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Escape Hatch

A Science-Fiction Tale

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e gave her an uneasy smile. "So, Ensign Fitzwallace I hear you've been having some trouble lately."

Fitzwallace was a small woman, hardly noticed by the other members of the crew. He wore a mop unruly, shoulder-length hair which always had half a dozen strands out of place. "I'm fine, sir."

He took a deep breath. "I'm here to help you," he announced. "Did you want to start by lying to me?"

Samantha frowned slightly. "I don't follow, sir."

His face almost cracked a smile. "Let's start again. My name is Norman Bartlett. Dr. Norman Bartlett. Most people call me Norm. I'm one of the Fleet's trauma specialists." He shifted uneasily in his seat. "A few weeks ago, you and some of the other members of the crew were trapped on the bridge of the *AC Cogswell*."

She gave him a polite grin. The sort of half wink which is normally used to tell another person you are uncomfortable and don't want to talk about something. Norm stared at her. "I'm fine, really. We escaped."

Bartlett sighed. "Tell me about last night."

She crossed her hands on her lap. "There's nothing to tell." She did her best at trying to sound as if the story was uneventful. Yet even someone with an untrained eye could see she was failing miserably. "I went to my cabin. I read a book. I fell asleep. Nothing to it."

He checked the notes on his pad. "So, there was no screaming?"

Samantha looked even more uneasy. "It was nothing. Merely commenting on a passage in the book I was reading. I didn't mean to disturb anyone."

Norm didn't seem convinced. "Why don't you tell me about the incident."

"It's all in my report."

"Why don't you tell me what's not in the report."

"Sir?"

"Tell me what you didn't put in the report."

Throwing up her hands, Samantha appeared to indicate the report didn't lack any details. "The attack was sudden. No one was expecting it. We lost engine power after the first pass. Weapons got off a few shots, but without engine power, they didn't do much damage. They turned around and started another run."

"Did it bother you?" Asked Norm.

"Did what bother me?"

"Watching the attack craft approach when the ship's defenses were down?"

She put her hands back in her lap, stood and started pacing. "I was really too busy to notice. Captain Tinsdale was shouting orders. I was busy trying to get a lock on the intruder."

"So, your job was to know where it was?"

"I suppose you might say I was watching, yes."

"It was your job to watch it."

"Yes."

"What happened during the second pass?"

Samantha exhaled heavily. "It took out the shield generators and the fusion generators."

"Did weapons fire at it?"

She took a quick breath. "Yes, but it was traveling so fast they all missed." Samantha had one of those faces. Above her right eye was an acne scar. One of those things it's impossible not to stare at when you are looking at her. Her tone changes as she went on describing the event. It was faster, higher pitched. "It dropped some kind of plasma weapon which breached the hull. There were panic calls over the intercom. Everyone was reporting in. It was all bad news."

He checked his pad. "Do you remember what they said?"

"Not really."

"You were busy with your attempts to help weapon's lock the batteries on the intruder."

"Yes."

"What happened next?"

"A fire broke out on the bridge."

"Can you tell me where?"

"Engineering and Life Support."

Norm put his pad down on the table.

"This was when the captain gave you an order, didn't he?"

"Yes."

He cocked his head to the right. "What was it?"

"Activate the fire suppression system." Samantha almost choked as she gave her answer.

"But you activated the intruder alert system."

Samantha's face turned red. "I turned on the fire suppression system," she announced.

Norman gave her an uneasy glance. "After you notified security you were being boarded."

She rubbed her hands together. “Look, there was a lot going on. The lights were flashing. People were yelling. There was a fire. The sirens. It was chaos. I thought I saw something. I was wrong.”

“But you did see something.”

She shook her head. “No.”

Norm eyes narrowed, he seemed disappointed. “You’ve been through training. You got top marks. Eight years in the field. *You saw something.*” He emphasizes the final sentence.

Samantha pulled her lips inward. “You wouldn’t believe me.”

Norman Bartlett seemed relieved, “You have no idea what I am trained to believe. Nothing you say could surprise me.”

“Something happened during the attack.”

Norm crossed his hands. “I gather.”

Samantha took a deep breath. “It’s not important. I thought I saw something. there was nothing there. In my defense, there were a lot of things going on.”

“So, what happened next?”

She sighed. “All the screens when out. We lost power.”

“But you were still being attacked,” added Norman.

“Yea. But would couldn’t do anything. The controls were dead. Beams started to fall from the ceiling. The ship kept getting rocked as weapons fire hit the ship. It was crazy.”

Norm leaned back in his chair. “And it made you feel uncomfortable.” Samantha didn’t reply. “It’s OK, you know. It’s a normal response. I’d be disturbed if you told me you didn’t feel uncomfortable.” He paused. “What happened next.”

