

Keith 'Doc' Raymond, MD

Salvage Vector Gamma

"Asgard Control, this is the Salvage ship Damocles. Over."

"Damocles, this is Control. What is your traffic?"

"Yeah, ah... well, we have a bogie at Vector Gamma twenty."

Laughter. "This guy thinks he's a fighter pilot!"

"Control, your mike is still on, ya Morlock!"

"Damocles, sorry, a bogie you say?"

"Ah, huh?"

Klang, bang, and a loud curse.

"Control, wait one... Hey Kobe, I thought you said you had that Russky satellite stowed!"

"Sorry Cap, dang flange is sticking out, all we need is... got it!" Kobe yelled, from the cargo hold.

"Zapusk rakety v 4, 3, 2..." came from the satellite.

"Oh Drat!" Kobe screamed, cracking the salvaged orbital with a hammer. "Whew! We're okay Cap, nearly launched a nuke down here."

"Damocles, your mike is still on," Control said, then more laughter in the background. "What are you girls trying to do? Light up the sky over there?"

Tullis paused, cursing under his breath, and went on, "About that bogie. Yeah, looks to be fifty souls onboard. It's adrift."

"Damocles, send their transponder code?"

"Even that's out, Control. Never seen a ship like it. Heat scan shows them, but not even their computers are warm. Can you send a Rescue ship?"

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“We’re on it. ETA ninety minutes at Vector Gamma twenty.”

“Based on their oxygen reserves, they have maybe thirty minutes. Can Rescue step on it?”

Static over the comms, “Best they can do. How many can you take?”

“Maybe fifteen. Might buy them some time. But look, this is a salvage ship, we can’t take passengers for...”

“Do what you can. Control Out.”

“Cratz!” Tullis yelled.

“Problem, Cap?”

“All we get is disrespect! Now they want us to save some stranded tourists. Insurance ain’t going to cover this! They’ll probably sue us for getting shivved on the space debris down in the hold. Tourists get what they deserve. Space lanes ain’t no stim film adventure!”

“I hear you, Tullis.”

“Can you clean it up down there? Make some space?”

“On it, Cap. Who knows, there may be some heavenly bodies onboard?”

“In your dreams! Look, I have to concentrate here. Get on with it, Kobe.”

“Yes, Sir!” This followed by a bunch of shifting and banging, like pots and pans being moved around in a pantry.

Tullis activated a series of thrusters to maneuver the garbage scow toward the skin of the unknown ship. Through the view port, he admired the sleek lines of the space-faring vessel. It appeared fast and ultramodern. The alloy construction was a type he had never seen before, and he’d seen plenty. The surface was dull yet shiny like shark skin. It even gave a little as he docked on the largest port door he could find, but he got a firm seal.

“Suit up Kobe! Air seems thin over there, and my dock seal might not hold. That ship is darn slippery.”

Both men put on vacuum suits and helmets, after Tullis sealed the main deck from the cargo hold. They'd use the passenger door rather than the loading ramp to access the other vessel. Tullis looked around the half-filled cargo bay. The usual satellite debris cluttered the space. Most of it good only for the smelter, but there might be some rare earth elements they could sell. It's how they made their living. For now though, they had a different mission.

"You ready, Cap?"

"Nope, this ain't no rescue ship. But who knows? We may get a reward, eh?"

"Yeah right! No good deed goes unpunished." Kobe lifted a heavy wrench and banged on the unknown ship's port. Instead of a clang, the skin of the ship vibrated like a singing saw. "That's weird. Ain't nothing I ever hit like that before."

Tullis elbowed Kobe, "You need to scout beyond your regular dives, kid."

They both laughed.

Then the seal on the other ship cracked. A rush of air from the salvage vessel passed into the derelict, adjusting to the slight pressure differential. A weird coughing noise from several souls on the other side came through the men's suit comms. Before they called out, the port swung inward exposing four aliens on the other side.

The shocked aliens staggered back as did the men.

They were one meter tall, but almost twice as thick. Bodies heavily muscled with thick pointed ears. The aliens had three jade-glowing eyes each. The iris similar to cats, except oriented horizontally. Nictitating membranes slid back and forth nervously, beneath heavier eyelids. Rectangular mouths held pointed teeth below their nose holes. They each also had three of those.

The humans must have appeared equally strange, elongated giants with bubble encased heads. Tullis with white skin, red hair and brown eyes, while Kobe had black skin, curly brown hair and blue

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eyes. Two eyes and two nostrils each. The aliens probably thought these beings were deficient in some way.

Time stretched, this being the first and most unexpected alien encounter, at least from the Earthlings' point of view. Kobe held out his hand to shake. Twelve eyes fixated on Kobe's hand. Tullis knocked it down, the sudden movement startling the aliens.

Tullis finally spoke, "Can we be of assistance?"

Several of the aliens twisted nobs hidden behind their ears, then touched the corners of their mouths. One said, "Say again," its mouth movement unrelated to the words the men heard.

"How can we be of assistance?"

"Thank you, our (untranslatable) foundered."

"Foundered?" Kobe asked Tullis.

"That means broke down," Tullis whispered, out of the corner of his mouth.

"Look Cap, they have power."

"So do you! We didn't detect it," said Alien Alpha, through its translator.

"Neither did we. Only bio detection on heat scan," Tullis uttered.

"Same same. In fact, we thought your (untranslatable) was just another bit of orbital debris until we saw you fire thrusters," answered the Alien.

"Why did you allow us to dock?" Tullis asked.

"For assistance. Plus, we didn't see a weapon's signature. We've been here quite a while. In fact, stranded. Our multiverse transit left us without propulsion. Our scientists think that our physics and yours are incompatible," said Alien Beta.

