

Destiny Forty Eight.

A Sci-Fi short story of 3,550 words – Used as part of Ripples From The Past

These were posted as short stories on my old Weebly site and Wattpad. I'm going to gradually add them to my new site, as blog posts.

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Destiny Forty Eight was owned by the Parallax Mining Company. They had never owned a huge number of craft, nine to be precise. Someone at their public relations company had come up with the idea that beginning the numbering at forty five, would be a good idea.

"It'll give the impression of size, of permanence, of stability."

They'd been right; Parallax Mining had survived several major recessions and one complete destruction of its headquarters building. It was perceived as a good investment and every shares issue had been fully taken up. That said, the crews of their mining supply craft, weren't exactly top drawer.

"It'll mean slowing down and dropping out of our time slot for Phlot beacon." Said Commander Zin Ganaan. "That will cause extra paperwork Mel, lots of it."

Zin hated anything that messed up the routine of the craft. He especially hated anything that meant paperwork and missing beacon slots. He was even beginning to hate Mel Habnah, his science officer. She was a good kid, but she seemed to delight in finding ways to fuck up the smooth routine of Destiny Forty Eight.

"Other craft will have picked up the distress call." Said Mel. "They'll be able to see us on their long range scans too, know that we're closest. We are legally bound to answer any distress....."

"Fine, fine, turn us around for deceleration." He said. "Careful though Mel, we don't want to break anything, they might deduct it from our pay."

The ship was huge and nothing was secured or bolted down. Nothing on mining ships was ever properly secured, it sort of came with the territory. The last thing anyone needed, was to spend hours un-securing heavy equipment and crates of spares. It all just sat there, held in place by their artificial gravity, which was kept at .7 of standard G, to save on running costs. The inertial damping too, was kept to a bare minimum and as Miram, his first officer liked to point out;

"Anyway, I think we got the beta version of the inertial damping system."

Not that Miram was joining in with their chatter. She was too preoccupied with sulking, over a bad sexual encounter on their last planetary stopover. That was the problem with mining planets, as she often told everyone within earshot;

"Too many miners with nothing between their ears, apart from shit and sawdust !"

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Destiny Forty Eight turned slowly, the directional thrusters firing sporadically, on low power. Zin felt a little vibration under his feet, enough to make a few things fall over, or roll to where they weren't supposed to be. Nothing dangerous, just damage maybe, to some expensive pieces of mining kit. He wouldn't really have to pay for it, but an inventory was always taken when they returned to base. Damage too much equipment and he might find himself demoted to being someone else's first officer.

“Really gentle with the main thrusters Mel.” He said. “As though we’re carrying several drums of liquid high explosive.”

“We are carrying barrels of liquid..... Oh, I get it !” Said Miram.

“Nice to have you awake Miram.” He said. “Keep your hand on the inertial damping control and step it up a bit if it’s needed.”

“Ok boss.”

Strictly his title was commander, but he quite liked the way Miram called him boss. She had an outer colonies accent and accentuated the last ‘S’ on boss. There were automatic systems of course, if you fancied living really dangerously. They were from Phlot, one of the less affluent Indie worlds, with technology several generations behind that of the Menderan Empire. Mel pressed a large yellow button, using a hand slider to increase thrust from the main Ion drive.

“We have a lot of vibration people !” He yelled. “Do something about it.”

“Slight yaw to the left !” Someone shouted.

“I’ve got it boss.” Said Miram. “Easy to sort out.”

She did and they were now travelling at the same speed as the vessel broadcasting a distress signal. Not a Phlot vessel, it was putting out a Menderan distress call. Zin just hoped that nothing too valuable had been damaged during their unscheduled manoeuvre. No use telling his boss at Parallax about a legal duty to answer distress calls, he’d still get his balls chewed off.

“Closer now, get us close enough to see her ident.” He said.

Destiny Forty Eight didn’t do smooth manoeuvres, she just wasn’t built for it. The vessel sort of crabbed towards the vessel in distress, using front and rear directional thrusters. It took quite a while, before Zin could see the lettering on the side of what appeared to be, a lifeless derelict.

“That’s a Menderan Walker class vessel.” Said Mel. “Real cutting edge stuff, capable of going just about anywhere.”

“Also used in the sort of research, best kept off world.” Added Miram. “Or at least, those are the rumours.”

