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Divided Planet

A Science Fiction Adventure

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The gleaming hallway of the main deck had been cleaned to blinding white shine. As if being spotless would be some form of protection against the inevitable doom the ship most likely faced. The air was filtered, almost artificially stale. The ship's staff stood rigidly at attention in their gleaming black and silver uniforms of the space service. Service stripes practically dripped down their arms, but where the medals should have been, which were so ubiquitously common in the service, they were noticeably missing on the crew's chests.

Captain Pseudonymous Howard extended his hand to greet his new executive officer. Karen Lewis was typical of the latest crop of academy graduates. Young, clean, and wearing a uniform that was as spotless as the hallway walls. Only her rank as commander marred its sparkling lines. The crew gave her a wry smile. Her rank demonstrated she had received excellent marks, but she must have done something seriously wrong. No one got assigned to the *AC Simon P. Cain* because of their sterling reputation or extensive battle record.

"Welcome aboard," the skipper said politely. His face was almost expressionless.

"Glad to be here. It's an honor." Replied Lewis. The rest of the crew fought back a snicker of derision. The skipper gave them a distasteful look and they snapped back to attention. Captain Howard ran a disciplined ship. He'd have brought back flogging if it had been allowed.

"You are dismissed," the skipper barked. The staff gave him a crisp salute and marched off down the hall. He turned to the new XO. "I'll give you a tour." Without waiting for a response, he moved off in the opposite direction from the exiting crew. Lewis had to move quickly to catch up to the fast-moving officer.

"There are those who claim the *AC Simon P. Cain* is a cursed ship. It was the only survivor of the ambush of the galactic fleet at the Battle of the Peral Star. Admittedly the ship didn't have a good beginning. Moored at the Mars Navy Yards, the crew failed to release the docking clamps on her first departure. Not only was the dock damaged, but pieces of the clamps flew off into the *AC Cogswell*, causing a hull breach and carrying away three shuttles. On her first fleet patrol, one of the crew released a plasma charge. When it exploded the entire group assumed we were being attacked by a cloaked ship."

Lewis listened attentively as any good officer would, but her face was a mask of confusion. The skipper took no notice and continued his introduction.

At the fleet admiral's request, The Cain conducted a torpedo drill by simulating a launch at the fleet flagship. This drill suddenly went awry when a torpedo from number two launcher discharged from its rack and headed toward the flagship. Unfortunately for the Cain, the number two rack wasn't prepped for an exercise. All the weapons were armed. We were forced to break the communication blackout to inform fleet. The message and the fire required to destroy the torpedo alerted the enemy. Just outside of the Peral star, the fleet was ambushed."

The skipper turned to his new XO. He didn't have a happy look on his face. "They kept the real reason for the fleet's defeat out of the media. You will too. It's a standing order on my ship. Are we clear?"

Lewis snapped to attention. "Yes, sir!"

The skipper's expression was unchanged. "I happen to agree with the scuttlebutt. This ship is cursed, commander. You can believe it. As a result, the mission of this ship is to stay out of combat. You'll find we don't do any kind of exploration. No visiting any new planets. No one on this ship gets famous. And nobody ... I mean nobody ... is ever allowed to screw up again. If we are lucky, all we will do are supply runs. And believe me, the fleet isn't happy to see us when we show up. Do your job right and I'll see you get transferred off this bucket. Do an exceptional job and I'll see your service record expunged so no one will ever have to know you served on her. That'll be all commander."

Karen Lewis stared in disbelief. "Is this the end of the tour?" she asked.

The skipper frowned. "There is no tour, commander. It's a euphuism for me explaining how we operate on this ship. We don't talk about this ship. We don't even mention we don't talk about it. We call it the tour." The skipper growled. "Other than this one time, no one discusses the history of this ship with anyone. Not family, husbands, boyfriends or other service personnel. Are we clear?"

Lewis snapped once more to attention. "Yes, sir!"

