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About 6,400 Words

Original Position

by Jacob Kader

The alert had sounded quietly, then rose sonorously, interrupting Skandar's time of quiet reflection and reading, and a wasted cup of tea, as it notified passengers of The Pioneer that deceleration was expected shortly.

Prior to the alarm, Skandar was pouring boiling water over old tea leaves, watching them steep, in an attempt to aide the circadian path back to real sleep, when the memories from Earth moved in. Faces and moments: an old friend he ignored on a city street as he hurried to class; the veins on the backs of hands of an old lover, Mona, it was; sun shining on his mother's face as she picked olives during the harvest, chiding him to get to work. The brain clenched tightly to memories, even when told to surrender. Stories on a looping reel, defiant, which he tried to change, to redirect, if only so he could see something new. Not all the memories were sad or depressing, but he wondered how to replace them with more positive and joyful ones. Why the negative before the positive? How to let go of anger, of resentment, of things he could not

change considering how much was left behind? He poured the water down the vacuum hose, saved the tea leaves for a weak brew later on, showing thrift on the arduous voyage. He washed his face and looked into the mirror, cool fluorescent light above drawing out his tired eyes, new lines forming, so he switched the color temp of the bulb to warm and lowered the brightness, then off, trying not to think of how much time had passed on Earth before sealing up into the compartment within his cabin.

#

Jody stowed away and secured her things, arranging her dark, navy blue Councilor's Robe first up in her closet before tidying her cabin, the alert causing unease. She often wondered why organization mattered since she rarely had visitors, blaming her upbringing in a house of order, neatness, and strict schedule. Routines had seemed preordained even to her parents who surely created the rigorous conditions. Jody remembered walking into her parents room, her mother panicking to pickup and fold a shirt laid upon the bed, as if a teenager had any sense of decorum or would care about a stray article of clothing. Was this sense of order ingrained by genetics or conditioning? Despite wearing nearly identical clothes each day, with the Councilor's Robe overtop as needed, countless miles away from Earth, she still sought order. Wearing the Robe around the ship felt like an endowment, an honor, a little allure in an otherwise grindingly laborious mission. Some passengers were awed as she strode by them on her way to Council. But the Robe also gave her the distance she sought from the interpersonal challenges that plagued the ship. Loneliness and homesickness crept in, the risks of relationships that might go rapturous or sour, torrential love or dullness or jealousy and anger abound. Heartaches and the mental exhaustion of entanglements, all the work of human relationships, contained in a ship with no escape hatch. The Robe, and the duties embedded in it, was her relationship and she wore it well,

having prepared for the long trip knowing she'd mostly be alone, where others seemed not to have prepared for it at all and were struggling. She tucked away the last of her clothes, catching a glimpse of herself in the closet mirror, worried her hair was graying too fast, before slipping herself into the compartment to strap in for decel.

#

The ship designers were conscious to limit mirrors aboard and encouraged passengers not to focus on distance or time or aging to prevent psychological collapse. There were few windows looking out to space, both for engineering and safety reasons. Psychologically, fewer windows helped prevent folks from seeing how little there was out there. Instead, advanced monitors were placed in congregating areas that initially broadcasted stunning images and videos created by visual effects designers using video collected from based on decades of space travel to simulate the experience. Though, early on many of the monitors broke or failed, the pristine glass and the ship's lighting allowed them to act like mirrors. The thirty percent reflection offered on the screens was enough to attract many to stop and look at themselves, often for too long. Cadets or others had to gently shoo them away, if too much time was spent concentrating on their own likeness.

#

The compartments inside the cabins were fluid-lined chambers with belting to create additional safety for acceleration and deceleration periods. Passenger areas of the ships were fluid-lined to protect the fragile humans from advanced speeds, then circulating on axes to create gravity. The compartments kept the passengers safe and comfortable as the G's wound up or down, helped to avoid a neck sprain or worse, a pancaking - hadn't yet happened, but theoretically could and was conjectured greatly among some young passengers, of which there

were some.

