

Space Station Seven

The Day The Power Went Out

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

"Residents of Space Station Seven, please be advised: a power outage has occurred that is effecting systems throughout the station. Please do not be alarmed. Life-support and other critical systems are not effected in any way. Lighting, Artificial gravity, and site-to-site communications may experience periodic disruptions. Your crew is aware of the situation and is already working diligently to address the issue in a timely manner. Thank you. Again, residents of Space Station Seven, please be advised..."

The pleasant and calm computer voice of Sevena - the personified form of the central computer of Space Station Seven - repeated the message in a lovely and friendly tone. Her voice awoke Nehru most mornings in time for school, but today, his eyes had flared open in shock at the abrupt change. He sat up in his bed, nearly banging his head on the top of his bunk. He listened as the recording repeated. "Lighting, artificial gravity, and site-to-site communications may experience periodic disruptions," she said. Nehru's eyes began to blossom with ideas.

He reached over the edge of his bed and pulled out the draw beneath his mattress. Inside were a gazillion coins and he grabbed a handful of them and tried to drop them. Instead, they floated harmlessly in the air, right where he'd release them. He smiled with delight and then the eager joy in his eyes turned mischievous. He pushed the coins back into his drawer and shut it, then slipped his feet out from under his comforter.

Nehru's room was small, like most private spaces on Space Station Seven. The floor space was narrow, just barely a meter and a half wide and a little more than three meters from end to end. His bunk was set into the dusted-gray metal wall, with book shelves above and storage space beneath it. A personal lavatory was just passed the foot of his bed, hidden behind a semi-opaque divider. The floor was carpeted, a feature exclusive to living quarters on odd-numbered levels.

Nehru opened the door to his room to see his parents exiting their room on the opposite side of their apartment. Between their rooms was the main room, situated around a couch and two love seats. Behind the couch was a kitchenette set made of wood and bright colors. In the corner closer to Nehru's room was a small office space with a desk and shelves dedicated to each of them built into the wall. On the corner closer to his parents' room was a kitchen, all the amenities of which were fixtures built into the wall itself. "Morning, momma," said Nehru as he floated into the communal space.

"Good morning, shona," said his mother. She still had the distinct Bengali accent from Earth. She navigated zero gravity with great trouble, clutching to items and pulling herself towards them, only to pull chairs off the floor. She looked at the wicker kitchenette chair she'd tried to cling to, as though not processing what she'd done.

"Baby, come on," said Nehru's father, pushing the chair back down to the ground. An American, he helped his wife over to the couch where she could get orientated. Like Nehru, both of his parents were still in their bedclothes, but Nehru's mother wore a cotton bathrobe around her silk pajamas.

Nehru's father moved carefully over towards the refrigerator and touched the screen on the door. Sevena appeared, repeating her message with a calming tone. On the refrigerator screen, she was full-sized, almost like she was a real person. Crystal white skin and light pink lips smiled as she spoke. Her soft green hair was pulled back, and her striking blue eyes blinked slowly and rarely.

Her pleasant voice was muted almost instantly by Nehru's dad. He instead read the text that streamed along with her cycled announcement. He tried several command buttons on the screen's interface but they were unresponsive. "System's out," he said as he tried to get access to anything beyond the announcement. He listened and could hear Sevena still speaking through the speakers in Nehru's room and their own. The screens of all the devices very gradually pulsed soft blue light around the edges, the space station's gentle declaration of an important announcement.

Nehru's mother very carefully leaned forward and picked up her reading tablet. Activating it, she got an immediate signal error. "The network is down too," she shared.

Floating behind his mother for a second, holding onto the back of the taupe couch, Nehru asked, "What time is it?"

His father headed over to the windows. He manually opened the shutters and looked outside. The starfield was open and magnificent. Nehru swam through the zero-g air over to his father as he did some quick calculations in his head. "It's...uh...it's October..." he reasoned as his son watched and tried to follow. "But we've gone back to...ugh, I still can't get used to the ten-month calendar." He started his calculations again. "It's, uh...sun's there..." he said, gesturing at the very edge of the sun visible around the side of the window. "It's uh...five...thirty...ish."

Nehru's mom dug around by the couch and pulled out her gym bag. She fished out her wristwatch and confirmed, "5:47am."

"Hey, I was close," Nehru's dad insisted.

