

# OASIS 8

By Cat Webling

A Preview

“Is it just me or... or is it really not busy today?” Jared’s voice rang out in the uncomfortable silence as we all watched our ship glide toward the still station. Only our ship. We were the only ones pulling into port, and it wasn’t sitting well with anyone.

Pulling into Oasis 8 should have been a pain in the ass.

People compared it to a truck stop off of I-75, near as dammit to Atlanta. It’s always busy, always crowded, always annoying to try and navigate your way through the waves of ships as they cruise around, vaguely following interstellar traffic law if you squinted hard enough. There was always a loud-mouthed asshole with a supped-up ship made from scrap parts you’d have to skirt around to avoid a messy, aggressive confrontation that usually ended with one or both of you in Eight’s holding cells, waiting on Council reprimands or jail time.

That’s what we were expecting, and what we’d been preparing for, for the past month; we knew we were going to have to stop to refuel before we got to the outer ring. Hell, everyone does – you can’t make it that far even with high-end, high-efficiency tanks, and there’s only one place to park it before you hit the dead zone.

Eight was the biggest international space station to date, equipped with enough ports to temporarily house up to thirty commercially sized cruisers and enough interior space for 1500 people to sleep in relative comfort for upwards of twenty days. Really, that many people weren’t meant to exist in such a small place together for so long, so tensions were always high and people were always rude.

But today was strange.

We’d been wary on the approach. Normally, the station would be buzzing like a hive, with ships from all over the system competing for space. When we weren’t caught in a jam half an hour out, we’d started to joke that we’d have the station to ourselves. Audrey had said she would love to be first in line in the café; we’d been living off rations for weeks. She couldn’t wait to get real coffee in a real mug. Jared had been excited about seeing some of his old friends and getting to call back home on a stable line. I was just ready for a fully night’s sleep without having to correct my ship’s course every few hours.

It was a simple mission, really. Some rich man's cargo going to a mining colony in the outer rings, just past the dead zone. We'd been paid handsomely for it, and that was just the advance. With a small, three-man crew like ours? Big jobs went a long way toward helping us break even, and this one might have even set us over that line into actual profit. I wasn't a fan of longer missions, though. As I said, after a long time onboard, you start to go stir-crazy and miss real, actual interaction and food.

I frowned over at Jared for a moment before returning to docking procedures. "Maybe we hit it in the off season."

"They don't have an off-season," he muttered under his breath, but we heard him. He let it go, tapping away at his navigation screen and the com deck, fiddling with dials and buttons, and swiping through screens as he tried to connect.

"Endeavor 101 to Oasis 8, permission to dock in station five?"

Static and silence.

"Endeavor 101 to Oasis 8, do you copy?"

"Are you connected?"

"Uh," he checked the line again, and his frown deepened. "No. No, I'm not getting through at all."

"Is something blocking it? Do they have shields up for some reason?" Audrey asked, leaning over Jared's shoulder. She'd come up from her navigation setup, and the book she'd been pretending unsuccessfully to read. Her eyes flicked between Jared's screens and the window panels. "Like, are we too far away from the station still?"

"No, of course we're not, we're in docking distance," I said sharply, adjusting our trajectory yet again. We were driving closer, but I hadn't actively pulled it in yet. I didn't want to arrive unannounced. "We should have been able to reach them half an hour ago."

"I thought the lines were busy," Jared said, checking his connection and refreshing it again. "That's happened before. Usually, it isn't a big deal."

“The lines might be down? Maybe they’re doing maintenance?” No one seemed to believe this, not even Audrey, who couldn’t help but look worried even as she said it. Here eyes were still focused out on the station and in the emptiness surrounding it. “Is it just me, or does it just look really... lonely?”

Jared tried again, fiddling with his settings. “Oasis 8, do you read? Hello? Anyone on?”

Audrey tore her eyes away from the shields and looked back at me. “What’re you thinking, Cap?”

I was really hoping neither of them would ask me that. I wasn’t superstitious and I’m not prone to making mountains out of molehills, but the lack of... well, anything, was getting to me. It was jarring. “I’m thinking... that Jared should shoot a message back to control if he can. Tell them what we see.”

“On it.”

Jared’s attention was absorbed into the screen again, so he didn’t see Audrey come up beside me and crouch closer to the jump seat. We both looked out at the station, searching for a sign of... anything.

“Maybe there was a structural problem, and they had to evacuate?”

