

**LAST CHANCES – THEME – THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM**

“Two hours to enter atmosphere.” August’s voice rings out, “Prepare for landing.”

James and I make our way to the control room and strap ourselves in. One glance at James’ ashen face tells me he is just as nervous as I am.

The planet we are about to land on is known to be inhabited, the closest planet to Earth with proof of life, the extra-terrestrial beings nicknamed Weavers. The Weavers are so named due to the images sent back by the exploration ships that had come here before. They look a little like giant spiders with six long, spindly limbs and abdomens like those of heavily armoured humans and oddly intelligent looking faces. They ‘walk’ on two legs, if you could call that mechanical style of movement walking. Another pair is used for carrying the thick, coarse rope used to construct new habitats. The third pair is used for layering the rope into the form of new habitats.

They always seem to be building a new habitat. Their habitats are laid out in concentric circles, with underground tunnels connecting each one. There are also tunnels that led out of the complex of habitats, a short distance from the marsh where we had been instructed to land.

The thing is, none of these missions have ever returned to Earth. Each time, they left their ship, planning to attempt communication with the Weavers, and each time, that was the last contact with the crew. They had never returned to the landing craft. There is a lot of speculation back on Earth as to the source of their disappearance, but everyone agrees that the Weavers can’t be good, that they must be in some way the cause of the lost explorers’ disappearance and presumed death.

Perhaps they were eaten. Perhaps they weren't yet dead, but the Weavers have some sort of malevolent plan for them. I don't really know, but that's what we're here to find out. Where have the lost explorers gone? If they are dead, we will avenge them. If not, we will bring them back to Earth. Because one of those lost explorers is my father. The father whom, because of the Weavers, I have never known.

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"Ten seconds to entry", James says through his headset. I brace myself for the jarring experience of entering the planet's atmosphere. Within another 30 minutes, we land the ship on a shallow marsh. As everyone prepares to go outside and confront the Weavers, my stomach is filled with great big moths trying to destroy my insides. There is a very real chance that none of us will survive to return to Earth.

We send a final transmission back to Earth, then open the inner door. Patrick is the only one staying on board and he closes the inner door behind us. Once it is properly secure, he opens the outer door. No turning back now.

We haven't even stepped outside when two pairs of leathery, webbed hands grab me and hold me above the owner's head. I cry out, but the others are in no position to help me. They too have been captured by the Weavers before they have a chance to defend themselves. As they carry us out of the ship and through the marsh, they hold us firmly above their heads, apparently oblivious to our wriggling and squirming. They had apparently abandoned their ropes as soon as they saw us land in order to kidnap us. At least that means we might find out where the lost explorers were taken.

As we scream out in fear and outrage, they all say in unison “Magnus periculus. Nolite in aqua ambulate.” They say it over and over, as though they were trying to warn us of something. As they carry us towards a habitat entrance, I notice that while the Weaver is holding me in such a way that I can’t escape, it’s also holding me carefully, as though I were some unimaginably precious cargo. Perhaps they aren’t what we always thought them to be.

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It’s very dark in their habitat; and spacious. Once we’re in, they put us all down and make us walk. The floor is covered with gravel which crunches and echoes around as we walk. The tunnels are way bigger than they looked from where we were on the ship; they seem to go on forever. After what I estimate to be a very long time, we are pushed into a small region free of gravel. A clanging of metal on stone tells me that we’ve been shut in.

“Guys, is everyone okay?” James’ voice pierces the darkness. Everyone responds positively except for –

“Where’s Emilie?”

“Maybe she’s unconscious”.

We all scabble around the floor, desperately hoping Emilie has just fallen onto a rock and knocked herself out.

“She’s not here”.

“I can’t find her either”.

“Use your torches,” James suggests. I can’t believe that didn’t occur to me. They didn’t take our packs. I feel my way through my pack, take my torch out, flick it on, and –

“No Em.”

“But where could she have gone?”

“Nowhere.”

“Well”, I begin, “Maybe it’s just me but...” I go on to explain my hunch about the Weavers trying to warn us, suggesting the possibility that the Weavers aren’t hostile as we had been taught to believe. “Maybe they want to use her as a translator.”

“That’s just ludicrous.” Jackie scoffs in disdain.

“It’s pretty unlikely, but I guess it’s possible,” says Matthew. “I mean; it did kind of sound like they were trying to communicate with us. But if they’re friendly, then what happened to the other explorers?”

“A different habitat, probably,” says James, desperate to believe me. He’s looking for his father, too.

“Latin. That’s what it is”, August says. “I studied it back when I was doing interstellar botany. I’m a bit rusty, but um... magnus – I think that’s great or big. Periculus – “

“Like peril?” Jackie interrupts.

“Yes! It’s danger. So – BIG danger. That definitely sounds like a warning. I think you’re onto something Gracie.” I grin nervously. We’re going to be just fine.

The crunching of gravel suggests that a Weaver is approaching. Apparently the doors aren't sound proof. The door slides open and two Weavers enter and grab Matthew and James, who were leaning on the wall beside the door and drag them away. The door slides shut, but not before we get a good look at the gravel. Or at least what I had thought was gravel. Smooth, white, gleaming bones, thousands of them in all sizes. Parts of skulls and ribs and feet and other pieces too small to identify. Some of them unmistakably human.

Jackie breaks the silence. "Friendly, huh? Not hostile? I don't know about you, but I count killing people as hostile. Very hostile. And if we don't come up with a way back to the ship before they come back, we're all going to die".

"The warning must have been a mimicry of the earlier explorers", August reasons.

"We were stupid to fall for it".

"But a plan?" Jackie insists.

"Did you see how dependant they were on the walls?" I ask. "I bet they can't see in the dark any better than we can. That's probably why they put us down when we came into the tunnels".

"And they only grabbed James and Matt with two hands so that they could keep two on the walls", August chips in.

"So how are we meant to exploit that?"

"Night mode doesn't work in here – it's too dark."

"Too dark for night mode?"

"I tried it."

“Then we use infrared. We don’t need to see details. Just where we are and where they are. And where the door is. And how to get out.”

“Turned on.”

“That’s more like it.”

“So – we stay at the back, and when they come in to get us, we sneak around them.”

“The gravel. They’ll hear it.”

“So we’ll use the hover boots.”

“The light?”

“Wait until we’re behind the Weavers to activate them.”

We wait for what seems like hours for them to return, but there is no sign of them.

Eventually we decide we need to sleep. I keep first watch. Then August. Almost as soon as I’ve drifted off to sleep, August shakes me awake. They’re coming.

We manoeuvre ourselves as far away from the door as possible and listen to the tell-tale crunch of monster on bone. The door once again slides open. This time we can see how they stick to the walls, leaving us a clear path through the middle. We get behind them, activate the hover boots and fly towards the exit. We have a clear path to the entry near the marsh.

“This is too easy. No Weavers anywhere.”

My voice reverberates around the tunnel and hundreds upon hundreds of Weavers swarm towards the source of the sound – us. I guess we’re not escaping, after all.