Nehru agreed more out of sympathy than interest, then pushed off from the window. He went floating towards the front door on the far wall. He opened it with the push of a button and the doors slid apart. He leaned outside, but quickly tumbled forward as if tugged out. He caught himself on the polished floor with a squeak of his palm on the textured plastic. "The gravity in the hall is still kind of working." His head ached and he had to sit down in the hall for a moment.

"Nehru, be careful," his mother told him. "Jumping from zero-g to gravity is dangerous."

Nehru was still, his eyes closed, waiting for the pain akin to an ice cream headache to subside. "Think school is cancelled?" he asked through dissipating dizziness. Both his parents paused, like they didn't quite process his question. As soon as Nehru opened his eyes and the hall wasn't spinning, he stood and announced, "I'm going to go check on Allison!"

Nehru's feet padded down the hall. With noticeably less downward pull than he was used to, he was able to run quickly passed door after door. He began to leap, springing much farther across the space station as he did. He leapt as though on an extra springy trampoline, vaulting many times his own height across the floor, only to touch down and then kick off with ease.

The hallway lights were half on, with the runway lights along the joint of the wall and the roof bright and strong as always. The overhead lights, that made up the roof's center tile, were dim but on. Meant to simulate the morning, their low levels weren't exactly cause for concern although they were definitely dimmer than usual. This made the normally off-white metal walls seem darker gray and almost unfinished, now that they lacked their usual pristine gleam in the bright daylight. The halls wound and turned subtly, never providing too extended a view down their otherwise straight route. The slight winding gave the halls an organic feel while avoiding monotony.

Nehru made it to the central garden of Section 07-089-05: Space Station Seven, Level 89, Section Five. The garden was a concourse of sorts, with a dozen restaurants and shops. Most were

closed at this hour, although the diner was open, as was the coffee shop. The general store was open too, but only the front-most portion. The primary store was only open during the daylight hours, and wouldn't be accessible until after 9am local time. In and among the shops that were built into the structure of the space station were trees and bushes. A garden in the truest sense, it also held a very different humidity. Simulated winter meant most of the plants were leafless, but one corner of the garden held vibrant equatorial plants that didn't shy from late-year blooming.

Nehru got a running start and leapt for the second layer. Not quite the next level, he was able to grab onto the railing of the walkway that was higher up than the ceiling in his bedroom. He swung his legs over it and ran. He ran down a different hallway, the doors farther apart down this direction. He slid before a door labeled '619' and knocked on it with a rapid beat.

The door slid open and there was Allison. A year older than Nehru, she had pale pink skin and blonde hair. "Come in!" she said eagerly, waving with her hand. Nehru came inside to find her apartment lit by the same gentle announcement lights as his own. As the door shut, Allison shouted, "Mo-om! Nehru's here! Can we go outside?"

Allison's mother came in from her room, blonde locks dangling down into her face. "Honey, what?" She crossed into the central room of their three-bedroom apartment, rubbing her sleep-filled eyes. Considerably larger than Nehru's, Allison's apartment overlooked the Garden and had a spectacular view of the main bay windows that looked out into space. "No. It's not even..." Allison's mother looked around the apartment. "What time is it? It's not even six o'clock." She looked at her daughter and Nehru. "And you're not dressed. Either of you."

Nehru looked down at his light tan pajamas, then at Allison's Star Wars pajamas. "What?" they both said.

There was a chime in the air, like silver windchimes being stirred in a strong breeze. Allison's mother looked at Nehru and asked, "Is this going to be your parents?" Her American accent got stronger. She went to the console on the refrigerator and touched it. "Ahoy," she said with a bit of a yawn.

Nehru's mother appeared on the screen. She wore a contrite half-smile as she looked just off from the image, the effect of looking

at her own screen and not the camera on the side of the door.
"Natalie? Hey, it's Paravi. Is my son there?"

Allison's mom turned to Nehru and mocked him with a childish,
"You're in trouble." She stuck her tongue out at him.

Nehru left Allison's side and crossed the apartment to step
before the refrigerator. His mother's projected visage stared down at
him while a small thumbnail of Sevena was minimized in the corner,
still repeating her announcement. "Hi, mom," said Nehru. He looked
at his feet.

"Nehru, son, you're not to go bounding off like that again," she
said, sounding more and more Bengali by the second. "And you
shouldn't be bothering Natalie and Allison this early in the morning.
Now, come home."

"And pick up some breakfast," called Nehru's father's voice from
off-screen.

"Yes, and stop and get some breakfast from the café," said his
mother. "Oh, and could you get me a coffee please? The usual,
please. Thank you, shona."

The screen went dark and Nehru was left staring at his irritated
reflection.

