

# PERPETUAL DARKNESS

I open my heavy eyes, but they open to nothing but darkness and cold. I can't see anything but the emergency lights glowing on the floor of our busted ship. I flip open the hatch of my sleeping pod and I choke as freezing gases are ejected into the air. Something's gone very wrong.

"Major!" yells a voice from somewhere else in the ship. "Major!" he yells, getting much closer to me. He grabs me and yanks me out of the pod by the collar of my jumpsuit. "I thought you were dead!"

"Lucky me," I reply, still coughing up fumes. My muscles feel like they've been pushed and pulled in every odd direction to their furthest extent. I can't even stand by myself. Colonel Snow keeps his arms around me, holding me up.

"You'll feel better in a bit, but then you'll feel horrible when you find out where we are."

As I attempt to move my arms, the colonel loses his grip on me. I plummet to the floor, but my arms break the fall. To my surprise, instead of staying with my face planted firmly in the colonel's shoelaces, I'm rolling down the deck of our ship. It's slanted like a steep hill. The ship must have crashed.

The sliding stops when I skid into a shallow pool of water in the rocks, rocks which clearly aren't a part of our original ship. For the briefest moment, I feel the worst of its freezing cold temperature. I instantly leap to my feet, my muscles shocked back to life.

This smell... This isn't water. It's fuel! I cough and gag, trying my hardest to vomit even though I don't want to.

"Major!" yells the colonel as he rushes down the broken remains of our ship to get hold of me once again. "Calm down!" he says to me, gripping me tight. I'm still gagging and hacking with seemingly no end in sight. "Stop that at once!" But I can't. Just then I realize I've nothing in my stomach to throw up, all the result of the long period of fasting I had to go through before they put me in that pod back there. The feeling begins to subside.

When I get my breath back for a short second, I say, "What the hell happened here?" I've been looking around for clues but I see nothing, absolutely nothing, only the dim glow of the emergency lights and their reflection in the pool of fuel below my feet. Not even space is this dark.

"I don't know."

"We crashed, didn't we?"

"I don't know. We must have." He paused for a moment, as though he was about to say something else. "The ship..." He could barely continue. "This is all that's left of the ship: these three sleeping pods... and the ship's controls over there. If the rest of the ship is out there somewhere, I only have a slight clue as to where it'd be. I've walked around. I can't see more than a few meters in front of me."

"You mean..."

He answered my question for me before I could finish my sentence, saying, "Yes, beyond that puddle of fuel is the rest

of Planet Alpha, if we're on Planet Alpha that is."

"It's so dark. This can't be it."

"It might not be. I've thought about that a lot over the past few days, since nearly the instant I woke up. One explanation other than this being Planet Alpha is that we crashed on an asteroid somewhere along the way, an asteroid with its own atmosphere."

"That's impossible."

"I know," the colonel reluctantly replies.

"Then that means this is Planet Alpha."

"Hardly the inhabitable utopia they said it would be," deadpans the colonel.

"Wait, how long have we been in space? Do we know it's been four years?"

The colonel puts his watch in front of me and says, "We're right on time, but that doesn't tell us anything. We could still be anywhere between Earth and Alpha Centauri."

"We're here," I say. "This has to be Planet Alpha. Our ship, it's got a gaping hole in it, but we can still breathe."

"More than just a gaping hole. We're missing ninety-five percent of the rest of the ship," interjects the colonel.

"Yes, but this has to be it, because we're still alive. We can breathe the air, the temperature is cold but still livable."

"That brings me to my most likely explanation: we're right where we're supposed to be on Planet Alpha, but something happened while we were traveling here—something awful, something cataclysmic."

"But..." I try to reply but the colonel is starting to make too much sense, and I just can't fit that theory in my head.

"It's always night, and in the perpetual darkness, you can never see the stars. There must be a thick layer of debris in the atmosphere or something that wasn't there before. An asteroid," he says. "This planet had to have been struck by an asteroid."

"But..." I still have nothing to say.

"And if we can't find the rest of the ship fast, we're going to die out here on this rock. The rest of the crew could still be alive, and if that's the case, the rest of the Prometheus is in a condition to make the trip back to Earth. Everything here is dead, the nav system, the comm—everything, including Major Pope."