Samantha kept pacing. “The captain ordered us to abandon the bridge.”

Norn cocked his head again. “That’s when the problem started?”

Her eyes shot the doctor with a fire of unconcealed contempt. “You could say that. The main exit was already blocked. We tried to move the steel I-beam off the secondary door, but it was too heavy. Even working together, we couldn’t budge it one centimeter. Nobody could get the escape hatch open either.”

He glanced down at his pad. “This is when you started working on the floor?”

Samantha stared out the window at the unmoving stars. “We took the floor panels up from behind the navigation console. You’re not supposed to do this. It’s a plasma conduit. You can get serious burns. But with the power down, we figured it was safe.”

“What happened when you got the panel off?”

Her eyes never left the stars outside the window. “There’s a long tube which runs down from the bridge. One of the walls as ladder runs built into it. The service crews use it when the ship is in for repairs. Everybody started climbing down the ladder. We got everyone into the tube when there was this massive crash.”

“What happened?”

“Something fell over, blocking the hole we made on the bridge floor. It looked like it was part of the navigation console, but there was a lot of smoke pouring down.”

Norm shifted in his seat. “What happened when you got to the bottom?”

“The hatch was jammed. We couldn’t get it open. smoke was filling the conduit. It was hard to see anything. Alyssa ... ” Samantha stopped and choked back her words.

“Alyssa, that’s Ensign Harper?”

Samantha exhaled. “She passed out.”

“What happened to Ensign Harper?”

“She didn’t make it.”

“And you still couldn’t get the hatch open?”

“No.”

“Commander Khan says you froze. Can you tell me about that?”

“It was nothing.”

“The conduit was narrow. He couldn’t get passed you to help with the hatch.” Norm looked at her until she turned to face him once more. “He says you were unresponsive.”

“I heard him.”

“But you didn’t move?” He paused. “Was there something blocking you? Keeping you from moving?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Samantha replied turning back to face the stars. “The ship started listing to port.”

“But it wasn’t what was keeping you from moving?”

“No.”

Norm dropped his head down. “And you said, ‘I’ve got this.’ what did you mean?”

“I don’t recall saying anything.”

“What did you mean?”

Samantha shouted at him, “I wasn’t there! OK!”

Norm put both his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “What do you mean when you say you weren’t there? You weren’t listening?”

She became extremely quiet. “No, I was listening. I ... you wouldn’t believe me.”

His voice became serious, intense. “Try me.”

Samantha hesitated. Time seemed to dilate. It might have been a minute, maybe two before she answered. It might have been fifteen seconds, she couldn’t tell. She waited for Norm to get impatient, but he remained sitting there, silent. “You know how they say there are many different dimensions? I can see some of them now. So far I’ve counted six of them.”

“This happened after the attack on the bridge?”

“Yes.”

“And you can still see into these dimensions?”

“Yes.”

“The people you thought you saw on the bridge. They were from another dimension? Which is why no one else saw them?”

“Yes.”

Norm seemed genuinely interested. “How can you tell them apart? Do you know what dimension I’m in?”

“Yes,” Samantha sounded confused. “No. Maybe. I don’t know. It just seems like I can tell who is in what dimension now.” She paused. “I crossed over into one of the other dimensions.”

“When you were trapped in the conduit?”

“Yes.” She took a deep breath. “I moved a few feet down. Not in this dimension,” she remarked, “in one of the other ones. Then I jumped into Crewman Adams’s body.”

“You mean Gordon Adams?”

“Yea.”

“Can you jump into anyone’s body?”

“No.”

“But you could jump into Crewman Adams’s body?”

“Yes,” Samantha hesitated. “Because he was dead.”

Norm blinked. “He was dead?”

Samantha growled. “Dead, dying, I don’t know. Maybe. I’m not a doctor. Anyway, I used his body to open the hatch from the other side.”

“And then what?”

“I went back to my body through the other dimension.”

“That’s when you helped everyone through the hatch you’d just opened?”

You could have cut the sadness in Samantha Fitzwallace’s voice with a knife. “Well, not everybody. The captain. He stayed behind to make sure everyone got out through the conduit. He didn’t make it.”

“Let’s see,” Norm looked back down at his pad. “You got the rest of the crew through three more blocked compartments by ...” he stumbled with the next part.

“By traveling into the other dimensions, yes.” Samantha finished for him.

Norm pushed his chair back, stood and tucked his pad under his arm.

Samantha turned and stared at him with a distressed expression. “So, this is it? We’re done?”

“I think so,” replied Norm.

“I’m out of the service? My whole life is over? Everything I’ve dreamed of whipped out in a second. The stars. The universe?” Her voice got quiet. “What are you going to do now?”

“Now?”

“Yea, now?”

Dr. Norman Bartlett gave her a wry look. “Now, I’m going to go recommend you for a medal.”