Two hours later, there was a knock at Nehru's front door.

"Nehru," called his mother, not looking up from her cross-stitch.
"Allison is here."

Nehru's bedroom door slid open and he came trotting out. With
gravity half-restored, he walked rather than swam to the door.
Dressed in blue jeans and a striped long-sleeved t-shirt with a gray
vest over it, he opened the door and let in Allison. She wore capri
pants beneath a kilt and a sleeveless blouse, her blonde hair done up
in a bow against the back of her head. She wore her ever-present
multi-tool belt with half a dozen pouches across it.

"Hello, Allison," said Nehru's mother. Still seated on the couch,
she turned to see Nehru's friend. "You look lovely."

"Thank you, Mrs. Agarwal," Allison responded, blushing a little. Bright eyes flashed as she remembered. "My mom wanted me to ask if you and Mr. Agarwal would like to come over for tea this afternoon?"

"We're still waiting to learn if we can go into work or not," said Nehru's mother, setting aside her cross-stitch. With partial gravity restored, she only had to place the wooden circle firmly on the couch.

"Mom says all the offices are closed for today," Allison reported. "She said the station is going to announce it with the morning news but that all non-essential offices are going to remain closed."

"Well, I'm essential," said Nehru's father. He hopped in, as though trying to milk as much fun out of the lowered gravity as possible. He wore a suit, but with jeans beneath the jacket. "They can't function without me."

"Shona, you're an astronomer," Nehru's mother told his father. "The stars will still be there." She turned to Allison and told her, "That would be lovely. I'll call Natalie and see when she wants to get together. Now, where are you two going?"

"I'm going to go find the aliens, mom," Nehru insisted. Allison elbowed him in the side and glared at him for some discretion.

"Son, you are not going into unauthorized spaces," his father said with uncharacteristic seriousness. He scratched at the partial beard that was clearly a bold fashion choice. "The low gravity might be fun but this is serious. If school's cancelled, it's because there's something up with the station." He looked earnestly at Nehru and Allison both. "You're going to stay in Section Five, understand? No Jefferies Tubes, no hopping a transport to another section or another level. And you're definitely not going into an unauthorized area. Am I clear?"

Nehru nodded, his lips swished to one side. Allison smiled brightly and was about to speak, but Nehru's dad pointed a finger at her. "That goes for you too, young lady." Now it was Allison's turn to sulk. "Now you two can go but I want you to check in before lunch, understand?"

"Yes dad!" Nehru called, he and Allison already out the door.

"Dipen!" both Allison and Nehru called, both of them knocking on the door of apartment 843. When nobody answered, they knocked again. "Dipen!" they practically chanted.

The door slid open and Dipen stood before them. Same age as Allison, he had dark brown skin which was intensified by the dark brown circles under his eyes. "What is it?" he asked. He had an accent not unlike Nehru's mother, but much thicker. It occasionally rendered him almost incomprehensible to his friends. He had the first dots of a mustache under his nose, which contrasted with his slender shoulders and noodlely arms.

"Come on!" Nehru begged, Allison grabbing Dipen's wrist. "School's cancelled."

"Yeah, I figured," said Dipen, being tugged out of the apartment. Being pulled into the hallway made him stumble as he fell into partial gravity. "Oh my sweet heaven!" he moaned as he grabbed his head.

"Have they not restored gravity in your place yet?" Allison asked, checking over his shoulder. She took a washer from a pouch on her belt and flipped it like a coin. The washer went spinning rapidly into the air, far higher than should have been possible. The instant it passed his threshold, however, the metal disc began to accelerate. Its rotations had no gravity to resist them, so they provided the coin with force that carried it into his apartment. Allison and Nehru marveled at the washer until it disappeared, followed a moment later by the sound of it clinking against a far wall.

"They always get to us last," Dipen told her through a yawn.

"Come on!" Nehru asked again. "Let's go find the aliens." He grabbed Dipen's wrist and tried to pull him into the hallway.

"There are no aliens!" he insisted. He said more, but it was in Urdu. He turned into his apartment and snatched his shoes up off the floor. "Why do you always drag me on these silly searches of yours?" His apartment was a thick darkness, but from it came the scents of home including turmeric and other spices.

"Because you want to know where the aliens are as much as I do," Nehru told him. "The only thing better than reading history is making history, right?"

"Making history makes one late for dinner," Dipen told Nehru as he got dressed.

"Thanks Bilbo Baggins," Allison told him. "Come on!" She began to run-float away, letting the two boys catch up.