"Pope's dead?"

"Yeah. Looks like the control on the cryo-system was busted during the crash. The poor guy was frozen to death, way past the stage of reviving."

"But I survived?"

"Like you said," replies the colonel, "lucky you. But come on, we have to get moving. I've been waiting for a few days for you to come to so we could start searching for the Prometheus." The colonel takes my hand and places it firmly on a pipe so I can hold my own. He jumps over the pool of fuel and walks out onto Planet Alpha. "That's one leap for man," he said. "Your turn." Outside, he stood on solid black rock, shiny with a layer of moisture stuck to it.

"But where do we go?"

"I figure the Prometheus is this way," he says, pointing into the distance. "If our piece of the ship slid along this grove here," he stomps on the ground, "then the rest of the ship must be in the opposite direction."

I hesitate.

"There's no time to lose. Let's move, Major!"

I jump over the fuel, and out in the open, I immediately notice something. I start walking. In the pitch black sky, a tiny white dot is shining. "Do you see that?" I say as I point to it.

"Yeah, I see it."

"It's a star. A single star."

"I thought that too, but I've watched it. It doesn't move. It shines the better part of twenty or so hours, but it disappears and reappears, never moving. I can't think of anything that would do that."

I'm still staring at the light, deep in thought, so much so that the colonel gets too far ahead of me for me to see the ground illuminated by the one light that he has.

"Come on," he says. "I'm going to lose you back there."

I pick up the pace, but keep it only to a fast walk. The slippery rocks made placing my feet down a precise process, and the lighting playing with the shadows didn't help the avoidance of large crevices.

We walked for several hours over the wet, barren landscape, coming to cliffs with seemingly no end to their depth, impassable canyons in the ground, and steep slopes impossible to traverse. Never once did we mention what a failure this mission had been. In four years, the colonel said, he could be back on Earth in time to see his daughter's sixteenth birthday. She was twelve now, but eight years old the last time he saw her. With the mission scrapped, if we made it out of here alive, he wouldn't have to wait until she was thirty-two before he would see her again, and that made the accident all worth it. The first manned-mission to another solar system beyond our own had come before his own family. This place is a goddamned wasteland.

"Wait," I say, stopping as we climb a huge incline. "The light! It's getting bigger. Do you see?"

The colonel looked up and saw that the light was indeed much bigger than before. "You were right," he says. "It was a star, an expanding star! We're gonna be swallowed by that..." Just then he stands up and smashes his head on a hard, rock ceiling. He yelps, and we both slowly look up to a sight that makes our hearts fall back into our chests. The darkness, this world... It can't be.

The colonel looks at me with wide eyes and utters the realization we've both just come to, "We're in a cave." A cave! A massive underground cave!

I stand up, making sure to duck my head down to stay under the ceiling. I run towards the light as fast as I can. It's getting exponentially bigger as I get closer and closer, and when I'm finally in the position to see it with clarity, I can confirm that it's a hole, a hole that we had pierced in the cave with our part of the ship.

"It's a hole!" I yell back to the colonel.

He isn't far behind me. "My God." He crawls up to it, looks at it for a moment, seeing snowflakes drop from the sky, floating in the hole we had made, and he stands up. He looks around for a moment. "Planet Alpha," he shouts with enthusiasm, "here we come!" He leaps to his feet, pulling himself up out of the cave.

I follow him up to find a beautiful, snow-covered landscape, and I breathed the cold air in with all the power in my lungs. We were alive, and Planet Alpha was just as gorgeous as they said it would be. But the colonel isn't sharing in my delight. In fact he's weeping. I turn to him to see what's the matter, and I can't help but drop to my

knees as well. It's a city, a devastated city, with skyscrapers and a host of buildings in ruins. This is my city. This is where the Prometheus was launched four years ago.

"We never left!" wails the colonel.

Who knows exactly what happened to the Prometheus immediately after it was launched? Perhaps some unforeseen malfunction sent pieces of it in every nearby

direction, our one surviving piece shot into an empty groundwater cavern. They never came looking for us because they were dead—all of them. It could have been a nuclear missile, it could have been an asteroid, it could have been a widespread war. We'll never know why, but we're the only ones left on our world, Earth.

Lucky us.

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