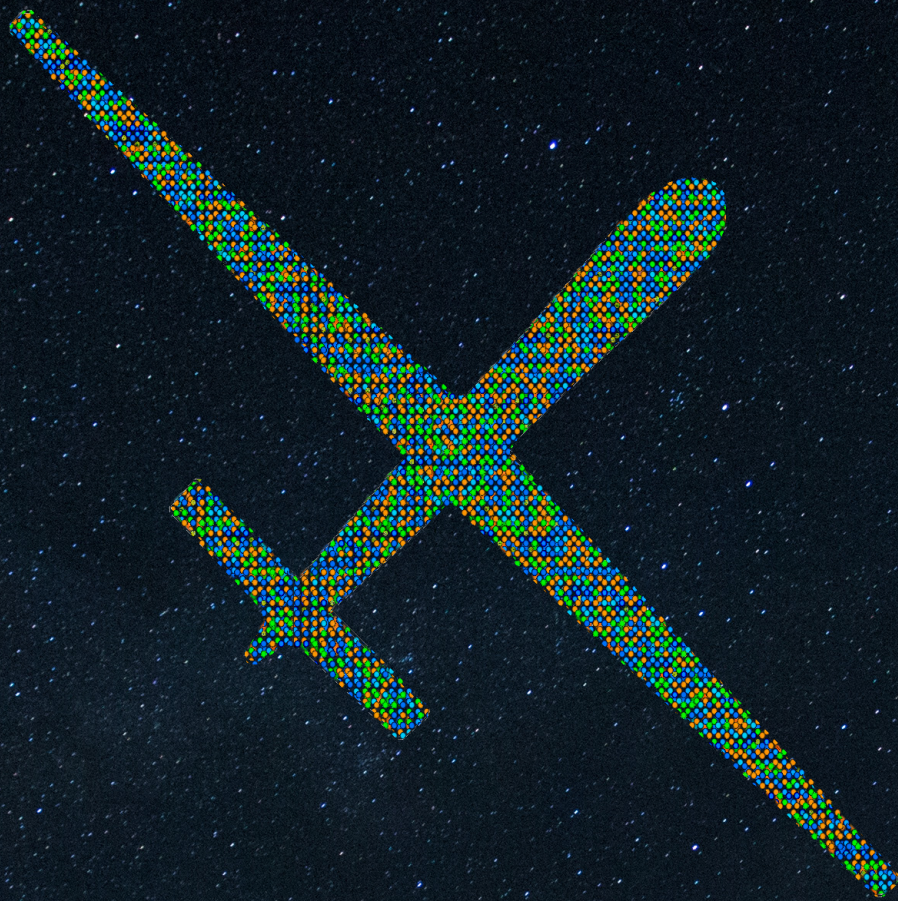


THE GENESYS
PROGRAM



SKELETON CREW
HT AARON

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CREW

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Tycho

In my absence, Tycho had gone from dirt map to home base. Mylar space blankets and brown-bag meal rations were stacked on the granite slab between Lara and Ethan, now in my seat. Beside the rations, a quartet of gazillion-lumen LED flashlights rested atop the orca's folded thermal blanket. A walkie-talkie with a whip antenna rounded out the haul.

Captain Young, marching towards us, was almost back from the orca. Ethan, gloating over the stolen seat, was pigging out on chicken noodles. "Chow time," he said, tossing me a ration pouch marked **Grilled Jalapeño (Synthetic) Meat Patty**. There was no expiration date.

"I'm not hungry," I said, chucking it back.

"There's no reason to starve yourself," he said. "There're forty meals in the orca."

"Thirty six," Lara said, correcting him. "Less the eight here."

"Whatever," Ethan said.

I plunked down on the rock's north end. "So the kid's a little weird but he's offered to help."

"What's so weird about him?" Ethan asked.

"Everything," I said.

"You just said he was a 'little' weird."

"Yeah, well it's like saying that you're a little weird. I was giving him the benefit of the doubt since he might be able to help us. At this point, he's our best bet unless you have a better idea." I knew he didn't. "There's a catch, though."

"Oh here we go—" Ethan said.

"Which is?" Young asked, poking through the ration bags.

"I promised him an astronaut slot. Since we're a skeleton crew as it is."

"We'll make him an ensign," Young said.

"We'll owe him a shuttle tour and some flight-sims."

"A catch, indeed."

"Yeah, well—"

"You wanna throw the moon in while you're at it?"

"There's no need," I said. "He took to the astronaut idea and that was enough. I asked him to sit tight while we worked out a plan."

"What's his name," Young asked.

"Joey," I said. "His name's Joey."

"And you're sure Joey can help?"

"That's what he says."

"Okay, we'll worry about your promises later," Young said. "For now we have a new crew member and a new plan—"

"What new plan?" Ethan asked.

"The one you're interrupting," Young shot back.

"Sorry," Ethan mumbled, reverting to his noodles.

“Rip, it’s stripes time for Joey. He’ll have to earn ’em. Getting in touch with mission control is priority one; you have the number. Lara will go with you. Ethan and I will work on the beacon. If we need you back here, we’ll pop the flares. Any questions?”

“Should we really be splitting up?” Ethan asked.

“It won’t be for long,” I said. “An hour. Two, max. Joey’s not far from home, that’s obvious.”

“I think we should stick together,” Ethan said.

“Tough cookies. You’ve spent—”

“There’s no problem I can see,” Young said, “if our new crew member gives us a better chance to contact mission control this evening then we take the shot. Unless you’re saying you wanna go with them—”

“No,” Ethan replied, shaking his head. “We should stay together here in case a rescue team’s on the way. That’s all.”

“Rescue shows, we let them know we’ve split up. Simple. That’s no obstacle to putting two teams to work.”

“But—”

“No buts,” Young said. To Lara and I, he continued, “Take whatever you need except the radio. If possible, report back tonight. Otherwise, no later than nine A.M. If Joey doesn’t work out this evening, we’ll leave for town around ten in the morning.”

Ethan, tinkering with the radio, cut in.

“Anyone know the rescue frequency?”

“One-six-six point something,” Young said. “It’s in the binder. We’ll get to it later. In the meantime, we need to fix the beacon.” Pointing at the radio, he said, “I’ll take that.” Ethan tossed it to him. Young turned a knob, muting the static.

“You two,” Young said to Lara and me, “Good luck . . . see you back here in a bit.”

I gave Captain Young a half-hearted civilian salute as he strode for the orca. He didn’t reciprocate.

“Wait a sec,” Ethan muttered, taking off after him.

* * *

Lara—flashlight in one hand, ration bag in the other—was set to go. I grabbed a plastic sack from the rations pile labeled **SPAGHETTI WITH BEEF AND SAUCE**.

“Oh, this one includes your daily dessert regimen,” I said, pretending to admire the menu. “Vanilla skyr and beet kombucha.”

“No way,” Lara said.

“Yogurt raisins and purple drink powder close enough?”

“Sure are.”

“Here ya go.” We swapped meals.

“You should bring one for the ensign,” she said.

“He could use about ten but yeah . . . one more for now,” I said, taking another. I stuffed a water bottle in my pocket and grabbed a flashlight as we set out for Joey’s new roost in the trees across from the orca.

Darkness had come quickly.