Tying his shoes, Dipen called in Urdu deeper into the apartment. There was a sleepy reply from his parents. He stepped out of his apartment and let the door shut behind him. Eyes pinched closed, he looked down the hallway at half-illumination. The wave of the hallway crested at his apartment door, giving little view in either direction. "What's happening?" asked Dipen. "I remember when Sevena announced the power outage, but I went back to bed after that."

"We'll find out at our next stop," called Allison as she disappeared down the hall.

"Yeah," Nehru told Dipen. "We've got to collect our ninja."

The door opened to reveal the tall Akami in full ninja regalia, including shoulder armor and a facemask like a monster. She stood with her arms crossed and her ankles crisply held together as she looked down at the other three teens.

Nehru and Allison both nodded crisply to the taller girl, then looked at Dipen. He yawned. Akami turned back into her apartment. "Mo-om!" she called. "I'm going out with my friends!"

"Have fun, dear," her mother called back over the sounds of pro-wrestling on the TV. The living room was a shrine to contact sports. Shelves and tables were covered in regalia for professional wrestling, mixed martial arts, and all manner of combat and combat-adjacent past-times.

"What is our task today?" asked Akami as she stepped out, the door sliding closed behind her. Her apartment was on the apex of the hallway's curve. Her neighbors' doors were within eyeshot, giving the hall a neighborly feel without getting too crowded.

"What?" asked Dipen.

"Yeah, I didn't understand you," Allison agreed.

Akami pulled up her fabric ninja mask and repeated, "What are we doing?"

"We're looking for aliens," Allison told her as the four began to walk down the hall.

"Precisely," Nehru confirmed from the lead. "We're going to sneak into the inner ring," he said. "That's where they're probably keeping alien samples, or wreckage of alien ships."

"The inner ring is where the artificial gravity is set-up," Dipen argued. "It's a basically just a bunch of giant power cables."

"Yeah, and can you think of somewhere better they'd keep the aliens?" Allison asked him. He didn't venture a guess.

"My dad's probably down there," Akami urged, suddenly whispering despite the four teens being completely alone in the hallway. The air was still, the result of the atmospheric units turned down to ease the strain on the power systems.

"Do you think he'll let us in?" Allison asked, hopeful.

"No, but..." Akami shrugged. "Like, I don't mind if you get caught. I just want my dad to be the one to catch you. If its someone else, they might send you to prison or kick you out of school or something."

Dipen turned incredulously to her. "If we get caught? What about you?"

"I won't get caught," said Akami. She lowered her mask. "I'm a ninja."

"Yeah, man," Nehru told him.

"She's got a mask and everything," Allison agreed.

"Come on!" Nehru said, leading them down the hall.

The four kids reached the Garden for Section Seven, a level passed where Akami lived. It looked different from the Garden for Section Five. A massive redwood stood at the center, rising up a dozen floors. The great tree stood in a circular plot with its long branches reaching out close enough to the adjacent walkways that one could almost reach out and grab a leaf. Businesses and restaurants dotted the floors in a cylinder around the tree. Glowing panels in the

roof and walls gave the room the sense of outdoor light, helping the tree to breathe normally in the artificial environment.

The air was moving here, processed air currents helped along with the humidifiers as well as the natural churning of air in so large and spacious an area. The sounds of birds were piped in through speakers, accompanied by the soft tones of Sevena repeating periodically an update on the power outages and disruptions to the station. On screens across the Garden, her artificial face smiled as she professionally kept the residents updated on closings, power disruptions, and repair status.

A few workers could be seen hanging from cords as they affected repairs on some of the screens between the floors. Even with the gravity at half-strength, they were secured and ready in case of a fall. With them was a repair mech, a large two-legged machine with the shape of a human. The repair mech walked on the side of the wall, using its modular feet to grip securely onto indentions of the wall so that it could make repairs in tandem with the repair workers. Its body matched the aesthetic of Space Station Seven, with few hard corners. It instead had a bulbous body with rounded limbs, and colored gray and white.

The four kids all came to a halt and watched as the machine worked. Twice as tall as a human, its head had two big eyes set against a black face, bright blue blinking occasionally in the digital approximation of a person.

The four adventurers were so enthralled by the sight of the mech working repairs that they didn't notice the footsteps behind them. Dipen only happened to glance around and then he yelped quietly. The other three turned to find Gondwana standing over them. The burly boy with a slight stomach and long, thick arms, looked down at the four and smirked. "Hey there." They began to scatter but Gondwana grabbed Nehru's arm and kept him from pulling away. "What are you up to?"