The station was the most advanced structure ever made. It’d gone through rigorous testing for years before anyone was allowed to set foot in there without a suit and tether, and there were safeguards upon safeguards for hull breaches and airlock failures. Even if something catastrophic had happened, it shouldn’t have caused an evacuation. It should have just caused that section of the station to be closed off for repairs. Eight could, and had, run on half its space and a quart of its power if it needed to. To have something big enough to shut it all down would have been on the front page of every news outlet from here to the edge of the system.

Still, I nodded slightly. “If that’s the case, we should check in and see if there are any stragglers. We may have to write up a report. Jared?” He looked up at his name, brows still furrowed in concentration. “Ask ground control if they’ve gotten any reports back.”

“Yep.”

I refocused on guiding us into the dock. Without the usual kerfuffle, it was almost too easy, and as the ship was caught by the landing gears and holding fields, as the fuel line slid out and connected, ready to start refueling, I thought about the last time I’d been through. New behind the wheel of a small training ship. It’d been the first time I’d gone totally off-planet, not just skirting around the moon and back.

Most pilots have their “graduation” trip to Oasis 8. It was just tradition at this point for interstellar pilots to take a simple cross-system mission just to get a chance to stop here. It’s a good way to network with other sailors and build a crew of your own. I’d actually met Jared here, in the third-floor cantina where we’d both been using our leave time to grab a drink. He was from one of the midway colonies; he’d never met an Earth kid before. We talked all night, commiserating about growing up in the inner rings and dreaming about getting to see the edges of the solar system and beyond. We’d parted ways that night, but kept in touch, and a year later, when I was hired on as a freight driver, he was the first person I’d called.

As I finalized docking, Jared spoke up, pulling me out of my reminiscing. “So, I got in touch with ground control.”

“What’d they say?” Audrey was pulling up the spacewalk suits.

“They’d only gotten one report recently, and it hadn’t sounded good. Eight went dark for almost a week.”

Audrey and I stopped in our tracks.

“A week?” I repeated. “And they didn’t send a crew?”

“They’d been told not to.”

“Why would they have been told not to?” Audrey asked, looking as shaken as I felt. Jared shrugged, but he didn’t say anything else, so there was a long moment of uncomfortable silence.

“Well. Looks like we’ll be putting in that report,” I said, walking to the suits. I grabbed mine. “Come on. Let’s go take a look.” Neither of them seemed excited by the idea.

We went through our usual checks to see if the air was holding steady outside and if it’d be safe for us to go without suits. Even when the readings came back normal, we waited until we were out on the dock to double-check the readings before taking our helmets off.

Normally, you only had to do this when you were docking on a small planetary base with a slightly outdated docking site that still made you come in through the airlock rather than having your ship’s docking ramp sealed. Today, though, we didn’t feel like taking any extra risks.

We’d taken barely two steps before the wrongness of the situation set in. Even the loading dock screamed of something wrong; there was no crew loudly jostling around to do maintenance on the ship or double check the fuel line or annoy us with customs questions. The bay was deserted and silent, the only sounds coming from some dripping water, though we couldn’t see where it was coming from. The only light came from the automatic fluorescents that came on when we docked; the rest of the echoing hanger was pitch black.

“Hello?” My voice echoed off the loading ramp and down into the docking station. Audrey checked the line and started the autofueler, while Jared and I walked around the dock to see if there was anyone around. Our continued shouts of “Hello? Is anyone here?” rang off the walls unnaturally loudly. We came back to the landing gate and looked toward the hall to the main atrium.

“We should go back,” Audrey was calm, but it was clear that this wasn’t sitting well with her. Hell, it wasn’t sitting well with any of us. Jared put a gloved hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged him off. “Clearly there’s no one here, and we’re not qualified to deal with emergencies like this.”

“I know,” I said, nodding, “and I agree. I don’t want to be here anymore than you do. It doesn’t feel right.”

“So, what, we just camp in the ship until it’s done refueling, then turn around?” Jared seemed to like the idea, but I sighed heavily.

“No, we need to get some kind of read on what happened, so we can go back and tell them.” The others shifted uncomfortably. I knew they’d do whatever I asked them to, and I didn’t like having to put them in this kind of situation, but it was a necessary evil. People could get hurt if we didn’t know what happened.

“Listen, we’ve got what, two hours before the ship is fully fueled?” They nodded. I spread my hands out in front of me. “So, we take a look around, see if we can find anyone or any clues as to what happened, and when two hours are up, we leave. Okay?”