There did not yet turn out to be time travel or wormholes or jumps through space-time by folding the napkins from one point to another in multi-dimensions, not for anything with mass. Humans had mastered building rockets and engines and going places fast. Once sustainable and generative fuel were invented for a trip that could last for years, there was hope to go somewhere and advance human life on a habitable planet somewhere.

#

Skandar took a breath, closed his eyes, a mindful moment, preparing for the initial, sometimes gut wrenching slow down. It reminded him of his fear of flying on earth, always grabbing the seatback in front of him at landing, the lack of control, the trust you had to have in a pilot's abilities.

Jody closed her eyes, monitoring her breath to the sound of a whistling, lurching noise, like brakes being gently applied, in a sense, as their speed tapered off, the ship adjusting to the cosmic winds and retropulsion.

The ship's alarm faded away as sleep finally came for both filled with dreams of endless passageways, liminal areas of the ship, and memories of a sun rising or setting.

#

A wave of crisp air greeted Jody as she stepped out of her cabin to head to the concourse of the giant starship, carrying the bulk of the passengers for the fleet of ships heading away from the Sun en route to a planet scientists discovered outside the solar system. The Pioneer traveled in the center of the fleet, alongside smaller freighters, fuel ships, defense ships, and others, that made up a consortium of enterprises that might establish the human experiment away from Earth. The Council was created to bring the disparate groups together and govern not only what

they were to do once they got there, but to act as the de facto government on the way.

After following her family's long tradition of Rabbis and Rabbinical studies Jody studied theology, then branched off from Judaism to satiate her spiritual curiosity. Much had changed after the disestablishment of the power centers of the Abrahamic religions as orthodoxy and fanaticism met against the world's general disdain of and malaise towards practicing religion at all. As the state of the Earth's tenability came under question from the simple mathematics of rising temperatures, and ensuing erratic weather and geopolitical instability, one would think religion and faith would increase, but survival eclipsed. Most felt there were too many consequences from sitting back and offering hopes and prayers when their survival was at stake. Jody's father, Adam, was sad but realistic as Jody broadened her search beyond Judaism with forays across the spectrum of belief.

"Don't forget where we come from, Jody," Adam would commonly refrain. As if the endless hours at Shul and the fasting at Yom Kippor or even regular Shabbat dinners would allow forgetting. Her parents were stunned when Jody's theological work and government service led to her being chosen as Councilor for the Earth's desperate mission. Jody couldn't remember exactly where they were sitting when she told them, but it was outside, in a garden. Her mother, Abigail, had walked off, disconsolate.

"I have to go."

"You're so young and we'll never see you again," Adam lamented.

"But someday I'll die and you'll die and we'll never see each other again."

"That's grim. Very Zen, very Buddhist. We're surprised you'd want to go. But, you were always a searcher. Don't ever-"

"-ever forget where we come from. In more ways than just Earth, dad. I know."

Her memory was faltering, because she couldn't remember exactly where they'd had that conversation.

#

Skandar's quarters were nearby, so he quickly caught up to Jody in the concourse and joined, followed by Kennedy, an acerbic and affable Councilor. His pleasant, Irish-tinged accent, made him the shoulder to grab, slap, lean or cry on. As an expert psychologist he had a talent for knowing the buttons to push to open a person up - a wry or endearing comment, a poem and a wink - and being able to hold a drink, certainly helped him become everybody's drinking buddy. And he rounded out their curious trinity, eased the tension between Skandar and Jody.

Skandar's counterparts on The Council were myriad, but by far the most challenging to him was Jody. They had corresponding paths, though Skandar had deviated, not from Judaism, but from Islam. His name was an Arabic version of Alexander, Greek roots that penetrated so much of Western Asian culture. After Islam he took his studies East to learn of Hinduism, and Buddhism, along with American indigenous beliefs and South American shamanistic studies, which further lead to studies of Indigeneity and what that meant on a dying planet. The more movement of peoples brought about by the environmental crisis as usable land shrunk, the greater the challenge to hold onto and preserve culture as national identities fell. And as the quixotic, divisive, desperate search for elsewhere to live in the universe bore fruit, with the remaining capital to pursue it, an opening was created for plurality, an elongation of diversity, as a true culture of Earth rose.