The skipper turned and began to storm off. "Find your station and get to work, commander. We have a ship to run." He turned the corner and Lewis could hear the sliding of a door. When it hissed closed she was alone, and the hall was silent.

----- *SOCS* -----

The lights around the bridge were dim. This was the third shift crew. Half the stations were empty, but those who remained seemed engrossed in their work. One officer kept walking between the unoccupied stations, keeping an eye out for anything out of the ordinary. Monitors beeped and flashed, giving constant updates on the safety systems. There were a few diagnostic checks the computer was doing that Lewis had never even seen before. The crew seemed to be a model of checking, double-checking and checking one more time. They weren't merely prepared for a disaster, they expected one. Commander Lewis's fingers ran over her console. The crew roster popped up on the screen instantly and she began to review it. It read like a journal of lost sailors.

A majority of the crew had long service records. Their early career made them look like misfits. But judging from their attention to detail on the bridge, they were well past those days. According to the records, those who didn't get over it became casualties. The logbook was a tale of freak accidents and bad timing. This was a better crew. But it was as if the fleet had dumped them here and forgotten they existed.

A young woman in a lieutenant's uniform put her hand on Karen's shoulder. "The captain explain everything to you?"

Lewis looked up. "I thought no one was supposed to talk about this ship."

"Lieutenant Diana Jansson, engineering," she announced. "I'm not talking about the ship. I'm talking about the crew. Specifically, you." She gave Lewis a concerned glance.

Lewis didn't hide the disappointment from her expression. "Yes, he explained everything."

“We need to work together on this crew,” Jansson explained. “It’s the way we can ensure there are no slip-ups. No mistakes. You don’t want to make a mistake on this ship.”

Karen frowned, “I take it fleet doesn’t send us the best and the brightest.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” she grinned. “But don’t let that give you any ideas. The skipper runs a tight ship. He could give the inspector general of the fleet a bad day. You’ll need to keep on your toes. The captain will expect you to be hard-nosed as well. If there was a medal for being a tight ass, the skipper would already have three of them.”

She gave the XO a tired sigh. “I know it sounds harsh. But if you don’t get over whatever got you here quickly. You’re apt to be attending your own burial in space.”

There was some serious activity on the deck. Crew members moved rapidly to respond. “Lateral stabilizers off .002%,” came a voice from the navigation station. Ensign Brian Hawke appeared like every other member of the crew. Young, cautious, and more than a little afraid of things not behaving as they should.

“Adjusting,” replied Ensign Jordan as he operated the controls. A point 002% variance was well within established norms for the system design. But the crew reduced it with the same alacrity Lewis had only seen during combat drills. She was concerned this level of constant stress would result in some serious mistakes. No one could keep up with this kind of pressure and not snap.

“You don’t believe the ship is cursed, do you?” asked Karen.

Diana blinked. “Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous. I know it’s cursed. And so does everyone else.”

Pilots and crews in the space service were the most knowledgeable and least superstitious people in the nine systems. But the way this crew walked and talked they not only believed in the Loch Ness Monster, but they expected to meet it any second hiding in the ship’s hold.

“Don’t let the skipper give you any false impressions,” Jansson related. “They know their business. This is the most detail-oriented ship in the fleet. But they are skeptical. It’ll take you some time to earn their trust. Some of the other XOs have found it to be pretty unnerving at times. But, you’ll get used to it.”

“What happened to the last XO?” Karen asked.

“Airlock accident, I think,” Diana smiled. “Only kidding. He did an outstanding job keeping the crew from cracking up. The skipper kept his promise and got him transferred.”

“What about you?” Asked Karen.

“Me. I only got 102% on my last evaluation, so I’ll be here for another voyage.” The engineering lieutenant explained.

Karen raised one eyebrow. “Still kidding, aye?”

“Not at all,” Jansson replied seriously. “The fleet only allows one transfer a month. So only the best get off.”

“Do you mind if I ask what the XO did to get such a top score?” Karen’s voice had a plaintive ring to it.