They looked at me, then at each other. Finally, Jared shrugged.

“Two hours. It’s creepy, yeah, but it’s an empty station. It’s not like we haven’t seen one before.” He didn’t mention that this one was a bit more than an empty waypoint station. We didn’t mention it either.

Audrey’s shoulders fell a bit in resignation. “Two hours.”

“Two hours,” I agreed, and turned back to the main hall. It sounded like an eternity.

It was strange to walk into the concourse and not find anyone running around. The soaring ceiling and circular room made it feel like the place should be full of constant motion. Designed after all of our classic sci-fi stories, even after we’d had the tech for years, this place felt straight out of an old space movie, like something from the far-off future of yesterday.

It was supposed to be a hub of chatter and laughter, constant energy that meant everyone was working together to go further out than ever before. To not have that, to have the room empty and dark save for a few emergency lights on the perimeter... well, it felt wrong.

As we fanned out into the atrium, I looked out over the café tables that lined the little food court. They were cute, round, diner-style tables, with a few rectangular booths partitioning the area from the main thoroughfare. The vendor booths were dark, and the

food didn't look like it'd been touched since that last report went out. I tried not to look too closely. Instead, I took in the tables.

There were a few that'd been knocked over, as if there'd been a raucous fight. One of the overturned tables had spilled a pile of poker chips, scattering them into the remains of broken dishes. Some of the ones still standing had plates of half-eaten, molding over food on them. They must have gotten up in a hurry, I thought. But the longer I looked, the worse the atrium seemed to get.

There were bits of broken furniture everywhere, table legs and chair backs and broken shades from the now exposed bulbs dangling down over the center of the room. A few of the stores that lined the walkways had windows smashed in, glass littering the shelves and carpets. Some of them had their gates down; others had gates only half pulled. One store, a little chocolate shop, had its gate pulled completely down.

I tripped on something and heard it clink away. After regaining my footing, I turned to find a small, white coffee mug skittering across the ground. It was tapered, smaller at the bottom with a half-heart handle I was surprised I hadn't broken. It looked like it might once have had writing on it. "Number One" something, one of those kitschy mugs you find in souvenir shops. Still, it was stained as if it'd been used a thousand times.

Why had it been lying in the middle of the floor? It was like someone was going to walk through this scuffed up doorway and pick it up, complaining to their buddy that "So-and-so never puts their mugs up when they're done!" They'd probably talk about how So-and-so could never finish one cup of coffee before it went cold, and then they'd have to make themselves a new one.

Somehow, it wasn't comforting to think of this silly little conversation that might have been. The chipped rim and lipstick stains, the dredge of long-dried coffee at the very bottom, gave me the eerie feeling of one last sip gone cold too soon.

"You okay?"



I looked up to see Audrey offering me a hand to stand back up. I hadn't realized I was kneeling.

"Thanks. Yeah. I just tripped on this."

"Cute mug. Shame that it's chipped." She took it from my hands and examined it, seemingly following the same line of thought. "Whoever had this will probably want it back. We should pick it up on the way out." She set it back down on one of the remaining upright tables.

"Hey guys?"

We turned to see Jared pointing down the hall that led to one of the loading bays. The sign on the wall had been knocked askew, the "Bay 15" scraped down the middle by what looked like maybe a big knife or a spike or something. It was unsettling, but it wasn't what he was pointing at. His finger was directed at the floor, some ten feet down the hall. "What's that?"

Audrey and I joined him to look at the dark stain. I walked closer and found more stains continuing up the hall, seemingly at random. Some were on the floor, some on the walls, one or two spray patterns across the ceiling, like some kind of weird art installation.

Not only that, the hall looked like it'd been hit by a tornado. The chaos here was worse than the atrium; pieces of torn-apart chairs were scattered across the floor. The little decorative plants and end tables were knocked over with dirt scattered all over the ground, leaves torn to shreds. The pictures that' been on the wall were tiled at slightly sickening angles, some having fallen off completely. Nearly all of them were missing the glass covering entirely, the glittering shards littering the hallway.

I bent down beside the stain to get a better look at it. The ground in here was carpeted in a dark slate grey, an industrial color that made it hard to tell anything about the stain other than it was very dark and oddly big. This was done intentionally, of course; in a station this big, messes happened all the time. You couldn't afford to replace the carpet all the time.

Still the stain was strange. It was a weird shape. There weren't many splatter marks out from the side of it, like you'd see in a coffee or oil stain. It was just a big stain that seemed to feather out further down.