Nehru pulled his hand free with a whip and glared at the older boy. "Leave us alone!"

"Yeah!" insisted Akami from behind Nehru.

"Geez, I was just joking around," Gondwana told him. "You guys can't take a joke." He looked up at the machine as it worked. "I bet we could drive one of those." Nehru looked up as well. "It'd be cool,

all biiiyu-whir, and all the brrr,crck,brr!" He kept making sounds, simulating less a repair robot and more a giant war machine from science fiction.

"We couldn't drive it," Nehru told Gondwana. "It's too big."

"Yeah-huh," Gondwana insisted. With a body built for sports, he looked as close to adulthood as his sense of humor was akin to a selfish toddler. "I can show you. We just need to find out where they keep 'em." He looked at Akami. "I bet her dad's got the keys to them and everything." He put a heavy hand on Nehru's shoulder. "Let's go find them."

"No!" Nehru insisted, trying and pulling to pull free his shoulder.

"Why not?" Gondwana challenged. "What else do we have to do today? Not school. They cancelled it because a bunch of babies might float away or something stupid."

Nehru pulled free of Gondwana's big hand and backed up, Allison and Akami supporting him, Dipen nearby but afraid of being within the splatter effect of their blood-loss if Gondwana got rough. "Come on, guys," Gondwana urged, less a request and more of a threat.

"No!" yelled Akami before she stamped on Gondwana's foot. He yelped and grabbed his foot, hobbling on one leg. Doing so in the low gravity caused his leaps to go much higher, which threw off his equilibrium. He tumbled back, more in confusion than genuine pain. In the moment of distraction, the four bolted from him as he continued to hold his throbbing foot.

They ran to the far elevator. It ran the length of the space station as well as provided passage through the different sections. Allison ran for the elevator and hit the button. But when the door opened as the others arrived, Nehru and Akami grabbed her by the arms. She yelped in surprise as they ran to the left, down a dim service hallway. Dipen lingered at the elevator doors, gesturing at them. "Guys?" he asked. "Guys!" He heard Gondwana approaching from the way they had run, and dashed after his friends.

The four ducked behind a half-door. The barrier went from the base of the floor to an adult's waist, so it came up to the chest of Dipen and Akami, and closer to the shoulders of Nehru and Allison. They hid behind it, granting just enough clearance to look over the edge to watch the elevator doors.

Gondwana ran up just after the doors closed. He smacked the button and stood, waiting. After a moment and several shifts of his weight, he turned and pouted. He abandoned his pursuit and returned to the center of the section to watch the mecha work.

The four friends all sighed with relief and slumped down. The service hallway wasn't nearly as well-lit as the living spaces. The passage was more of a consistent box attached to identical neighbors, with all sorts of access portals and occasionally even a monitor and data port. A single light dotted the ceiling every so often, but between the rare illumination and the dark gunmetal gray color of the service passageway, it felt cold and isolated. The only indication of ceiling and floor was the orientation of the letters written at intervals more frequent than the lights, industrial directions and technical specifications that were as alien to the children as the lifeforms they searched for.

"This is perfect," said Nehru, floating a bit. He swam through the air, the artificial gravity completely turned off in the service hall. He turned around, but over-estimated the effort and ended up spinning in the air. He laughed once he realized how harmless it was. "Come on!" he told his friends.

Allison didn't hesitate to float up after him, turning a bit as she did. She laughed as well, then swam upwards like she was speed-swimming across a pool. Akami refused to miss out on the fun so she swam up after them, passing Nehru with a backstroke.

Beneath the shower of giggling and laughing, Dipen watched the three swim and couldn't bring himself to deny the fun. Trepidatiously, he swam up a bit, his toes leaving the ground. He floated in total freedom, bereft of all gravity and orientation. Realizing that, and staring down a hallway that was almost identical – up or down – he yelped and grabbed onto the barrier, returning himself to the ground securely.

Nehru floated towards an access panel and pulled close to it. He pulled from his belt a small pen flashlight and clicked it on, shining a solid beam of light through the dusty air. He read the description of the power conduits that passed through and, with just a bit of thought, placed where in the station they were currently. "We're at...we're near one of the junctions."

"The junctions?" asked Dipen, still clutching the gate.