Skandar had grown up outside Washington, D.C., parts of which had sunk under rising waters from both the Potomac and Anacostia rivers. But he spent formative seasons in his family's ancestral village near Jerusalem, maintaining a Palestinian identity within a rich genetic

profile, a manifestation of the diverse strands that had made up the Levant. His piercing green eyes and brownish, graying hair allowed him to pass among many cultures, which in turn made him feel rootless, perhaps stemming from the Palestinian core trait of exile and statelessness. Really, he felt lonely, the way men in their 40's, who drink little and have much on their minds do. The work of the Pioneer and The Council gave him purpose and drove out his introversion and many of the past depressive episodes where he walked endlessly, wherever he was. Dark nights of the soul filled with treks that lasted until his legs were tired and exhaustion finally drove out the repeating cycles of thoughts and rumination and questions and suppositions and denials and everything else humans have been bothered by since sentience. Walking and wondering if the morning would ever come. Aboard the ship he was limited to traversing the passageways of the Pioneer, searching the vessel, often venturing into areas where he was escorted back to his room by Cadets.

Skandar was slightly older than Jody, both had distinctly semitic features, and gave off an ascetic air. Skandar's and Jody's fierce theological and political battles had the strange effect of turning repulsion into attraction. He wondered if it was because they were so similar - loners and lonesome. As the years piled up on the journey, they silently negotiated their relationship, going through cycles of avoidance and closeness.

"An interesting time for an alarm? What were you up to?" Jody asked.

"Reading, staring off into space." Skandar quick to a joke.

"Literally." Kennedy closed in behind them.

"Same." Jody smiled, back with her gang.

Skandar tsk tsked, "They better have tea up there."

"I have a feeling it won't be a tea type of Council."

“Bad feeling?”

Jody grimaced.

“I’ll be the bad guy-”

“AGAIN!” interjected Kennedy.

“Yes, again, and I’ll ask for tea,” Skandar always trying to finish a sentence with these two.

“You’re not the bad guy, Skandar, you just take deliberative and argumentative to an...interesting level.”

“What can I say, I’m a grown up. But thank you. A nice way of calling me annoying.”

Kennedy jumped in, “I thought I was the annoying one.”

“Everybody likes you and you like everybody, which is not annoying, Kennedy, it’s disgusting.”

They chuckled as they swept through The Concourse. A trio of Cadets in their heather blue uniforms joined them, Skandar looking back, motioning for them to pass.

“We’re here to escort, Councilors, not to pass,” said the leading Cadet.

“Yeah, not a tea kind of Council,” Kennedy offered under his breath.

Skandar and Jody caught eyes, before pressing on, as the Cadets picked up speed to hurry them along, past the broken monitors reflecting their Councilor’s robes.

#

The tension was palpable as Council members, accompanied by Cadets, entered the Council Deck, thirty-six seats semi-centered around a dais underneath monitors that displayed Captains from the other ships in the fleet. The Core sat closest to the dais, a seat for representatives from the twelve ships on the journey. Then twenty-four seats behind, called The Array, representing a diverse range of interested parties - morals and ethics, labor, education, safety, language, and

assorted affinity groups. The goals of The Council were simple, yet lofty - to be a deliberative body that came to the most correct decisions on the simplest and complex issues that confronted them. Rawlsian in stated goals though it wanted to be, The Council had to confront a military presence that brought mixed histories of military and ship captaincy - leadership and stewards, authority and ego, braggarts some, mixed with the humility of possibly having to go down with the ship. Skandar often quipped that only thirty percent of people survived the Titanic, a shipwreck that only some knew of. The escape vessels and possible transfers to other ships would be less than that. Even without a soldiery presence The Council could be contentious simply by the nature of people gathering in a room, but primarily because so many serving on it had other duties. Many wanted Council sessions to start late and end early, which was anathema to those asking many questions trying to find the right or equitable answers, like Skandar and Jody.