"Look like something spilled and never got cleaned up. Coffee? Or oil, maybe?" But it was too big to be a coffee stain, and there was no reason to bring oil this car into the main structure.

"Here, hang on, let me get some light on it." Jared swung a flashlight off of his hip and turned it on, aiming at the stain. In the stark white circle of it, the stain took on a much different appearance.

I reeled back slightly.

"What?" Audrey leaned over Jared's shoulder. Her voice was higher than normal, clearly panicked, but I couldn't force myself to look away.

When I was a kid, I'd broken my arm pretty badly. I was running around our house with my brother, and I'd somehow ended up falling down the stairs. I'd gashed my arm and split the bone, so when I hit the carpet in our living room, I'd been gushing. I got taken to the hospital and patched up pretty quickly, but it'd taken my mother a week to really scrub the stain clean. It was the first time I'd seen something like that. That kind of thing sticks.

So, seeing this stain, the dark color finally lit up, the pattern of it finally clicked.

"Blood," I said quietly. I finally managed to look up from the stain on the floor to the others.

In patches all down the floor. On the walls. A few sprays on the ceiling.

"It's all blood."

They both took steps back, eyes finding the rest of the stains as quickly as mine had.

The floor was soaked. The ceiling. Down the halls. In the atrium.

"We should go," Audrey said, her voice again quivering. "Oh my god, we should go."

“Jesus,” Jared breathed. He swung the flashlight around the hall, and the horrific brown-red stains jumped out from every surface. He spoke without thinking. “That’s so much. It’s everywhere... what happened?”

“I don’t think whoever made these stains made it out,” I said bluntly. Audrey cringed, but Jared just nodded, jaw set. On silent agreement, we began to retreat toward the ship. “I think you might be on the right track about us staying on the ship, Jared.”

“Yeah.” Obvious relief tinged his voice. “We can undock, we have enough fuel... to... wait...” He trailed off, face froze for a second on a half-smile that dropped quickly into a frown. His eyes were fixed on the end of the hall.

“What’s up?”

“I... did you see that?” He gestured, and we looked out, but I couldn’t see anything. “It was right there; something moved.” He took a step forward. “Hello?”

“What are you doing?”

“If it’s a person, we should help,” he snapped quietly, then said again loudly, “Hello?”

The air seemed to hang on his words. Nothing moved.

Audrey put a hand on his shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get back.”

He seemed reluctant, but he followed. His eyes kept darting back over our shoulders. “I could have sworn I saw...”

“Was it a person?” I asked, following his gaze. I slowed to a stop and tried to focus, but I couldn’t make anything out; there was just the haze of the emergency lights and the shadows of the rest of the hall. It looked like there were a few more overturned tables, shadows distorted by the red glow. I wanted to think that maybe all he’d seen was a flicker of the light.

“I don’t... think so, thinking about it.” His frown became more fixed. “It was fast. I only saw the shadow, I think, and it must have been crouched or something because it looked weird.”

“Maybe it was a pet or something?”

“Maybe. Sad, if it is.”

“Maybe we’ll see it again.”

None of us were convinced. We all walked a little bit faster.

...

The long hallways just seemed longer on the return trip, every echo and crash sounding like a threat. Looking back up at the atrium as we passed by, it was even more clear that something had come running through. The higher levels had some railings missing, and if I looked at the spots just below them on the ground, sure enough, there were the bent and shattered bits of piping. That was strong stuff, built to withstand the pushing and pulling and movement of thousands of people a day. If something had bent it, I was anxious not to meet it.

What was it? Where had it come from? Everywhere we looked, there were more sickening red stains. I started to notice rips in the carpet, long scratches and marks in sets of four or five that seemed to drag on for feet at a time, etching themselves so deeply into the floor that I could see through the layers of carpet and padding to the steel below.

I noticed, as we passed into the smaller bay hallway, that the station intercom was lit up. I figured it was just the notice of evacuation or something. The coms were normally plain black squares on the otherwise starkly white or grey walls; these scrawled a message that I didn't stop to read alongside a red warning symbol.

Maybe a wild animal had gotten loose? For some reason, that thought wasn't comforting. We stuck close together; I think we were all a bit afraid to trail too far behind. Jared led the way back up the gangplank to the main doors.

"What did you see?" Audrey's quiet mumble seemed to ring in the silence.