Zin looked at the words on the hull in Menderan, which he couldn’t read. Below them was a smaller version of the Ident in the common tongue, which he could read.

‘Menderan Science Vessel – Grey Walker.’

Nothing about what to do if it was found drifting though, not a word about that. A huge off world science lab, drifting a long way from Menderan territory and appearing to be lifeless. It was unthinkable, but the proof was right there on the view screen.

“It’s huge,” said Mel, “we’d fit inside one of its cargo air locks.”

“Don’t get any weird ideas.” Said Zin. “What are our limited array of sensors picking up ?”

“Our comms system has been trying theirs for a while now.” Mel replied. “Nothing coming back, on any frequency, even the weird and rarely used ones. Just the low power signal saying ‘help us,’ in the common tongue.”

“They’re drifting.” Added Miram. “If hurtling through space at about eighty thousand miles per hour, can be called drifting. No shields, no Empire electronic ident.... They’re dead boss. I’d use a lifeform scanner, but well, you know why not.”

“I know Miram, because we don’t have one. We’re a mining supply ship with technology a good fifty years out of date. We shouldn’t even be wondering what to do ! We’ll put a high power location beacon on her and call it in. With luck, the fucking empire might give us medals and a small reward. Get it done people !”

His people weren't rushing about, obeying his orders. Not unusual, they rarely seemed to do anything at a rush. Open rebellion was rare though, they usually did begin to turn his orders into actions, even if a little slowly.

"We should have a look inside." Said Mel. "There might be sick and wounded people on board."

"It's a big research vessel." Added Miram. "There could be a large crew, all needing medical assistance. Then there is also the matter of salvage."

So, the real reason his crew were suddenly developing empathy for injured Menderans. It had crossed his mind too, the likelihood of Grey Walker containing a lot of expensive and sort after technology. They were a long way from anywhere and the emergency transmission was weak. Their long range scanners were a joke, but he had to ask.

"Any other vessels close to us?" He asked. "I mean close enough to be an annoyance?"

Miram just shook her head at him.

"Three other vessels did pick up the signal and acknowledged it." Said Mel. "They all remained on their existing courses, once we confirmed that we were investigating the source of the transmission."

"No one is likely to arrive and be an annoyance boss." Said Miram. "We could grab a few high price gadgets and then call it in. A derelict boss! No one will be that bothered about how much spare kit they were supposed to have on board."

Zin knew it was a risk, but a relatively small one. Parallax didn't pay that well and getting bonuses out of them was always a fight. A little extra cash, would really make a difference to his life. There were the grandkids now.....

"Could the robots handle it?" He asked. "There might be a contagion over there, a plague."

Not just him being over anxious, half of all derelicts were caused by one of the crew bringing a contagion onto the vessel. There were a lot of strange bacteria out there, many of them lethal. Whole planets had been wiped out. Strangely, Miram was actually laughing.

"The robots!? Yep, if we fancy watching them try to walk through glass doors and knock over anything that isn't nailed down."

She was right; the thirty or so robots they had, were originally intended to carry out all the exterior maintenance. The idea had been to reduce the time crew members spent suited up and bobbing about in the vacuum of space. Parallax had bought cheap though, the bots seemed to have an IQ of about twenty, on a good day. The bots were rarely used for anything.

"Drones then," he said, "I know we have at least one working drone. I saw Doc outside, fixing something a few days ago."

People always give technology names and the drone's ID code was DOC0447, so of course they all called him Doc. Why a him and not a her? No one was really sure.

"Doc can't handle this." Said Mel. "He only has one working arm. It was damaged about three trips ago and Parallax keep promising to fix it."

"We need to go." Said Miram. "Us, people, wearing atmosphere suits."

Zin frowned; sometimes his crew treated him like a complete fool. He honestly felt he'd earned a little respect, many times over. Such was the loneliness of command. He'd console himself by claiming the major share of anything they looted from Grey Walker.

"Of course one of you needs to go." He said. "Mel actually, she is the science officer and will know what's worth grabbing."

Miram looked a little miffed, but simply nodded at Mel.

“Take a grunt from engineering with you.” He said. “A guy, a big one ! Then make him go everywhere first, in case anyone over there begins firing a blaster. Doc can follow you and be my eyes and ears; he doesn’t need two arms to do that.”