"It's where the vertical and horizontal routes cross," Allison explained. She swam over to Nehru and caught his arm, pulling herself next to him. He held the pen steady and let her read the panel covering. "Looks like we're near A-19 and B-70." She turned and floated in the air, facing Akami. The ninja was walking on the roof, enjoying the inverted perspective. "Do you know if we're close to the quarantine barriers?"

"I think so," said Akami, not giving the question much thought.

"Wait, what quarantine barriers?" asked Nehru.

"The bulkheads that will partition off the space station," Allison told him. "They can shut off whole sections. Not just like to keep people from getting through, but like air and power and stuff. It's in case a whole bunch of people get sick or something. Because we're in space, germs and stuff can be a lot worse than they are in an atmosphere."

"Not to mention if there's an air leak, they want to be able to clamp it down quick," said Akami. Allison nodded in agreement. "But yeah, I think I heard my mom saying that dad had said they needed to oversee some work somewhere near here."

"Okay," Allison said, turning to the access panel. She began to feel around its edges, digging her nails into the hard plastic.

"What are you doing?" asked Nehru, just before she pulled the panel off.

"You broke it!" Dipen shrieked.

"Did not," said Allison. Nehru looked inside with his flashlight and, then reached inside. He winced suddenly and pulled his hand out. Sucking his finger, he announced, "The May circuit is active. That means they've got power going that way." He pointed down into the darkness.

"That means we go that way," said Allison.

"That's the way your dad is," Nehru told her and Akami.

"We have to find him to make sure he doesn't see us," Allison told Nehru, swimming by. Akami nodded and followed. Nehru grinned and waved for Dipen to follow. He yelped but did so.

Akami's father was a big man. A former sumo wrestler in Japan, he had lost considerable fat after his retirement from the sport but had lost little of his imposing size and presence. As if made out of solid muscle, the man stood perfectly still as he watched a construction crew repair a bulkhead. Thick arms crossed, he watched the work with technical and tactical certainty, making sure of every detail as the repair crew of nine rushed through the job.

"What are they doing?" Allison whispered. She was crouched with the others, a few lengths down the hallway. The walls vibrated with echoes of blow torches and on-site communication, while Akami's father radioed with others, coordinating the efforts. Through the doorway a few meters ahead, the four kids watched the repair team work.

"They're repairing a bulkhead," said Nehru. "But why? It must have been forced open."

"There ARE aliens," Dipen realized.

"Big aliens," Akami agreed. She fist-bumped the terrified Dipen.

"Let's see if we can go back down that other hall," Nehru suggested to the others. He floated back the way they'd come, slipping down the hall at the nearest junction point. One by one, the others followed, Akami the last to go.

Only a few seconds after they'd gone, a spark from one of the workers caused a burst. "Breech!" yelled one man, just before he was violently yanked towards the bulkhead. The others abandoned their work immediately and grabbed the man as air went sucking chaotically towards the tiny hole in the metal.

Akami's father raced ahead of the others. He angled a plate of metal that they used for repairs and let it fall over the suction. The metal stopped the pull immediately, although it warped and contorted. The metal plate groaned under pressure but it held.

Akami's father grabbed one of the torches that floated in the air where the workers had left them when their coworker came under danger. He applied the arc and began to seal the metal plate in place. "What happened?" he yelled over the welding arc as he quickly secured the makeshift solution.

"We're on the edge of the station, sir," one of the other works advised him. "The metal here is under stress from the vacuum. If it's compromised, it doesn't take much..." He wiped his face, struggling to regain his composure.

"Everybody out," ordered Akami's father. "We'll resume working once we're in environmental suits. I don't want anyone near the edge of the station without total environmental protection. Especially near the damage. The threat's too great." The workers all agreed and hurried out.

The four floated on through the darkness, the hallways lit only with emergency lights. The only sound was the rattling of distant vents and the distant voices of repair crews. Words were lost, only the echoes passing like ghosts through the halls. The four kids were silent as they floated along, keeping a watchful eye in all directions. Their glances passed this way and that. Without gravity, halls to the side, drops beneath, and shafts above all turned into directions from which detection could come.

Nehru paused at a corridor mouth and leaned around the edge. The boxy passage, with edges smoothed in case of depressurization, was lit with flashing yellow lights and klaxons sounding periodically. He peeked down the passage, certain he would see an alien.

Instead, he saw an armed guard.

Nehru yanked his head back, gasping frantically for a second. He slapped his hand over his mouth to keep his breathing quiet. Allison, Akami, and Dipen floated over to him, about to ask but he put his finger to his lips. He leaned very carefully back around and studied the guard.