Behind the thirty-six members of the Council, room was made for affiliated staff and approved communications officers, since dissemination was imperative on their mission. The Council made sure to procure and curate the truths, secrets, lies, misinformation aboard the ship, so that nothing got too out of hand. While this brought up the issue of limiting freedoms, the ways of divulging information were crucial. Yes, there was norovirus and health concerns. Yes, red dust from nuclear engine exhaust is present, but their fluid-lined ships and compartments helped prevent this along with Line-Ahead formations - they traveled in escorts and columns to avoid radiation trails. No, there wasn't an alien sighting starboard side a month ago - thanks to one of the few teenage passengers.

Addie, Press Officer and amateur Muckraker, crouched behind Skandar and Jody as they sat. "Any ideas what the deceleration was about?"

“Haven’t heard, just barely had time to get the robe on, Addie,” Jody snipped.

“Skandar? Any rumblings?”

Skandar leaned in close and used hushed tones, “There was talk of tea of being served, what have you heard?”

Addie glared at him.

Skandar smiling, “I know as little as you.”

Addie bustled off to another group of Councilor’s who’d arrived to ask the same thing.

Kennedy joined her, pretending to be a reporter, much to her discontent.

Jody watched them, “I wish Addie would just sit down and listen, instead of asking so many questions.”

“Likes the questions, hates the answers.”

“Kind of like you, Skandar,” Jody winked.

Skandar shook his head, had learned to take the ribbing, as he folded his robe over, got comfortable in his seat, as a crescendo of voices and activity filled the deck.

Captain Hoytema, tense, sporting short-cropped graying hair, strode in and sat at the chair next to the dais, as the lights lowered, giving his arrival and presence weight. “For your safety, please be seated and buckle up in case of any effects of deceleration or changes in gravity.

Pardon the alert and rush, but we’ve encountered a situation that dictates the Council not only meet, but decides on a correct course of action. First, our whereabouts-”

On the holographic, three-dimensional screen above the dais, the fleet’s trajectory could be seen in metered dash crossing through a distant, unrecognizable portion on the outskirts of the Milky Way-

“-here you can see we have traveled, roughly, 50 AU’s away from our Sun. We must correct

for different orbits we've slingshot and our place in space-time relative to where we left. Our mathematicians and theoreticians are working on this, please standby. Based on early coordinates we are beyond Pluto. Without knowing what to expect in navigating the Heliosphere and the many other challenges ahead on our journey to the a-Centauri star system, and a hopeful destination, we are still making progress. Which brings us to the alert that systems registered over several hours. I'll be blunt. It appears there is a, well, something traveling alongside or perhaps directly towards our fleet."

To this news there was total silence, the absence of breathing, which caused even more anxiety. Jody's heart did a rapid beat and for some reason she remembered the arboretum in Northeast Washington D.C. where she field-tripped as a kid. Much of it was lost in the Floods, but the higher elevation parts remained. She recalled the canoe ride to get there, the wet, a few yellow wildflowers, the smell of herbs, the drone of dragonflies nearby, her mother walking away from where she and her father sat. This was where they were when she informed them of her selection to The Council. She was so far from home.

Hoytema continued, "Now that deceleration has completed, our fleet is reforming and we are clocking the progress of well, frankly, I don't know what to call it. Shifts within our fleet have been met with shifts in theirs. This isn't ultimately hostile behavior, but at this point we are taking all precautions."

"Captain, permission to speak?"

"Yes, go ahead Admiral Xing-"

Skandar leaned over to Jody, "Of course, we have to hear from the Admiral before anybody." He shook his head. Admiral Xing, the curt military leader of the convoy, did his best to defer to Captain Hoytema, the lead facilitator of The Council.

“Captain, I say the following based on caution, on our security, on the defense of this entire fleet - nothing, *nothing*, about this should be treated as anything differently than military engagement.”

Hoytema countered, “I think we’re all here to ascertain information and data and consider all different views-”

“-their posture-”

“-Must we always begin with posturing, with the rattle of the saber before anything has even happened?” Shouted Skandar from his seat, as the room looked back at him.