Jansson gave her a straight look to the inquisitive brown eyes. "He kept us all from killing ourselves."

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Admiral Simko's face appeared on the main view screen. "Pseudonymous, I've got a job for you."

Captain Howard slumped back in his chair. There was a look of distress on his face. Admiral's didn't hand out supply assignments. You got those from a junior staff flunkee at operations.

"I need you to go to Essos IV. There was a civil war about to break out, but now something's gone wrong. We haven't heard anything in a week. No communication chatter, nothing. We need you to go out there and find out what's happening. Stellar Affairs Group has an interest in any developments. Seems we sold weapons to the rebels. Fleet doesn't want them falling into the wrong hands if peace should suddenly break out."

The crew froze. Everyone glanced around as if they expected to find themselves on some other ship. One without the Cain's reputation. Their disappointment was obvious. All eyes turned back to the view screen. Howard cleared his throat. "With all due respect, sir. This doesn't seem like the appropriate task for the Cain. We don't have any diplomats and we don't carry a marine force."

Admiral Simko folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. "Like so many of us in fleet command, I'm now going to say something I never thought I would say. You are the only ship in the area. It has to be you"

What followed was a long pause filled with stony silence. Howard shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Can't you ..."

"No."

"Perhaps you could ..."

"No."

Pseudonymous Howard exhaled deeply. "Well, I guess we are on our way to Essos IV, sir."

"Good." The admiral looked as if he had been informed of a suicide mission with a zero chance of success and he would be commanding. "Keep me informed of your progress. If anything goes wrong we've never talked, and I don't even know who you are."

The skipper tried to reply but the communication was already broken. There was another long moment of silence. Howard rose to his feet and strode over to the XO's station. "I want drills every two hours."

"Drills for what, sir?" Asked Commander Lewis.

"I don't care," the skipper retorted. "You're the XO. Figure out some drills." He started to walk away and then turned on his heels. "Make sure you drill everything."

"Everything, sir?"

The skipper crossed his arms. "Everything. Do you have a problem, commander?"

"No, sir," Karen's face was stern and unyielding, "I'll just need to run them every hour, sir."

He looked resigned. "Well then, run them every hour. Get it done."

"Yes, sir." Karen Lewis shifted in her seat. "Does the mission make you nervous?"

Howard frowned, "No. The mission does not make me nervous." His voice was loud and clear so everyone on the bridge could hear it. The skipper then lowered its voice so only the XO would be included. "This trip made makes me panic. We're taking our tiny frigate to a planet which is armed to the teeth. And I had the weapon's detonation circuits thrown out the airlock years ago."

"We're unarmed?" gasped Karen.

The captain frowned. "Yeah."

The skipper walked out the door and it wooshed closed. Diana Jansson crossed over from the engineering station. "We don't talk about the ship," she explained.

"So, no one mentions we're about to go into hostile space unarmed?"

"Correct."

Lewis sighed. "This is going to be a hard ship to get used to."

"We don't talk about ..." Jansson began, but Lewis cut her off. "... the ship."

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Essos IV was a stellar oddity. Its oblong shape was unique in the universe. Astronomers insisted the world was the result of two bodies occupying the same orbit around its star. One was slightly faster than the other and over time they had met, colliding very slowly and gradually. Others argued, and loudly, the twin body theory was absurd. Since the longer side was 90 degrees from the orbit of the resulting planet. But those which argued against the two-body crashing theory could offer no better explanation.

Everything looked extraordinarily quiet. In fact, it was rather unnerving. The skipper had the ship scan the surface when they arrived. They couldn't find anything. No life, no power sources, no activity. There was a certain amount of yelling as he had them run the scan again. When the first result was confirmed, he ordered a third set of scans.

"Captain," Brian Hawke at the navigator's console protested, "It going to show the same thing."

The skipper looked annoyed. "Then we'll have the most accomplished scanning crew in the fleet. Run the scan again. In fact, run it until you find something or until I tell you to stop."