The woman was dressed in the dark gray and off-white tones of the security's camouflage. She had a sleek, smooth rifle type of weapon. Her eyes were hidden behind a helmet in case of atmospheric depressurization and her magnetic boots were locked onto the floor plating.

"She's got a plasma rifle!" Akami squealed. Allison and Dipen both smacked their hands over her mouth to silence her. They pulled her back and the four huddled close. "She's got a plasma rifle," Akami repeated much quieter, once their hands were away from her face.

"Why is there an armed guard?" Dipen asked Nehru.

"In case the aliens come back, obviously," Nehru told him. He looked around and spotted an air vent above them. He floated up to it and moved the grating with only a little bit of trouble. "Come on," he told them, slipping into the ventilation shaft. Allison followed him quickly. Akami went next, having some trouble fitting her thicker shoulders through the tube. Dipen went last, having trouble curling his legs through the opening in the narrow gap.

The four floated through the air vent. It was little wider than a video screen. Nehru's slender shoulders always managed to rub against one side without fail. Allison followed behind, her long blonde hair floating up into the air like a wild net of tendrils. Behind her, Akami was having to crawl through the tube. The largest of the four, she couldn't move in any way that didn't result in her pressed into two or more sides. Behind her was Dipen, constantly looking behind him and certain death would come from any angle if not every angle all at once.

As the four passed a vent, Nehru stopped abruptly. "Holy cow," he gasped. Before he could get a good look through the vent, Allison collided with his legs. Akami slammed into her, pushing Nehru on farther. Dipen, paranoid to be monitoring in all directions, managed to stop himself before he hit Akami.

"What is it?" asked Allison, rubbing her scalp.

Nehru tried to turn around in the tunnel but couldn't manage. He looked for another vent, but couldn't. "Look out the vent," he told Allison. "Can you see it?"

Allison had to swim forward, almost between Nehru's legs. She craned her head to see, looking through the vent out into the hallway beyond. An observation area meant for social gatherings held a window that looked out into space. In the window, Allison could see a shadow fallen over part of the space station. "What is that?" she asked.

"What do you see?" asked Akami. "What is it?" she asked Nehru while Allison struggled to see.

"I don't know, I only caught a glimpse of it," he answered across Allison's head. "Allison, can you tell anything about—"

Allison pushed the vent open, startling the other three. She swam through the narrow opening with some acrobatic grace and floated into the room. The observation space was little more than a junction in the halls. It was a square that connected three different paths through the station's access tunnels. The air was light, the atmospheric levels turned down to emergency levels.

Allison swam up to the window with rounded edges and pressed against it, tilting her head awkwardly to see. With just a bit of searching, they could all tell as soon as she fixed her eyes on the mysterious object. "What is it?" asked Nehru.

"Is it an alien?" Akami followed, hopeful.

Allison's face was awash with the exterior lights of the space station as well as the starlight outside. Her eyes crinkled as she tried to grasp what she was looking at. "No, it's..." Realization struck. "It's a piece of metal."

Four faces were immediately flush against the cold window. Cheeks and noses pressed against the transparent material so they could see. On the other side of the window, they could make out the slightest edge of something metallic. With the sun approach that side of the station, they could make out precious little except its jagged silhouette. "What is it?" asked Nehru.

"Maybe it's space trash," suggested Dipen.

In unison, the other three all asked, "Space trash?"

"Yeah," he said, the first to peel his face away from the window. "The orbit around earth is full of all sorts of junk from the space missions from previous generations. Rocket tubes, jettisoned materials, and just straight-up broken satellites and stuff that never fell to earth. There's like this giant junkyard of trash all over the earth's orbit."

"What should we do?" Nehru asked. He looked at the jagged edge of the metal and felt a rush of fear. "They haven't removed it."

"If the repair crews were all the way back the way we came, they may not know where it is," suggested Allison.

"They know," Dipen told her, certain in the omniscience of adults.

"No, the external sensors can actually be real easy to damage," Akami told him back.

"It's possible they're fixing the damage as they come to it," Allison told Dipen, in agreement with Akami. "With space, there really isn't a trivial risk. Any break needs immediate repair or else..." She looked out the window again, chilled at the mere prospect. "But something this big...and if they don't know it's there?"

"We need to tell somebody," Nehru realized.

"Tell them what?" asked Akami. "If we tell them where we saw it, we'll get in trouble."

"Better we get in trouble than the station lose more power or anything," Allison told their resident ninja.