Jared turned back to look at her. She met his gaze and took a breath, straightening up as much as she could. "Back there. The shadow thing. What did it look like?"

"A shadow," he shrugged, punching numbers into the keypad with more force than was strictly necessary. "IT wasn't clear. It was just... big." He looked as if he were about to continue, even going so far as to open his mouth, but a loud electronic buzz startled us all. Jared looked at the door and shook his head. "What? How is it already locked?"

"It auto-locks," I said. "Move, I'll put in my override." Jared stepped aside and I punched in my code.

The panel just buzzed again.

I blinked. “What? No, don’t do that.” I put in the code again, and got the same response.

“Did you put it in wrong?” Jared asked.

“No, I know that code like the back of my hand,” I said, but I tried it again anyway, taking special care to enter it correctly. Still, the door just buzzed. “What the hell?”

“Ah, no,” Jared groaned, looking over the panel. “Look, the key’s disconnected.” I looked where he pointed and yes, sure enough, the 8 key was dim.

“Well how are we supposed to get in if the key isn’t connected?” Audrey asked a bit too quickly. She’d been looking back over our shoulders all the way back. It didn’t surprise me, really; Audrey was young, the youngest member of our crew. She was a newly licensed interstellar navigator, just out of school. She had been looking for her first job when we ran into her a few months back, so I asked her to come along on this cargo mission when our previous navigator landed a higher-paying gig. She was good at her job, maybe a little overzealous at times, but prone to jumping at shadows. Of course this place wasn’t sitting well with her.

“We’ll have to go grab one of the service kits,” I said, and started walking back down the gangplank toward the hall.

“What? No. We’re going back in there?”

“Aud, we can’t really leave until we do,” Jared said as they started following behind me. I glanced back over my shoulder to see Audrey still standing by the plate, tapping the dim button to no avail. Jared stopped and offered her a hand. “Hey. We’ll stick together, okay? We’ll move quick, grab it, and come back. Done and done. Yeah?”

“I just... it doesn’t feel safe. How far away are the kits?” Audrey started reluctantly moving forward.

“Down on the service deck,” I said, “Normally, we’d be able to just radio in and request one be sent up.” Normally, we wouldn’t have to, as a regular maintenance check

done by the dock crew would've called for one, but I didn't think it'd help to say that. "As it is, we have to go grab it ourselves."

"Couldn't... I mean, couldn't one of us stay here? Look after the ship?"

"All alone?"

That got her moving. As they joined me, I glanced toward the elevators. Given the state of this place, I didn't trust them.

Jared seemed to read my mind as he said, "I think I'd rather take the stairs, if that's okay with you?" No one disagreed, so we made our way to the service stairwell, which, luckily, was unlocked.

The door creaked uncomfortably as we pushed it open, and by Jared's flashlight, we could see that this area, even as bare as it was, still looked like it'd been ripped apart. More flecks of red dappled the walls and floor, though not nearly as much as in the main halls. There were scratches in the same patterns as the gashes from earlier, covering the floor and walls, all the way up the flight. Bits of the railing were missing here as well. Most shockingly, the stairs themselves had been chipped in several places, which gave them the unsettling appearance of cobblestone rather than concrete.

"God, what happened here?" Audrey squeaked, pointing down a flight over the remains of a bit of railing. I stepped forward to get a better look.

Three long, deep gashes were torn into the step. Side by side, they looked like a thick rake had somehow cleaved through the stone like it was butter. There was another set further down, and a few sets of four below it, all dug so deeply into the stairs that I could see the bits of rebar that made up the frame. Even those were scraped.

"Jared?"

He jumped at his name, eyes fixed on the scars and scrapes. "What?"

"How big was that shadow?"

He gulped. "Big enough."

“What exactly did it look like?”

“I don’t know,” he repeated, shuffling slightly, and gripping the unbroken railing beside him more tightly. “It was just... big. I couldn’t see much of it; it was just a shadow.”

I looked at the gashes. “Did it look more like a person or an animal?”

“Neither? It was too big to be a person, and I’ve never seen an animal that big in a station.”

Something thudded sharply above us and we all looked up. This time, no one called out.

It thudded again, and then came a noise no one was prepared for. A deep, throaty growl. Deeper than a person’s voice. And very close.

We took off running, taking the stairs nearly two at a time. It was a miracle that no one fell as we careened down the broken stairwell, slamming into the walls as we rounded corners. We could still hear the growling; it seemed to be getting louder and louder, until the sound of my own frantic heart racing in my ears drowned it out. I saw a door, and just made out the word “Maintenance” before diving against it and begging the lock to open.

