

# TOMAHAWK

The whole crew was entranced by its beauty. We just stared. We lost ourselves as we marveled at its lengthy, flowing curves, ghostly and pure, like a long, bright white flag seen through a burning mirage in the distance.

Its entire existence was beyond all of us. We could have watched it for so many lifetimes, watched it flow just above the surface of the star, weaving itself around massive sun flares and lightly grazing itself against the star's hot gasses like an Earthen marine mammal breaching out of water.

We could almost make out some form of eyes and a mouth and maybe even a nose at its front end, but that was only our imaginations trying to make something so incomprehensible seem just a little real. It existed, as it was before us, and at the same time it did not exist.

So much did we yearn for just a small understanding of it. To have knowledge of it was so far out of reach, and the realization of that felt like a mountain of promises shattering over us.

We were there to kill it.

Before that moment, we had spent just over three days slowly gliding across the surface of Wolf 359. No organic being from this dimension of our universe had ever found itself so close to the incredible power of a star. But it wasn't pleasant. The small crew compartment was scorching. 48 degrees made it hard to keep water in the body. It was nearly impossible to breathe in the humidity, it was nearly impossible to see through the sweat in our eyes, and it

was *entirely* impossible to sleep. The environment was just barely habitable enough to survive in. It was far from being livable. Its cramped quarters, its heat—it reminded one of a serving in a damaged submarine in an old war or serving in an ancient water ship rowing with a large group of men at the lowest decks in the thick, sweltering heat of a still, jungle coast.

Our ship, the Maya, was a massive 256 cubic kilometers in size. Most of its mass was contained in the gigantic reflectors and fins, channeling the energy of the star aside us into powerful electromagnetic shields that repelled the radiation, our tremendous coolant system, and our even more tremendous thrust system, which counteracted the intense gravity of the star which attempted to pull us down into itself.

The dots blinked again and again in front of me. On the third day of intense monitoring, redshifts and blueshifts began to appear as the illusion of rapidly-flashing, green lights all over the screen. The last time our systems detected an anomaly, the computer decided the incoming unknown, which was three light-months ahead of us, was a destroyer with a deadly containment leak, attempting to dock with a station a quarter of its size at a speed that would obliterate both the destroyer and the station. It wasn't a destroyer. Since then, all scanners were monitored by human eyes as well.

We were so low in the star's atmosphere, that it seemed like a flat ocean of fire went on forever. It was disturbing to

see no curvature whatsoever on the horizon.

The clanking sound of the captain walking up to the front of the ship echoed off the walls and rattled its way into my ears. Some of the crewman would swear amongst each other that it was an experiment in sonic torture. We weren't really chasing anything, they would say. The heads back home were just seeing how long we could hold out before we snapped. They wanted to know how far away from home we could get before some break in our psychic link with our homeworld caused adverse effects. I almost believed the conspiracy theories myself, but the metal, clanking sound of Captain Baha's mechanical leg always reassured me how real Tomahawk actually was.

Reduce speed and maintain a minimum distance of 500 kilometers, the station said. It was impossible to purge the incident from my memory. Repeat, reduce speed...

I rubbed my eyes hard in attempt to push the sweat out. I adjusted myself in my soggy, sweat-soaked chair and closed my eyes for a moment. I tried to relax and just concentrate on breathing.

The clanking stopped behind me. Something touched my shoulder. I jumped a little and looked. It was a mechanical arm resting on my shoulder, holding the needle of my intravenous hydrant. Droplets of the fluid were dripping down rapidly onto my arm from which it must have slipped out of. The captain wasn't pleased. He asked if I needed to be reminded of how fast I would die of dehydration in that oven we were in.

No, I said. I tried to excuse the mistake of not noticing that it must have

slipped out while I was adjusting myself in the chair.

He told me if I couldn't pay attention to something as important as my hydrant, I definitely couldn't pay enough attention to the scanners. He ordered me to get some rest. Just as I was about to get up, the alarm sounded. The off-duty men hustled out of the waking rest in their bunks and to their stations, still dripping with sweat.

Don't make me have to remind you of your hydrant again, the captain said to me. He yelled at me to get to the payload station as he clanked up the front of the ship.

Another crewman jumped in my seat right as I got up, and he immediately hooked in his IV. I ran to the back of the ship and sat at my station. It felt so good to sit in something dry for a change. I too plugged in my IV and made absolutely sure it was secure that time. Payload diagnostics loaded on the screen in front of me.

Ship's zero degree sensors had picked up a blueshifting anomaly. Baha ordered the Maya's forward thrusters at full, and the anomaly began to blueshift even more rapidly. We were gaining on it. Systems attempted to identify it. When the anomaly was identified as the derelict remains of the Maya, the crew laughed nervously. No object in the system's database came close to matching the parameters of the anomaly, except for the very ship that we were in. And at that distance from the star, the entire crew would be nothing but a pile of charred corpses.