"Yeah, and something that big," Nehru said with a nod at the window. "People may have been killed."

Akami checked back with Dipen. Even he seemed to agree with the course of action. She again looked out the window and sighed, resolved to her fate. "Man, my dad's going to be so mad."

Commandant Patrick Toussaint tapped his index fingers together as he stared down at his desktop. A man closer to the start of his career than the end of it, he had only a few specks of grey in his hair. Deep black skin hid the lines on his face when he finally looked up at the four kids standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the other side of his desk. "Please explain to me again," he asked, his words thick with a Haitian accent, "what you were doing in that area?"

Nehru, Allison, Akami, and Dipen, all shifted. Being back in full gravity caused their backs to ache, but it was the glare of Akami's father behind them that really hurt.

Allison started with, "When the aliens attacked--" Akami's father growled. The four children all looked over their shoulders at him as the giant of a man glowered disapprovingly at each of them. They turned and faced forward again, feeling out of place in the humble but professional office of Space Station Seven's Commandant.

Toussaint leaned back in his rich desk chair and considered the children for a moment. The left side of his mouth curled as he realized

no further answer was forthcoming. "Come now, children. Tell me the truth."

"We were looking for aliens," they said. All four mumbled some part of the sentence but only Nehru actually said it in its entirety.

"Aliens," the Commandant repeated, trying not to smile and failing. He glanced at Akami's father. The big man equally struggled not to reveal a charmed smile. He allowed only a smirk, and only for a second. "Nehru...son...you are going to be the death of me." The senior commander of Space Station Seven sat forward and tugged down on the front of his white uniform. "There are no aliens on this space station. Thus far, humanity has met no one else. We look forward to meeting them, but we must find them first, yes?"

"If there weren't aliens, why was there an armed guard?" asked Allison. The Commandant's eyebrow rose.

"That's enough," said Akami's father, with a voice as even as a ruler and as hard as stone.

The Commandant gave him a patient nod. "If you're referring to the security agents, they were mobilized because their suits are, by design, capable of handling emergencies like zero-gravity and depressurization."

"But she had a plasma rifle!" exclaimed Akami. Her father growled like a bear. "But she did!" his daughter insisted back at him.

"She did," the Commandant interjected, more to keep her from being scolded further. "But a plasma rifle can function as a makeshift welding torch if needs be; the proper tools of which were needed elsewhere thanks to the repairs caused by the impact. And plasma rifles draw ions from the atmosphere, another function that can have non-violent benefits in an emergency situation. You saw only a guard with a weapon, when in truth what you should have seen is a trained responder with a multi-capable tool."

He nodded and then rose. "You violated quarantine. You entered a secure area. You entered an off-limits area. You entered a dangerous area. Do you know there was no oxygen in that work space?" he asked them. He paused for that detail to register with them. "Had you stayed there, you would have all died." The chilling fact made all four kids look nervously at each other.

"Fortunately, you didn't die," the Commandant acknowledged. He paced before the four like they were soldiers. "So for each of these crimes, I should throw you in jail for days, or weeks. Maybe longer. Alternatively," he allowed, "because you spotted the debris that damaged the station, we have been able to direct our repairs with far greater accuracy. We've restored gravity and power to the majority of the station where it had been disrupted. You've helped turn a dangerous situation into merely an inconvenient one." He stopped before Nehru and said, "I'm inclined to call it even, no?" He wiped his hands, as if he was departing from a game of cards.

He put a hand on Nehru's shoulder and knelt down to look him in the eyes. "This is the third time in two months you've been brought to my office. I like you but I'm getting very tired of meeting like this."

Nehru swallowed. "Yes sir."

The Commandant rose and stood with his hands behind his back. He looked at Akami's father, the head of security. The man gave him a lazy shrug. "It's been a busy morning and we've got many repairs still ahead of us. I don't care to deal with telling your parents. Be gone, all four of you space rats."

The kids broke out into giggles of relief. "Thank you sir!" they all said and rushed out. The Commandant turned to Akami's father and the two men shared amused smiles. Meanwhile, with the office door open, the soft echoes of Sevena's voice made it to them.

"Residents of Space Station Seven, please be advised: power has been fully restored to the entirety of the space station. Repairs are currently being completed to the damage caused by space debris impacting with the outer hull. We apologize for the inconvenience and we thank you for your patience as we resume normal operations. Again, residents of Space Station Seven..."

Into the endless beauty of space, Space Station Seven floated on, the residents within continuing with their day and with their lives.

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