"Different physics?" asked Tullis.

"We have no hadrons for example?"

"Is that strange?" asked Kobe.

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The aliens laughed, it sounded like a squeak punctuated by honks.

“What did I say?” Kobe asked Tullis.

“Must have been amusing,” he answered, turning to the aliens asking, “How did you get here?”

“Through the Arch,” answered Alien Delta. “Don’t you see it?”

“No.”

“Come. We’ll show it to you. Follow us,” offered Alien Delta. The four aliens turned away at the same time.

Kobe looked at Tullis, reluctantly.

Tullis sighed and said, “Are you kidding? Explore an alien spacecraft. This is the stuff you tell your grandkids!”

The salvage team bent over to enter the alien vessel which had a ceiling height proportional to its inhabitants. As they stepped through the sterile barrier between the two ships they were thrown violently to the deck.

“I think they stunned us!” Kobe cried out, having difficulty breathing, “I can’t move.”

Tullis painfully lifted his head and swiveled it toward Kobe, gasping out, “Not stunned. Just a high gravity environment. Imagine we’re in a 5G acceleration.”

The aliens turned. Saw their saviors plastered to the deck and huddled to talk in their own language. One signaled for help on a comm link. Shortly thereafter two gurneys arrived on anti-gravity vapor.

“So sorry, friends! We should have realized you are from this small planet. Our planet has five times the mass, and so too five times the gravity,” said Alien Beta.

Alpha and Delta bent over and lifted the two men onto the gurneys as if they weighed nothing. “This should make your visit more comfortable,” one said.

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The aliens eased the gurneys down the pentagonal corridors. Just as they were passing a view port, Kobe cried out, "Stop!"

There it was, scintillating in space. A giant silvery arch made of the same shark skin as the alien ship. Beneath it, serpentine energies swirled. Tullis sensed immense powers at play within it.

"That's it! The Arch. That's where you need to tow us so we can get back home. Our propulsion system operates on our own physics, so it doesn't work in your universe," noted the Alien Alpha.

"Why can't we see it from our ship?" Kobe repeated the question.

"Maybe because you are within our domain. Existing in our physics rather than yours."

"So that's why I don't feel so good. And I thought it was just the gravity. Maybe we better get back to the Damocles, eh Cap?"

Tullis concerned, realized Kobe was right. He didn't know what damage they were sustaining at the atomic level. "We'll need specific coordinates to the Arch, so we can tow you there."

Alien Beta also recognized the danger their physics might have on the two Earthlings. "We'll take you back now. I'll get you those coordinates. We've been monitoring Asgard Control, and I think we can translate the coordinates for the Arch into your positioning system. We won't be able to talk because our comm systems aren't compatible, but if we vanish..."

"Gotcha."

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"Read you loud and clear."

The aliens tilted the gurneys and dumped Tullis and Kobe unceremoniously back through the sterile barrier onto the deck of the Damocles. Both men staggered to their feet, straining against overwrought muscles, but breathing easier. There were no farewells, no closing words.

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“Think we need tow cables, Cap?”

“I saw nothing where we could attach them to their ship. Did you?”

“Best we use the docking seal to tow them.”

“Good thinking. I'm heading up to the bridge.”

“You know, Cap. No one's going to believe us.”

“Sure they will. Look, I brought back a souvenir!”

“Why didn't I think of that?!” Kobe said, staring at the octahedron containing a trapped fireworks display in Tullis' palm. The micro-explosions inside the structure made it hypnotizing.

“Where did you find it?”

“Looked like artwork on a shelf in the corridor. Took all my strength to grab the thing.”

“They didn't spot you?”

“They didn't seem to care. Anyway, I better get up there. They've waited a long time and are oxygen critical. No need to delay our friends further.”

Settling into the pilot's seat, Tullis checked the coordinates, then entered them into the navigation computer. He set the thrusters on a slow even burn and imaged the docking camera to be sure the seal held as the two ships headed toward the Arch coordinates.

“Salvage ship Damocles, this is Asgard Rescue. Over.”

“Asgard Rescue, this is the Damocles. Thank God you boys made it.”

“We see you are towing the unknown vessel. What is the status of the crew? How many casualties?”

“None, but the ship's disabled.”

“Would you like us to take over the tow?”

“Thanks. I think we have it. Not far to go.”

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“Where is it you are taking them? Nothing around here, Damocles.”

“Just watch.”

The two rescue pilots turned to each other and shook their heads. The women felt bad for the space sick men. They knew their work exposed them to all kinds of toxins and radioactive materials from the floating junk they salvaged. Price of making a living as garbage collectors. They put the twinned ships up on the main viewer. The other crew and medics on the bridge watched the ugly little garbage scow tow the sleek vessel.

“We probably should do a medical on the Damocles' crew,” the rescue doc suggested. “Those guys look to have lost it, towing that yacht around.” The other medics nodded. “I am detecting the fifty souls they reported onboard, at least.”

All eyes were drawn to the main viewer when a nova bright light engulfed the two ships. The camera lens adjusted down quickly, but not before everyone squeezed their eyes shut. When the glare ended, only one ship remained, the Damocles.

“Damage report!” Asgard Rescue cried.

“We're all good here,” reported Tullis. “You?”

The copilot checked all systems, everything was nominal. “We're five by five.”

“What happened?” asked the rescue pilot.

“Long story. Happy to tell you over drinks back at the Base.”

“In your dreams, cowboy!”

“You can't blame a guy for trying.”

“Mandatory physicals following the accident investigation. Asgard Rescue, Out!”

“So what are we going to tell them, Cap?”

“The truth.”

“We are so screwed!”

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END