The anomaly was within visual range. All of us immediately choose to bring the feed up on stations' screens.

At first, it was difficult to make anything out. Sun flares were erupting in front of the ship, dilating the sensors and overexposing the image. The system began cycling through the electromagnetic spectrum, attempting to increase the clarity on the anomaly's ghostly, white whisper.

I had to stop for a moment. My attention drifted. I realized that this was the same type of trouble they were having at the station in the Centauri system when they tried desperately to identify and ward off the object that was barreling towards them.

I will never forget that—just waking from over three years in suspended animation to hear their cries. The feeling of helplessness was overwhelming. At our distance out from them, the transmission was three months old. It was like watching a recording, a recording stored on lightwaves in space.

The station gave the incoming object one last warning, and then began to open fire. Bursts of high-intensity light beams would have flooded the space around them, which would have seared through anything in the known universe as if it never even existed. But in all of that—the beast plowed through, unscathed and passed through the massive station in one giant strike. The station and everyone aboard were gone in that very instant. And through all of that, the beast thrived.

The whole incident brought back painful memories for the captain. He looked down at his cold, mechanical leg, seemingly thankful that the beast only took half his body and not his entire life.

Tomahawk is moving out of the Centauri system, the captain informed us. Back to the freezers.

The beast was headed to Wolf 359. The star was over seven light years away, which meant another seven years in suspended animation. If we ever made it back to the local system after completing our mission, we'd still be young men and everyone else would be... I tried not to think about it.

A few solar flares in front of us fell back into the star, and we could see it clearer than ever.

Tomahawk.

A thousand questions raced through my head. What sort of creature was it? Was it even a creature? Did it think? Did it have a brain? Was it sentient? How could it survive in space? Was it some alien craft? Was it some other-dimensional creature peaking through to our own dimension? Was it feeding off the star's energy? Was it trying to get home?

The beast slowed and darted around sharply, like an eel sensing danger nearby. It knew we were there.

The captain yelled to the back of the ship to ready the payload. I tapped the screen in front of me. The payload was at 98% stability, better than expected. The ship rumbled wildly as the payload compartment began to open up on the side of the ship. The payload was out in the open and ready to be fired.

The zero-degree scanner operator announced that Tomahawk was changing its course. It was closing, possibly attempting to enter into near-light-speed. The captain yelled for the payload to be fired.

The rumbling wasn't stopping. The payload compartment's doors were stuck open. With the payload compartment open, there was a massive hole in the side of the

ship that had minimal heat-shielding and not a single reflector over it.

I initiated the fire sequence. The payload was detached from the ship, and it began to fall into the star.

I looked to the front of the ship. The captain was standing behind the pilot and the scanner operator, looking right back at me. I didn't even have to tell him. He knew the payload compartment was still open. We didn't have much time left.

The payload came back up on the scanners, rocketing its way towards the beast. The payload spun rapidly, flashing and flashing until it was a steady glow of light. The scanner operator announced that the payload was on target. He began the countdown until impact. Seven.

With a tremendous, deafening boom, the ship's lights went dark and we found ourselves strewn across the compartment unable to breathe. The heat was unbearable. It felt as though my skin began to boil. It was apparent a coolant pipe had burst.

Trying to get up, desperately grasping for anything to help me, I realized I had been thrown into one of the rear pods. In the dark, I imagined my flesh was melting right off my bones as I grabbed the ejection lever.

In an instant, I was hurdling away from the Maya. The space around the escape pod flashed as it passed through the star's upper atmosphere. Through the dark shielding in my small window, I could see below me the payload detonate right in front of the beast. There was a blinding flash and then everything became very dark. The beast was unscathed and undeterred, and the very next moment, the beast swallowed the Maya whole.

The effect of the payload continued to build. A chain reaction warp of the space-time continuum began to exponentially grow. Particles gathered rapidly at a highly accelerated rate. We had set off an artificial singularity.

The beast fought with everything that was in it to push itself through the ether, attempting to escape the black hole's grasp. Finally, when it seemed almost certain I would watch the beast die, it pulled free, and instead, the black hole began to devour the star.

I pressed my face against the window, trying to see further below me, but could not. I fell back into the pod, exhausted and lost. I looked back out through the window one more time. Ice crystals were starting to form. The pod was headed back to the local system, and to get me there alive, it required for me to travel in suspended animation. I tapped on the pod's panel, trying to delay the freeze's onset, but it didn't respond. I was locked out. I gave up, and I peered into space. I was calm again.

But with a shattering, ripping sound, I was brought back to life. I saw, for the briefest of moments, the underbelly of the beast as it careened past me. It was so incredibly close that I actually somehow felt it. It was like nature, perhaps in its purest form, wild and uncontrollable and deadly, and I felt that any attempt to control it or tame it would lead to undesirable and unfortunate consequences.

I placed my hand on the window, wanting to feel it for just a moment longer.

But the beast was already gone.

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