



NEW DEPTHS

RUMMAN R KALAM

"So this is it, Chirag?" shouted the woman floating on a lifeboat at the man floating on another lifeboat.

The man spun around against a backdrop of a gigantic rubber donut that was rapidly expanding.

"Aurora-1 Station, baby!" screamed Chirag as he threw up his arms which cradled Aliya's vision of a rocket shooting out of a low-orbit satellite.

"Here comes the station itself!" she pointed as Chirag waded near to her position, head cocked back at the station that will land on the floating platform.

"When do you think Earth will laser in the messages?" asked Aliya.

"I bet they already got the laser from humanity's first chapter in a new system," said Chirag, shielding his eyes from the red sun as his eyes tracked the rocket.

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EARTH: CONGRATS, ATLANTINES. EXPLORE URGENTLY. BRIEF ARRIVING.

Aliya read the message on the station main screen with a grimace on her face.

"The first messages are always like that. They just want to let you know that they exist and anything else that's urgent—which is rare," explained Chirag from across the room.

Peeling her eyes away from the screen, Aliya looked at Chirag, her expression unchanged.

"You'd know that if you read the mission logs from most of humanity's missions," he continued.

"No... I know. There are urgent instructions in here," said Aliya as she fixed her gaze upon Chirag who quickly moved towards his terminal.

"Oh, boy. We are to arm the submersible right now and go down," he said, scanning the full brief, "We've been gone for somewhere around five years. Earth has loaded 8 colony ships in the meantime teeming with all of the planet's migrants."

"Wow, we don't have much space back home, do we?" said Aliya with a sigh.

"Doesn't look like it. I'm lowering the sub. Going to suit up now," finished Chirag. He moved from the terminal towards the sub bay and Aliya sat down on the comm terminal.

"No time to break open the champagne bottle. Hah," mused Aliya.

"It's powdered champagne. It can wait." Chirag smiled and nodded at Aliya as he disappeared down the hatch.

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DEPTH: 600 meters.

"Damn, this ocean looks proper deep," said Chirag's crystal clear voice as it filled up the station chamber.

"Mhmm. Seems a bit bumpy but it stops at 2500 meters," mumbled Aliya while looking over the readings.

"How many flora—fauna did we scan so far?" asked Chirag.

"Quite a few. A few hundred maybe, can't say since the data is still raw. The sub scanners are performing tenfold better than we expected them to," replied Aliya.

"Not bad, not bad. I saw a few things here and there. Mostly the fishes we expect although they do seem a bit large with big heads. Might be quite intelligent," observed Chirag.

"I heard established biologists tend to hold onto their assumptions until they at least get some proof," said Aliya as she sipped her coffee with a playful smile.

Chirag didn't transmit his embarrassed laugh either. The two polymaths lounged in their respective chairs, thinking about getting some leisure time. The irony of the situation was not missing in either of their minds. Here they were, looking for off time in their second day of work after spending half a decade asleep in cryogenic freeze. Hilarious.

"Say, Aliya, do you see the bumps yet?" asked Chirag after several hours and 1500 meters.

"Hm. Those aren't bumps, really. It's one big bump," replied Aliya.

"Is it like a giant mushroom or something?" Chirag sat up straight.

"No, not really. Looks like a ball. Half of this gigantic ball thrust onto the ocean floor. Here, let me send you the readings, Chirag."

"These aren't readings. More like the lack of them. What the hell."

"Yeah, that dome is like a giant inert rock. Could say something interesting about the ocean floor topology," Aliya remarked.

"A geologist's dream," Chirag commented.

"Or for others, a nightmare involving

the observation of a stone in their backyards," said Aliya. For once, the duo didn't laugh at a joke. Backyards reminded them of home. A home that didn't actually have backyards but little coops in towers that housed them while they read about humanity's decadence that led to them abandoning home. Or home kicking them out after millennia upon millennia of pain.

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DEPTH: 2461 metres

"Chirag?" Aliya's voice cut into the peace of the sub bridge.

"Yeah?"

"Can you point the underside cameras to the dome and shine some light?"

"Yeah, hold up," Chirag stretched one of his arms as the other one swept over the controls.

"There," he said.

"Oh," said Aliya.

"Oh," Chirag replied.

Beneath the dome, sky scrapers were desperately trying to touch the shell of the glass-like dome but fell a good few hundred meters short. Large creatures, resembling dragons of folklore, flew around the spires. One of the dragons glided off a tower and flew towards the dome. It hovered just behind the dome wall and looked dead into the submersible camera.

Time froze as both Aliya and Chirag struggled to process the sheer incredulity of the situation, locked in gaze with a dragon.

We are not alone.