“He’ll just be dead circuits once we enter the Menderan craft.” Said Miram. “Their hull will screen out his control transmissions; it’s why we can’t simply use scanners to look inside.”

“That is why you’re going to run a line over there.” He said.

“But..... that might wake up their computer !” Said Mel.

“Bound to !” Moaned Miram.

Why did his crew only seem to become really interested in just one thing, moaning at him. He was the commander though; no one got paid at the end of the mission, unless he signed it off. It was a useful weapon to get his orders obeyed, but a weapon best kept for a really critical occasion.

“These are my orders !” He barked. “They will be obeyed, or I’ll get Doc to anchor that beacon and no one will go on board. Clear !”

They both nodded at him.

“They’ll have a standard emergency socket; everyone has those, even the empire. Run a line over and then attach a beacon to their hull, you’ll probably need to use resin. Important ! Don’t turn the beacon on yet.”

“Oh boss !” Said Miram.

“Hey, you guys treat me like an idiot, have a little back. Then and only then, will you pop their airlock and go inside. Right, get going.”

For once they looked happy, Mel was even rushing somewhere. No doubt off to engineering to find a large engineer, to act as a blaster shield. Zin sat back in his comfy command chair, flicking a few buttons to bring Doc out of his bay. One armed and well overdue for a service he might be, but he was the only working drone they had.

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Zin Ganaan adjusted the zoom on the view screen, watching Mel and the engineer, as they clung to the side of Grey Walker. The beacon was fixed in place and a line had been run across to provide just enough power to open the airlock and communicate with Doc, once he was inside. The drone was currently hanging back, bobbing about and keeping its cameras aimed at Mel and..... Who was it ?

“Who did she take ?” He asked Miram.

“Nate, large, muscular and brighter than most in engineering.”

Doc worried him more than the humans outside, they were reliable, but Doc was becoming a little skittish. Standard drone layout with rotors to provide lift if there was an atmosphere and thrusters if there wasn’t. For some reason their one and only working drone, was spinning his rotor in the near vacuum of deep space. Not at full speed, but it was weird.

“Did you run diagnostics on Doc ?” He asked.

“The diagnostics system is playing up.” Replied Miram. “He’s done this before and it doesn’t deplete his power pack that much.”

Miram speak for shut up and don’t worry about what can’t be fixed. There just seemed to be a lot of their systems that had developed faults, which Parallax Mining never fixed.

“Popping the outer lock.” Said Mel.

Good, their comms were nice and clear, that was something. Zin watched her lift a small outside hatch and wait. Gradually the outside airlock door, slid open. It was a little sad, that even a derelict, seemed to have an airlock that opened smoother than theirs. He could see Mel and Nate, looking

into the dark interior of the airlock. Doc seemed to be working properly; he turned on his lights and moved closer, as soon as Zin pressed the right buttons.

"We're going inside." Said Nate.

They moved inside the airlock, Doc's lights illuminating the interior. Luckily Doc decided to stop spinning his rotor, which had been causing some concern. Rotor blades and people in space suits, weren't a good mix.

"No artificial gravity in here." Said Mel. "If anyone is alive, they'll be floating about in zero G."

Another small panel and two more manual switches;

"Air is coming in, we're pressurising." Said Mel.

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It was strangely stressful, watching the inner hatch open. No one knew what to expect and the empty white painted corridor, was a bit of an anti-climax. Doc had a few basic sensors, which were picking up an atmosphere that was fresh and breathable. The problem was, that it was currently at minus a hundred and fifty degrees.

"You're inside a freezer Mel, deep cold." He told her.

She wiped her gloved hand over the wall, showing him the layer of ice on it.

"Looks like the power has been off for days." She said. "Whatever happened here, occurred some time ago."

Everything glittered, where the water vapour in the air, had turned into ice, which covered everything in a thin layer of glittering crystal. It looked beautiful, but it meant that all the crew were probably dead. The corridor led to a six way junction, with no signs to give a clue to where each corridor went to.

"I guess if you belong here, you know the way." Said Mel.

"Left, go left." Said Zin. "Treat it like a maze and keep turning left until you've been everywhere."

"Fine, but it's a huge vessel." Answered Mel.

Their boots were designed to grip the metal runway that went down the side of the corridor.

Another one of the standard safety features, which everyone adhered to. Magnetic boots were a pain to walk in, staggeringly tiring, but they seemed to be making good progress. They came to a set of swing doors, with something in Menderan written above them.