Hoytema remained measured, “Representative Khdeir, please respect the queue. We will each have allotted time for comments, questions, and answers-”

“-where was the Admiral in that queue?” Countered Skandar, matching Hoytema’s tone.

“We have gone over this many times, there is a certain protocol within a fleet. Admiral Xing is merely giving us his early report. *Please* be patient as we hear from all parties, so the Council can be informed. Following Admiral Xing’s report, it will be to our benefit that we hear from additional ships and then open things up to discussion.”

Skandar looked down, then over to notice Jody’s intertwined fingers, knuckles bled white, her head down in deep thought.

Kennedy elbowed Skandar, “Only two minutes in and you’re arguing.” He offered a thumbs up.

Skandar ignored Kennedy, took a deep breath, tried to focus back on the Captain receiving updates from the other ships. The final voice came from Rahman, Officer on Watch from their own ship.

“Early indications from radar, deep space sonar, and visual patterns suggest their fleet

doubles ours, though, we can't see beyond exactly. With respect to Admiral Xing, I'd like to point out that we are triple checking their maneuvers. Um, well, I can confirm that they have counter-measured, closely, the deceleration and formation shifts of our fleet."

Hoytema turned to the assembled, "Council, this is what we know and have. I believe we have much to discuss. Let's do it with grace and diplomacy."

Addie jumped in, "Have we tried communicating with or signaling this, whatever it is? This fleet?"

"I believe we have sent out initial signals to alert them to our presence using all tools available. I have not yet heard if we've received responses."

A Councilor from the Wheel of Twelve, Alex Simons, slightly wild hair, arrogant and impulsive, rose his arm to speak showing a little excitement, "Is there any chance this, well, this fleet is from Earth? Or can we tell what type of life form they might be?"

The Captain made a disconcerted face, "At this point--"

A Representative in the Wheel interrupted, "What do we know about nearby planets or systems where there could possibly be lifeforms?"

Hoytema put forth an understanding smile and nod, "Officer Rahman? Are there any indications of a place of origin for a fleet like this?"

"I'm not quite sure what you're asking me, but truthfully, we are the first to go this far. We're gathering data from Voyager 1 and other far-reaching probes and are waiting for more data from satellites that were launched after deceleration."

Hoytema in his assured tone, "We don't yet know what this could be. So many questions, so, we cannot answer regarding places of origin."

Admiral Xing took advantage of a moment of quiet, "There is only one way to play this,

respectfully. Offensive and decisive action. All their posturing says they will follow if we run. They are mirroring every move. Whether or not we engage, we must show strength, not passivity.”

Skandar was now rankled, “And just what does strength look like, Admiral?”

Hoytema was about to chide Skandar for speaking, but was cutoff again,

“-how exactly does a ship show strength in space?”

“I’ll tell you how a ship or fleet shows strength, the universal language of offensive formations-” Xing retorted.

“And what if they don’t speak the universal language of your stupid formation-”

Hoytema tried to get order, “Councilmembers, please-”

“If they have a fleet, then they have a system, just as we do-” Xing offered patronizingly.

“And what if they have a system that copies, mimics, but isn’t a system based on the military and war?-” Kennedy jumped in to Skandar’s defense.

“-That’s a question you can ask them-,” Xing offered with a fake laugh.

Simons called out, “Personally, I don’t think we need anybody from the 24 to dictate this conversation.”

A Councilor from the Twenty-Four shouted, “So we should just be quiet and listen? Are the 12 more powerful than we are?”

Simons turned to face the Councilor, “Many of us have large stakes in the success of this journey.”

“Oh, I get it. The Trillionaires give the money, they get all the say-”

“If you paid for one of the ships, you might have a slight understanding.”

The volume on the deck rose as the quorum devolved into conversations and side arguments

between small groups or Councilmembers next to each other. A Councilman from the Twenty-Four had to be restrained from approaching another on The Twelve.

Skandar shook his head, unable to believe how they were unraveling. He looked at Jody who seemed to be lost, like she was fighting an internal battle.

An alarm sounded. The holoscreen conveyed that The Sparta had armed.