Thankfully, the door swung inward with a loud BANG. I practically fell into the small room, causing Jared to trip over me as the door swung closed behind him.

For a long moment, we just laid on the floor, not sure what else to do. Neither of us wanted to think about what we’d run from.

“Liz?”

“I’m fine. You okay?”

Jared huffed a laugh. “Yeah. Banged up but fine. Aud?”

Nothing.

“Audrey?”

We looked up from our places on the floor.



Audrey was nowhere to be seen.

“Audrey?” I repeated, jumping to my feet as quickly as I could I went back to the door, hesitating before slowly pulling it open and looking out, but there was no sign of her.

“Where’d she go?” Jared was just as pale. “She couldn’t have gone far. She was right behind us, right?”

“I thought she was,” I muttered as I scanned the landing again. I’d just spotted a cracked door on the landing above us when the growling returned, this time accompanied by heavy thudding and a sickening squelching sound. I shut the door quickly and turned back. “I think she went through a different door. She’s a floor up.”

Jared suddenly grabbed for his hip and pulled the walkie talkie’s we used to keep in touch when one of us was running maintenance on the ship. He clicked it on and there was a soft beep as the little green light lit up. He pressed down on the talk button.

“Audrey? Audrey, come in.”

There was no response. He sighed, clipping the walkie back to his belt. “I’ll leave it on in case she thinks of it.”

“Good plan. Not sure if it’ll work on separate floors, but it’s the best idea we have right now.”

“What do we do? Should we go back through and see if we can catch up to her?”

I frowned. “I don’t want to go back in there. Whatever that was, it sounded close.” I eyed the door again, then turned to face the rest of the small hallway. “I think we’ll have to find another staircase and meet up with her that way. We should pick up the kit while we’re here, though.”

“Wouldn’t want to make two trips,” Jared joked weakly. I couldn’t even muster a smile; even in the toughest of situations, Jared always had something silly to say to lighten the tension. Still, the sheer strangeness of our predicament iced over his usual warmth; the words landed flatly between us as we continued to walk in relative silence.

This place was, we discovered, just as ruined as the stairwell. More slashes lined the walls, and dark sprays spread out up onto the ceiling. The steel of the floor didn't hold much staining, though I didn't look too closely at the various reds and browns as we passed. A few of the doors hung from their hinges, and the fluorescent lights were dangling in their sockets above us.

The whole thing felt surreal; I was reminded of a haunted house my friends and I had gone to when I was a kid. It'd had an asylum theme, artistically broken down with just enough light to see the next exit before something jumped out at you from behind a corner. Here, the lights were too dim even for that, so we saw by Jared's flashlight and climbed over debris as carefully as we could.

I had the same unnerving feeling of being watched, and found myself tensing for something to jump out from every corner.

"What do you think it is?" We'd been walking in silence for so long that the sound of Jared's voice made me jump a little.

"I'm not sure," I said, ducking under a sputtering light. "A big cat, maybe? Or an off-worlder animal of some kind?"

"I hear the pack beasts in the outer ring are big," he said, trying to be casual. I knew him too well; I could hear the edge in his tone. Maybe that was just because I was on edge as well.

"Don't call them beasts," I said, trying for that same elusive relaxed tone, and his smile was a little more genuine.

"Oh, what, I'm supposed to call them oxes?"

"Oxen, and yes, that's technically what they are."

"They're oxen as much as I'm a hyena," Jared said with a bit of a laugh, "those things are huge. Not to mention the coloring."

"Well, that's just an evolution thing, isn't it? They were bred for the strength, and the color just happened to be a freak mutation."

“I guess.” Jared flicked his light over the ground and stepped around a sharp bit of broken piping sticking out of the ground. “Still, I didn’t think a blue ox existed outside of folktales until I met one.”

“They’re not really blue, I don’t think,” I mused, “Just kind of... oil-colored. So, they look blue in the right light.”

“Funny mutation, that. What purpose does it serve to be oil-colored on worlds with no oil? I’d say it’s a way of picking up prey, but they’re herbivores.”

I shrugged. “Mutations don’t always have a good purpose. Sometimes they just... happen. Sometimes life is weird.”

We’d finally come to the main office door, and with Jared’s help, I nudged it aside.