"Observation Room." Said Miram. "No idea what that might mean."

Very low temperatures do strange things to bodies. There is a drying effect, a kind of mummification, that can leave them looking almost as they did in life, for decades. There were stories of old derelicts, hundreds of years old. And inside them had been found bodies, looking so well preserved that they might have been taking a nap. That most definitely wasn't the case with the crew of Grey Walker.

"Oh Shit ! Are you seeing all this commander ?" Asked Mel.

"Yes, I'm getting Doc to take a few readings."

They'd been torn apart, by what appeared to have been teeth. A throat ripped out, an arm torn off, the ice covering the walls was tinged with red. Doc was telling him the story, but doing it with some very basic scanners and an old and slow analyser. Still, the answer was the same as his own eyes were telling him. The crew had been killed by some kind of beast, using claws and teeth.

"Draw weapons and get out of there !" He ordered. "Now, run carefully, but run !"

For two people in space suits, carrying blasters and wearing magnetic boots, they moved at a fairly good pace. Zin kept Doc behind them, illuminating the corridor as best he could. He noticed something at the six way junction, something glinting in Doc's lights.

“Stop !” He ordered. “Wait ! There’s something in front of you.”

Confusion with Nate firing at something and the sound of someone screaming, a female voice, it had to be Mel.

“I’ll get suited up.” Said Miram.

“No !” He barked. “We just deliver mining spares, we’re not soldiers.”

They were dead; Doc was showing no life signs for Mel or Nate. It had all happened so fast, what had killed them ? He carefully had Doc move his cameras around, until they were all aiming at the body, which until a few seconds before, had been his science officer. There was a lot of blood, which was rapidly freezing, covering the floor in twinkling red crystals. Mel’s suit had been ripped apart and a head was using rows of sharp teeth to dig into her chest.

“Fuck boss ! It’s eating her !” Said Miram. “Let me go over there.”

“No ! I’m not losing any more of my crew.”

“What the hell is that boss ?”

“I have no idea Miram. Just keep recording everything. Someone will want to see it all, when we get back to Phlot.”

Oh yes, a lot of people would want to see the creature, which had probably killed the entire crew of Grey Walker. About twice the size of his crew and covered in short fur. Zin had never heard of any primate that could function at minus a hundred and fifty, but it seemed happy in the deep cold. It was pushing its jaws into Mel, pulling out tissue from her chest, before chewing it and swallowing. He heard Miram being sick and just hoped it wasn’t all going over her computer console.

“Definitely a primate.” He muttered. “Hands, it has hands.”

He’d heard of constructs being developed by the military of various planetary groups and wondered if he was looking at one of them, an artificial construct. He noticed its green eyes, when it looked up and took an interest in Doc. The drone stopped transmitting, about two seconds later.

“Are you alright Miram ?” He asked.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be alright again. It ate her ! It ate Mel and probably Nate too.”

“I know, but we’re going home now and there are a few things to do.” He said. “The line needs pulling out of the derelict and the beacon needs turning on. Are you up to ? I’d send a robot, but we both know they’re useless.”

“That’s fine Boss, I’ll suit up and do it.”

Zin found himself trembling after she’d gone. He’d been a military pilot once, losing comrades all the time. In the end he’d stopped getting to know people, it made coping with the deaths a lot easier. Mel and Nate weren’t just crew, he knew their families, knew them well. Crap ! People weren’t supposed to die when delivering mining equipment. There was a message to send though, encrypted and sent via the usual relay systems. Not as quick as empire transmissions, but Parallax would get it within an hour. Mendera too, they were bound to intercept it and send a team to recover Grey Walker. He just hoped they were well armed.

“Priority transmission from Parallax Mining vessel Destiny Forty Eight.” He began. “This is Commander Zin Ganaan. We responded to an emergency transmission, a distress call. On investigation we found a Menderan research vessel Grey Walker, drifting in deep space. A beacon has been placed on her hull; I’ll attach the relevant Ident and location. Sadly while heroically trying to save any of the crew who might still be alive, two of my crew lost their lives. Details will be attached. It is my opinion that Grey Walker is a lifeless derelict, all its crew killed by some kind of unknown creature. Please inform Mendera about this incident, so that they can deal with the situation.”

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~The End~

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