

DECONTAMINATION

When I open my eyes again, I'm in my decontamination cell. Plexiglas surrounds me. I throw a glance at the cell next to mine. It's empty. Something wet runs down my face and I wipe it away with my forearm. I try not to look too closely when lowering my arm, but the dark red smears on my sleeve are hard to ignore. Blood. Lots of it.

Major Davis steps in front of my cell. Automatically, I raise my blood stained arm in salute. She salutes back sloppily.

"Sergeant Spencer, mission report?" she inquires. She seems unfazed by my appearance, even though I must look like shit. I feel like shit.

"Where is Doctor Bennett?" she adds.

"The mission failed." There's a lump in my throat and I fight to not let it creep into my voice. I'm a soldier for god's sake. "Doctor Bennett is dead. Terror birds got him. Ripped him to pieces." I shiver involuntarily.

"Put your traveling unit in the reader," the major instructs calmly.

With shaking hands I remove the small silver disk from my belt and put it into a gap in the wall. A screen next to Major Davis lights up and shows the route I traveled with Doctor Bennett. She points at a spot at the end and asks, "Is this where the phorusrhacidae got you?"

"Yes, ma'am," I reply weakly. My legs quiver at the thought of the gigantic bird monsters. They were everywhere. Ten feet tall. Beaks like axes. I want to sit down.

Major Davis moves her finger over the screen.

“Last time they got you twenty minutes earlier and further to the south,” she mutters to herself but the words make me prick up my ears. Last time? Last time we traveled to an even earlier era in time. There were no animals at all.

“Mission control, this is decontamination,” the major speaks into her headset. “We got another course correction. Move the entrance point five miles north and the exit time ten minutes into the future. Copy that. T minus thirty-eight minutes until mission start. You will receive a new update in approximately nine minutes. Copy.”

“What do you mean T minus thirty-eight minutes until mission start?” I blurt out. “The mission is over! Bennett is dead!”

Major Davis eyes me disapprovingly.

“The mission hasn’t started yet,” she states. “And let me assure you that Doctor Bennett is fine. He is happily bustling around in his laboratory. Same as you. You are happily bustling... somewhere. In the gym probably. Your travels will start in thirty-eight minutes, you will arrive in the Cenozoic era at a point that’s five miles further to the north and with a bit of luck you won’t have another encounter with the phorusrhacidae.”

I begin to understand. “So... my mission... the failed mission... will have never happened?”

“Correct,” Major Davis confirms. “Doctor Bennett is a valuable asset, we cannot risk losing him.”

“But if my mission never happened, shouldn’t I be disappearing or something?” I hold up my hands. They look normal. Bloody and scratched up from the attack of the terror birds. But solid.

The major looks at me like a kindergarten teacher at an especially dense student. Then she smiles sympathetically. “I really don’t know why I explain this to you every time. I guess

I like you. What you are thinking of is the grandfather paradox.” I raise my eyebrows questioningly and Major Davis sighs.

“You travel back in time and kill your grandfather. As a result, you are never born. You can’t travel back and kill anyone. Your grandfather survives. You are born. You travel back and kill him...” With her right hand she paints a circle in the air. “Get the picture? You have created a paradox. But this only makes sense if we assume there is only one timeline which allows for dynamic changes. Anyway, that’s not the case. Reality is a multiverse.”

I open my mouth, but Major Davis shakes her head.

“No interruptions. We don’t have the time. Living in a multiverse means that whenever we make a decision we split the future in two timelines. One where we did the thing and one where we didn’t. It works the same for the past. Every time you go back in time you create an alternate timeline. Another universe. In the past of this timeline, in which we both stand right now, no human has ever visited the Cenozoic era. It just didn’t happen.”

“But in your personal past, you have been there. This, however, has happened in an alternate universe. Your appearance in the Cenozoic era has split a new timeline from ours.” She paints a Y-shape in the air. “The only reason why you are able to get back to our timeline is because the traveling units are programmed to home on to the universe they were built in. This universe. The other universe with the alternative timeline you created by ripping out plants and stepping on insects is lost to us. We don’t know what the present there would look like.”

She stops and I use the chance to voice my questions. “So, that means that, for example, for the grandfather thing I could travel back, kill my grandfather and nothing would happen? Because that would just create an alternate timeline where he is dead and I am never born? But in my original timeline everything would stay the same, and I would stay alive, too?”

“Correct.” Major Davis nods approvingly. The dense kindergartner has learned his lesson in the end. “And that means you won’t just dissolve. But for us, in this timeline, your failed mission will never happen.”

“But if I don’t disappear... won’t there be two of me?” I ask, still trying to wrap my head around the concepts I’ve just been presented.

“No,” Major Davis replies with a sad smile around her lips. “There won’t.”

“I don’t understand...” I start, when a blinking warning signal on the screen interrupts me.

“It’s time.” Major Davis moves towards the door of my decontamination cell and enters a pass code. Then she takes a step back and salutes. “The United States of America thank you for your service Sergeant Spencer.”

I salute back mechanically, when I feel air streaming inside the decontamination cell. No, not air, I think. Gas. Then everything goes black.

When I open my eyes again, I’m in my decontamination cell. Plexiglas surrounds me. I throw a glance at the decontamination cell next to mine. Doctor Bennett kneels inside it, inspecting his box with plant samples. As required by protocol I remove the traveling unit from my belt and put it into the reader in the wall.

Major Davis steps in front of my cell. I raise my hand in a sharp salute. She salutes back sloppily.

“Sergeant Spencer, mission report?” she inquires.

“Mission successful,” I state.

Major Davis nods and turns to her screen, where she checks the data from my traveling unit. Without turning around she asks, “Any run-ins with the contemporary fauna?”

“No, nothing to speak of,” I recount. “The mission was pretty straightforward. In. Sampling. Out.” Though, I think to myself, I would really like to see some of those primeval

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beasts close up once. But up until now mission control has always managed to drop us off far away from any interesting wildlife.

“Okay, great.” Major Davis speaks into her headset, “Mission control, do you copy? This is decontamination. We have a successful mission.” She listens for an answer and then turns to me and Doctor Bennett.

“Mission control would like to congratulate you both on your twelfth successive successful mission,” she informs us and smiles. “Make yourself at home. Decontamination time today is twenty-eight minutes.”