The room was oddly calm. The desk was in the right place, with a little task chair tucked neatly behind it. A drawer in the old filing cabinet was slightly ajar, but it looked more like someone had left it open on purpose than anything else. Papers littered the desk – reports of little tasks to be done on the outer shielding and the plumbing and the windows and things. There was an uncapped pen sitting beside a tall stack of request forms, with a much smaller stack of signed ones on the other side. It looked for all the worlds as if someone had just been interrupted, and would be right back.

Jared spotted the maintenance kits to the right side of the desk, and hefted one onto his shoulder as I took a closer look at the desk. Maybe there would be some clue hidden among the bureaucratic paperwork.

There were various ship schematics, a few docking licenses, and some crew reports about maintenance – the kind of thing you’d expect to find on a foreman’s worktable for a station of this size. As far as I could make out, there’d been around ten ships docked in the morning, but the reports stopped at around two in the afternoon according to internal clocks.

Of course, the clocks out here ran a bit differently; they still operated on the twenty-four-hour day, and for the most part, were synced with Greenwich Mean Time back on

Earth, although I don't think anyone really remembers why. Out here, day cycles were more of a comfort measure and a means of keeping records than a tangible constant. Being so far out and such a different shape, Eight's actual orbit didn't match Earth's at all.

At the bottom of one of the stacks was an incident report. I pulled it up to look at it and heard the clunk of a communicator falling off the pile. How I hadn't noticed it before, I'll never know, but I picked it up then.

The screen was blinking with the message, "Communication not sent. Try again?"

I frowned and held up the device. "Hey, look at this."

Jared, who'd been rifling through the open cabinet in much the same way I'd gone through the desk, maintenance kit all but forgotten beside him, jumped slightly, and looked over. "What? A communicator?"

"Yeah. Looks like they were trying to send something out, but it didn't go through."

"Well, hit play. What were they sending?"

It felt a bit like invading the privacy of this unknown foreman to open his personal messages. Checking the screen again, though, I felt a cold chill. The recipient was Central Command.

I hit play.

It was a voice recording, with a scruffy, muffled quality, as if it'd been recorded in motion, the mic close to the face of a hoarsely breathing man. We could hear the sounds of his footsteps, fast and loud, and apparently on metal. I guessed that he must have been on one of the service scaffolds.

"Command, this is Wilson. We need backup here, and now. That thing we called you about earlier?" His voice hitched slightly, though his steps didn't falter. "Whatever that thing is, it's got Lila, and we don't know what to do."

He seemed to pick up the pace, not quite running. “We need help and fast. We’ve started the evac, but it’s not going quick enough. We’ve already lost quite a few.” There was a distant scream, and something howled.

Jared and I shared a glance. His jaw was tight, eyes wide, as he nodded back to the recording.

The sounds of struggling got more frantic, and Wilson seemed to finally get to the door he was looking for and swing it open with a popping creak. Suddenly, we were listening to sprinting, on a much more muffled surface than before. Carpet, I thought, in the main halls.

“I’m grabbing maintenance kits from my office, then meeting the others on a lower deck.” There was a short pause and some more shuffling, as well as a grunt as Wilson picked up the kit. “I think it’s following me, so I can’t bring the comm with me. Too much noise.”

There was a sharp thump in the recording, and then Wilson’s voice was further away than before. “If you get this, talk to me on Jason’s number. He’s down with the main evac ship. I’ll be there soon. Again, this is urgent.” A door slammed and the talking became more distant still. “We’re desperate. Send help. Send!”

With that, the line went dead.

There was a long moment of stunned silence before my eyes caught on a light blinking on the desk. I recognized it as a medbay pager. It, too, had a final message, this one blinking in red.

*SLIGHT EYE MOVEMENT. REQUEST ASSISTANCE WITH RECOVERY. GET HERE ASAP  
WILSON.*

I frowned as I read it, but Jared was still staring at the comm.

“We need to find Audrey. Now.” His voice cracked slightly.

I nodded.

We left the office, eyes searching every shadow for whatever it was that'd chased old Wilson down here. He was someone I'd only ever known by reputation; apparently, he'd been the longest-serving foreman on Eight yet. There were rumors that he was a droid with extremely convincing aging protocols – some people said he'd started the rumor himself. Anyone who worked with him said he was just a crochety old man, though. An Earth native who'd gotten the job after a long stint in interstellar travel, as a sort of settling down.

I wanted to hope that he'd gotten away, that he'd sent another distress signal somewhere else, but I knew that if he had, this place would already be swarming with containment officers and interstellar law enforcement.