The crew seemed disappointed but returned to their duties. They had anxious looks on their faces. Some had the famous 1,000-yard stare which was often seen in doomed aviators. For some the concern was what they might find ... or why the population was hiding it. The rest of them seemed apprehensive because they had been looking for an opportunity to explore the universe for a long time ... just not aboard the Cain.

"Damn funny readings," Science Officer R. Dean Jordan muttered. Among the crew, Jordan seemed the oldest. He certainly was the most experienced.

Karen gave him a cautious look. “How so?” She asked.

“I can’t find any buildings,” Jordan explained. “I can find large deposits of clay minerals, but no buildings.”

Lewis seemed to be cross with him. “Ensign, there are supposed to be nine billion people down there. Living on a planet with more weather systems than sports teams. I’m sure all those things add up to a lot of rain. Chances are they are going to be living in some buildings. Is there something wrong with your equipment?”

“Can’t find anything amiss.” Jordan pressed more buttons on his console. “I’ve used the map from the last several visits by fleet ships. I looked for every city. That’s where I found the clay minerals.”

“Only where there are cities?” Lewis asked nervously.

“Only there. It’s strange.”

“OK, let’s recalibrate,” Commander Lewis instructed him.

“Well the only way I can recalibrate would be to scan some known buildings and compare the readings. Only there are no buildings.”

The crew wrestled with the scanners for several hours until the skipper decided to organize an away team for the surface. “You’re in charge,” he growled at his XO. Half the crew was ecstatic at the prospect of doing some exploring on an actual planet. The other half ran and ducked down hallways to avoid being seen and run the risk of being selected for the landing team. No one wanted to restart the curse.

“Jordan,” Lewis announced, “You’re coming along.”

“I was afraid of that,” The young lieutenant replied. Dean was a straight-laced young man with what seemed to be a permanent sour disposition. It was understandable. On his uniform, he had a long stream of service stripes down his sleeve. According to his records, he’d been on the ship since it was launched. Longer even than the captain.

The trip down to the surface was uneventful. Even with half the crew squirming in their shuttle seats. The cloud cover was thick as well as dark. Half the clouds were gray, almost black. When they hit the ground, they were in a fog. It was almost as if they were still in the cloud layer. Jordan tested the air before the airlock opened. After he tested it once, he repeated the procedure twice. At last, the door was opened.

The first thing everyone noticed was the burning smell. It seemed like wood, coal and a factory discharge all at once. Everyone took respirators from the airlock before proceeding. The ground was hot, but there were no craters of the type you’d expect if the threatened civil war had gone hot. It wasn’t long before they found one of Jordan’s clay deposits. It had been a building. Now it was only rubble. The construction material had been brick, which was why the computer classified the remains as a clay deposit. It gave every indication of being destroyed in a war or some kind.

Jordan stayed to take a reading while everyone else split up to look around. It was a mess. The worst apocalyptic nightmare turned reality. The smoke was the result of numerous fires which were still

burning. Mostly because, at first glance, there was no one left to put them out. Fuel lines had broken, and they were set off by other flammable materials which had ignited in the disaster.

“Commander,” yelled an ensign just out of sight from the main group. “I think you should come see this.”

Everyone walked over to the sound. As the smoke cleared, you could see what must have been a freshly organized unit. At least regiment strength. Their equipment was in ruins. Blasted bodies and twisted remains littered the area. They must have been with the rebels. The ground was littered with standard fleet weapons. General Command would be pleased. At least these weapons couldn’t fall into the wrong hands. They’d been incinerated. Jordan scanned the area. The wind and the soot were blowing his blond locks and turning them black.

“Weapons fire?” asked Lewis.

“No,” Jordan replied, “there’s no sign of it.”

The wind picked up. Lewis put her hands on her hips. “What do you mean no sign of it? There are burned bodies lying everywhere. I’d say it was a pretty good sign. wouldn’t you?”

Jordan exhaled sharply. “Commander, every weapon leaves a trace. Something. I can’t even get any gunpowder residue. Although there is plenty of sulfur flying around. I don’t think you can even cause this much damage with black powder.”