Hoytema stood, “Who gave the order to arm? Admiral Xing, did you give this order prior to Council’s recommendation?”

Admiral Xing looked grave. “Yes. We cannot...we will not wait.”

Jodi spoke up just above the din, “If I was armed, wouldn’t you also arm?”

“Without communicating first?” Kennedy answered Jody’s rhetorical question.

Jody turned on him, “Would you just put your hands up and ask questions? Or would you show strength, defense?”

“Jody, c’mon, what are you saying?” Reasoned Skandar.

Hoytema tried to regain control of the room, “Councilmembers, friends, please. If you’re willing to speak to the soul next to you, surely you can say it to the rest of The Council. I propose we vote. Would you vote to request the Admiral and other ships in the fleet to de-escalate and put away arms?”

The Councilors all had vote options on the touchscreens on their Council’s chairs armrests.

“The votes from the 12 are 6 yes, 6 no. Now, votes from the 24?”

Skandar weighed his options, looked over to Jody, not to spy, but to notice how quickly she’d voted on her screen.

“The votes from the 12 are 6 yes, 6 no. From The Array - 20 to deescalate, 4 to stay armed. 26-10.”

“The 24 never thinks about the stakes.” Xing offered dismissively.

“Do not characterize us, in any way. We vote for the safety of our passengers.” A Councilor yelled out.

“You can’t create a rationale for a vote, only an informed discussion can do that.” Said another voice from the Twenty-Four.

Skandar stood, impassioned, “Why shouldn’t we assume they want what we want? Which is safe passage and security? Why can’t we look at it from the perspective of not knowing? Or should we always distrust? Must we always behave as if our security matters more than another’s?”

“This is backwards talk, it will only set us back!” Simons lashed out.

Jody’s finally spoke up firmly, “We should only assume the worst. I’m sorry to say. If we put down arms, we are defenseless.”

There were rumblings of approval - of course they would arm themselves if provoked. Skandar sat down, his voice, his thoughts drowned out. He turned to Jody,

“Is this really your position?”

“It just doesn’t make sense here, where we are.” Jody kept her eyes forward, not looking at him.

“Only if you look at this as nowhere. What if we entered a place where they exist?”

“Your biases come out when you say that.”

“My biases?”

“You will always be on the side of hypothetical victims, scorn for the powerful, the oppressor, the colonial or imperial-”

“-or the Occupier. Shouldn’t you be too?”

“Is that what you think we are? Occupiers?” Jody asked with her eyes narrowing.

“Perhaps.”

“We’ve embarked on something unprecedented in history.”

“But how would another see us? As wayfarers and wanderers? Or as aggressors? The first sign of an Empire reaching out to colonize their world?”

Jody shook her head, trying to sort through the mental morass they were in.

“We’re not outnumbered Captain,” said Admiral Xing. “We are a capable fleet and unless they have the exact defensive capabilities than us, we will have to send a message.”

Skandar seethed, “The message you will send, Admiral, is not one of defense. Stop posturing and calling it defense. This is offense!”

Xing pounded on his Captain’s station, which threw his camera askew, his image on the monitor going dutch. “I will not be characterized in any way by a citizen. My job is to protect you. You are not my superior!”

“But we are all your superiors? You work for us,” Skandar pounded on the voting panel on his armrest. Several members of the Twenty-Four were shouted in support of Skandar.

The room erupted again into yells and arguments and invective, which released the tension and hostility undergirding the entire enterprise. Who actually was in charge? Who was leading? Who was following? The military? The Trillionaires? The people aboard? Was their assumed noble mission and charter a gloss? A veneer covering something more extreme and inimical? Was being armed a tool that humans, perhaps all species, needed to survive a journey in a cruel, hostile territory? Even in the desperate search for safety in the universe, we flew a white flag while holding a gun.

Rahman’s voice broke through, “Movement in their fleet, Admiral.”

Blinking red lights lit Xing's face on the monitor, "The move they just made is offensive. They're fortifying positions and I can no longer debate this situation. Captain, if a decisive vote doesn't happen, I will be forced to initiate offensive maneuvers and fire."