My feet moved a little faster at the thought.

The thing appeared to have gone a different way because we couldn't hear it anymore. This didn't sit well with either of us.

We came to the end of the hall and found the alternative service stairs. Places like this always had too many staircases anyway, I thought as we climbed. Strangely, though, this set was devoid of scratch marks. Apparently, whatever that was had never come this far.

“He mentioned someone called Lila.” Jared's voice echoed awkwardly in the silence between our footsteps.

“He said it'd gotten Lila,” I corrected flatly.

“Terrible way to go. By space ox.” We both knew it wasn't an ox, but calling it that felt better than the alternatives.

“He sounded really broken up about it.”

“The poor girl.”

We were careful to look out as we came up to the entrance for the upper floor. Nothing moved in Jared's flashlight beam; it was just more of the same destruction. I felt my stomach drop, and heard Jared gulp quietly. We pushed on slowly, and without having to speak, ducked in sync to one side, keeping in the shadows. Jared covered his flashlight with

his hand, letting only the smallest beam slip through so that we could see. Together, we snuck down the hall at a snail's pace, eyes peeled for any sign of Audrey.

A dull thud up ahead of us froze us in place.

A door creaked open, slowly, and a can of paint came rolling to a stop as it thumped against the opposite wall of the hallway. We didn't dare move as we saw a large shadow fill the place where the room's light hit the wall.

It was oddly distorted, hunched, but far too small to be whatever we'd seen before. After a few moments, the shadow straightened up.

"Audrey?"

She looked toward us and with a soft, "oh, thank God," came bolting over and pulled Jared into a tight hug, with mine quickly following. Words seemed to fall out of her mouth faster than she could control them.

"I had no idea where you were! We were running and I saw an open door and I ducked in but I turned around and you two had kept going and that thing was following you and I freaked out and ran, which of course I realize now was a little stupid, but I got away, and I was so worried about you two, I thought it'd gotten you and I didn't know what to do and – "

"Audrey, Audrey, breathe," I said with a laugh that was nearly a sob. "Breathe. We're okay."

"We're just glad that you're okay," Jared added, his voice just as shaky. "You said you saw it?"

Audrey was already pale, but she seemed to go even paler. I worried she might pass out. "Only for a second. It was... huge, and weird, and... I don't even know. It was just... awful."

"We can talk about this later," I decided. "For now, we need to get back to the ship as quickly as possible."

“We can go that way,” Audrey said, pointing down a side hall a little further down. “I found a map when I was hiding, in one of the service offices. That leads back down to the docks through the main hub.”

“Great,” I said, “Come on.”

Jared slung his arm with the flashlight over Audrey and left it there as we walked. She shook like a leaf, even under his arm, which only made him hang on tighter. He looked over as he did so, and nodded down.

“What’re you holding?”

“Huh?” She looked down at her clenched hands, and manually relaxed them to show two crumpled pieces of paper. “Oh. The map, obviously, but I also found this?” She held one of them up and Jared turned his light on it.

“OR Trading Company?” he read.

“It’s a packing slip, I think.” She smoothed it out further. It was a little hard to read while we were walking, so Audrey described it. “This is apparently an outer rings freight company. Kind of like us, but not freelance.”

“What’s so special about a packing slip?” I asked.

“Well, it was just on the floor where I was hiding, and I happened to read it. It looks pretty normal until you get to the actual freight list, and then there’s this little note.” She pointed to a bit of scratchy handwriting beside the printed font.

*Do not touch! Potential biohazard! Potential live specimen!*

“How is it a ‘potential’ live specimen?” Jared asked, “Don’t you have to know if you’re shipping live cargo?”

“And the thing is, the only unaccounted for freight listed,” Audrey pointed to the printed text as she spoke, “is ‘archeological sample.’ There’s no other description for it.”

“What kind of archeological sample might also be alive? How do you not know if what you’re transporting is alive?” I regretted saying it as soon as the words were out of my



mouth. It looked like everyone had the same thought: none of us really wanted the answer to that.

There was a long gap in the conversation as we made our way down another hall and, finally, into the atrium. Light was just beginning to stream through the shielding blinds, throwing the stains and devastation into even sharper relief than when we'd first arrived.

We made our way around the edge of the room, back toward our docking bay. Just as we were coming up to it, though, we heard something that made my stomach drop as if I'd been chucked into zero-G.

The growling was back, and it was coming from our hall.

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