Lewis lifted her respirator. The rotten eggs smell was intensely pungent. It was sulfur all right. She lowered it back into place. “So, what do you think it is?” she retorted.

Jordan shook his head. “It doesn’t make any sense.” the science officer muttered. “According to the computer, there’d been a giant flash of volcanic activity. Planet-wide.”

“That’s impossible.” Lewis looked smug. “I never heard of any natural occurrence affecting an entire planet on the same day. Volcanic or otherwise.”

Jordan raised one eyebrow. “I’m aware of that. I assume the computer is wrong, but I don’t have any other explanation. You see this?” He reached down and picked up a handful of gray dust off the ground. Jordan let it slip through his fingers and the material floated down to the ground like a light gray rain. “This is volcanic ash.”

Lewis shifted her stance. “I don’t like this. There are all sorts of ways this can go bad. Can any weapons do this?”

Jordan pushed the dust around with his foot. “No weapons I’ve ever seen. Nothing in the Fleet armory anyway.”

A gust of wind blew Lewis’s hair and she had to push it out of her face. “Somebody else? The other side perhaps? Government forces?”

Jordan cringed. “Maybe, but why would you want to make it look like volcanic activity.”

Commander Lewis gave him a stare. "Maybe so someone investigating the event couldn't trace it back to them."

"If you're right, we need to tell fleet as soon as possible."

Lewis's eyes flashed. "Let's hope I'm wrong."

There was a series of arguments over the COMM channel between the skipper and the landing party. He wasn't buying the planet-wide volcanic activity either. In the middle of the heated discussion, there was an earthquake. The landing party had a hard time keeping their feet. When the building were in place they would have been in serious risk of being crushed by the collapsing materials. Fortunately, the structures were already on the ground.

"Get back up here," Pseudonymous demanded, watching the party dancing and jumping around on his screen.

----- *BOB* -----

Back on board, the skipper still did not seem pleased. Even though the group had suffered no casualties. "Give me some distance Mr. Hawke. Let's get out of here."

The Cain's engines hummed to life as the navigator ran his hands over the controls. On the viewscreen, the planet started to recede. The skipper leaned back in his chair and breathed a sigh of relief. The deck plates on the bridge vibrated with the push of the engines. The vibrations increased in intensity ... and then stopped entirely.

"Ensign Jansson," the skipper spit, "What is wrong with my engines?"

"Lieutenant, sir," Diana responded, looking at the readouts. "I'm checking sir."

Pseudonymous appeared less than pleased. "Well, you're an ensign until you figure out what's wrong with my engines and fix them." What followed was a flurry of activity which bordered on the frantic. The engineering staff looked grim. Their appearance wasn't improved by the fact they were all sweating. Before too long panels were opened and bunches of wires and circuits were littering the floor. There were more tools and screws on the floor than dandelions in an open field.

"Well, I'll be damned." The skipper mused.

This comment stopped everyone, but they were all looking at him.

Pseudonymous Howard recrossed his legs. "OK, Jansson you can be promoted again."

You would have had to have taken a poll to see who was the most astonished to hear the captain's comments. He pointed at the viewscreen, who no one else was looking at. "Take a look." Pseudonymous gestured at the screen.

On the screen, Essos IV was on the verge of not being a single planet. It looked more like two bubbles desperately trying to separate themselves on the surface of a cup of coffee. The two spherical shapes were still attached at what you might call the equator. Stretching in the north-south direction. But it was far smaller than any equator on any planet anyone had ever seen. Only a thin strip of material even

joined the two orbs together. They were moving farther apart, but incredibly slowly. It seemed as if they were struggling to separate.

Without any fanfare, what had once been a single object on the screen was now two.

Pseudonymous settled back in his seat. “If we hadn’t have stopped here. We have missed this.” He pointed at the viewscreen again. “Call the science commission. You folks have just discovered a new lifeform. A very large lifeform.”