"Admiral, you do not have that authority to unilaterally fire any weapons-" Hoytema barked.

"I will assume that authority if these deliberations do not conclude, time is against us-" Xing barked back.

Simons jumped in, "Let him do whatever he thinks it right!"

Councilors squabbled and yelled again, pandemonium continued.

Skandar and Jody remained silent, their eyes both reproachful and sad and forlorn, all at once. Jody rose from her chair,

"I vote to fire."

Skandar looked up at her shocked, pleaded, "We can't do that, we haven't even tried to communicate with them-"

"There is no time. It's us or them."

"It doesn't have to be that way."

"I vote to fire."

Hoytema issued the vote to the holoscreen and to each Councilors voting panel. Skandar looked up at Jody, in horror, then down at the arm rest he had broken.

Rahman tried to appeal to the Councilors, "Council, Captain Hoytema, please, we are in uncharted territory. Give us time to get the results of where we are in space-"

Hoytema looked grave, "Officer Rahman, we appreciate your appeal, but the votes are in."

The results showed only two dissenting votes from the Wheel. The Twenty-Four were split evenly.

“The results show 22-14 that we engage.”

“Shouldn’t we be unanimous?” Skandar shot up. “Shouldn’t we have more consensus to protect the lives of those aboard?”

Simons stood up to rival Skandar, “The Fleet’s charter says we do not need to count every damned vote in the time of war. What we need is decisive action.”

Kennedy yelled out, “Since when are we in a time of war!-”

“-What is the point of The Council if its purpose is swept aside at a time of war? This is no Council. It’s a charade.” Skandar stepped over Jody and began exiting the Council’s Deck. The commotion of The Council quieted as the stormed out of the door and it shut behind him.

#

The Pioneer slunk back into a rear position, the armed ships moved forward. Skandar watched on the Board, his presence in the Officer’s deck going unnoticed, as he listened in on the complex chatter from The Sparta and other defense ships as Admiral Xing had assumed command, reducing Captain Hoytema to a passive observer, much like Skandar.

“Their fleet is also moving positions, Admiral.”

“I see it. And still no response whatsoever?”

“No sir. The only response has been a strange repeat of our initial call.”

Xing in full command role yelled out, “Flange left, but initial fire will be from the right side. All hands, ready. Rear fleet, be ready for evasive maneuvers and escape. We will engage their largest ship first.”

Jody had also entered the Officer’s deck and stood close behind Skandar. He felt her presence, but was too consumed with fear, with scorn, with sadness, as he scanned through his mind to recall any Hadiths or scriptures or laws to ease his mind. Anything that could confirm

that humans should resist war.

“I’m sorry Skandar. We can’t always agree.”

“I never thought we’d have to agree on being against something like this.”

“Our security is paramount. Nothing may happen. It might just be a show of power.”

“Power over what?”

Jody shook her head, afraid Skandar would never understand. He the same towards her.

“Admiral, it almost appears their fleet has tripled, as if they were hidden.”

“I see it. Prepare to fire. Positions, ready Left.”

The Sparta, forward and to the right of The Pioneer, moved left, as other ships flanked.

Rahman turned to the Captain, “Captain, their fleet is completely copying our movements.”

Hoytema rose from his chair.

Skandar stepped forward, mouth hung open, his eyes stung, as he quietly choked on his words, “It’s a mirror!”

Admiral Xing issued his command, “Fire!”

Sparta’s atomic weapon released, the small rocket blast briefly lighting the darkness of space. They watched the quiet clicking on the holographic radar as the bomb careened into some kind of orbit, doubling, then tripling its speed, and then what appeared to be a similar projectile the opposite way.

Skandar finally found his voice, “It’s a mirror!”

Jody stepped forward. Rahman looked horrified as he turned from Skandar to the Captain. The Captain grabbed the banister to steady himself. “Admiral, hold any more fire-”

The Pioneer’s alerts blared, as they all watched the missile orbiting right back to their position.

“Incoming!” Whatever they were facing, or were in, issued back the exact missile that was fired.

Skandar yelled, “We’re firing on ourselves!”

