of planets their current system was made of; the two gigantic suns pulled more than 50 planets into their gravitational field. Paired with the nebulas around them, Marcus and Clara marveled at the beauty they were faced with.

-What do you call this system? –wondered Clara.

-‘Enilid’. It means ‘colorful’.

-I can see why.

Marcus wasn’t admiring the view. He was busy with deep thoughts.

-Zaahlg. You said we were not yet ready. Why shouldn’t we tell everyone on Earth of your existence anyway?

-You could. Not that I would care; you’re not the first or the last sentient race we’ve encountered in the universe; your race will discover us eventually, and nobody would probably believe you. So it’s up to you.

-So there are more races?

-Of course. You are yet to explore the universe. Now rest; I believe that you are tired, having learned so much in such short time.

Marcus suddenly realized that he was, actually, very tired. He leaned onto the pod’s window, and fell asleep momentarily. The ion drive was insanely fast. It was not long before they reached Earth. They awoke in the middle of the Atlantic, to the sound of radio chatter. The scientist at the NASA headquarters was literally screaming into the microphone when he discovered that their signal appeared.

-FIREFLY! MARCUS, CLARA! DO YOU COPY?!

-Uhh… hello?

-THIS IS NASA, DO YOU COPY? I REPEAT, DO YOU COPY?

-Copy, HQ, this is uh… Firefly.

-Where the hell have you guys been?

Marcus had a massive headache.

-I… I don’t know.

Clara looked at him with an unsure expression.

-You don’t think we should tell them? –she whispered to him.

-They will find out eventually. At the very least, it’s a sign of gratitude for Zaahlg bringing us back.

When he had fully awoken, Marcus noticed a strange bag in his lap. The object inside was rigid, sharp, and glowing blue. A small piece of paper fell out.

 ‘*Here’s a little souvenir. I will be looking forward to our next encounter. Farewell, and may the stars be in your favor on your future journeys.’*

He smiled, and gazed at the Sun through the pod’s window.

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