The explosion detonated against the port side of the Pioneer’s closest escort, The Pilgrim, causing it to slam into them, which sent the Pioneer into a violent spin. Skandar and Jody both braced themselves against the Captain’s rear stanchion, but Skandar was flung backwards against the back panel of the deck, as the G’s sent him into unconsciousness.

“Fire right!” The Sparta’s right flank began firing pulses, which disappeared into the mass of space and came back around to hit the port sides of other ships in the fleet.

Captain Hoytema yelled orders over the blaring alarms to the auxiliary ship controls, “Stabilize engines, spin control calibration sequence. Seal all doors! Evasive maneuver and escape protocol! Xing! Xing! Cease fire! Cease fire!”

The ship’s engines fired up to recover from the death spin, which caused lurching sounds as titanium and alloys made great bends. A massive hole had opened up on the port side, which exposed the ship to space for the first time. The ship closed passageways and cauterized parts of that were exposed and destroyed. Jody held on, fought passing out, as the engines fired against the brutal revolutions.

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Once the ship stabilized, Jody grabbed an emergency mask and oxygen to fit onto the unconscious face of Skandar. She approached the Captain’s chair to find Hoytema slumped on the deck floor, likely dead after giving his final orders. Rahman lifted off his mask, a new reality dawned, as he did system checks to get communications back up. Jody joined Rahman and they both looked out of the Captain’s deck window, saw the repercussions of what had happened. The

warships continued pulses, waves that sent propulsions back around, as deep space snuffed out even the smallest gasp of oxygen aboard ships that were being destroyed.

The Pioneer continued rear evasive maneuvers which gave them perspective, finally revealed something - a mirror, an optical illusion, a concave swirl of blackness.

“The reflection of our fleet was offset. It looked like it was coming at us from an angle,” Rahman gasped through heaves.

“We weren’t far enough away to see it. And not close enough to realize it was us.”

“I’ll never forgive myself!” Rahman yelled.

Jody put an arm around Rahman’s shoulders, “It wasn’t in your control. It wasn’t your fault. We couldn’t see it for what it was!”

They watched as ships broke into the millions of pieces that made them up. There was the sound of static as Comms resumed. They heard yelling and screams, the voices of innocent people trying to recover from a most wretched and lonely destruction. The fleet scattered as Rahman tried to issue directives for how to keep them together, but some ships were lost or escaping, leaving the Pioneer alone.

“Where is everyone going? Where do we go?” Jody asked Rahman.

“I don’t know. We don’t know where everybody is. And we don’t know where we are, so there’s nowhere to get back to...” Rahman’s voice trailed away as Jody sank against the back wall of the deck, cradled Skandar, checked to make sure he had a pulse.

Tears fell as she tried to catch her breath, waiting for the adrenaline and panic to subside, as she looked out the deck’s window into the darkest of space.

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As the Pioneer retreated, Skandar came to, looked up at Jody, at her tear-streaked cheeks. He

lifted off the mask.

“It was a mirror.” Skandar whispered. Jody nodded. He slowly sat up, contemplated her face, her eyes. He ventured that whatever that was, no human had encountered anything like it before. Some distortion of light, a vergence or divergence, a lens that arced directly back at themselves. Jody was on the verge of collapse, not able to fully comprehend what had happened. They sat close together and both looked out.

Skandar thought of a night before this journey in the desert of Jordan called Wadi Feynan. To get there from his village in Jerusalem, where his great-great-great grandparents were born, his friends and family had driven alongside the Jordan River until it culminated into the Dead Sea, both bodies of water reduced to trickles. They camped, far from light pollution, and the valley allowed for the stars in the night sky to cradle and envelop them. Later, Skandar slipped away from the dwindling campfire for a walk, found himself at the top of a small hill. The awe of the constellations, the question of where we fit into the expanse, consumed him, he bawled as he stared up in astonishment.

Traveling in those same stars, so very far from Earth, as he sat close to someone he wanted so desperately to understand, to love, to be loved by, to be his friend, he wondered how and when we would ever stop destroying ourselves. When would we ever learn.

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