

A Mission to Palmas-3

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Ops. Prep. Room, Medical Sector 3, Block D, Deck 3, Kassad-class Star-Strider Restful. 22:32 dark cycle; 42 hours to mission commencement.

“It will only hurt a little, *relax*.”

The sound-proofed walls of the Operation Preparation Room cut short the echoes of shrill agony as filament-thin needles tore a series of six sequential holes down the length of his arm. Viscous fluid, black like tar, bubbled and spread, engulfing Isaac Adelann’s outstretched arm as it spasmed in its restraint.

“Almost finished, I just need to patch you up a bit. You’ll be field-ready in no time.”

“Thanks as always, Doc.”

Linear motors cried as the 20-millimeter reinforced door formed an airtight seal between Isaac and Medical Sector 3. He held his hand before his eyes. Grip, un-grip. . It felt the same as usual, like the 2-micrometers of synthetic polymer weren’t even there.

A mission-specific implant, almost certainly a data-recorder; there wasn’t much else that could be of use on a reconnaissance mission. Standard protocol: enter, gather intel, leave. Quick and easy. According to *The Standard Encyclopedia of Species*, beaten into every young Tormassian before they even knew how to read it, the natives of Palmas-3, the Palmos, were a remarkably peaceful species. Neither Isaac nor Command expected any resistance to his presence, as such he was equipped minimally.

Isaac tapped three times on the sensor lock, each tap a calculated 1.21 seconds, any more or any less and his identity would not be recognized. The door computer, content that the individual before it was who they said they were, unlatched the security lock and allowed Isaac into the 4th most secure part of the ship, the armory. Isaac was notorious, especially within his own Ops. Team, for paying particular attention to his gear. Maintenance wasn’t always easy, especially when he found himself assigned to long missions on sand worlds such as Katrain. Six months there had turned his teammates’ gear to dust, but his remained pristine day after day.

Slot 240, as always. Electromagnets released and the metal

cover flipped away to reveal his personal equipment: a 24M carbine, 2 weeks off the assembly line; its predecessor, the 22M occupied the slot adjacent; 6G General-Environment gear filled the hanger-space; a pair of 48H sidearms sat on the bottom of the locker; and a multi-purpose knife lay next to them. Each was retrieved one at a time. Isaac unscrewed or removed every piece he could. He wiped and polished surfaces, cleaned down crevices, and carefully re-painted insignia before putting the gear back together again.

Isaac examined his mental checklist, affirming each matter of the day to be complete. With all his duties done, nothing remained but sleep. He returned to his assigned Cryo-Block, hopped in tube number 240, secured all 5 safety harnesses, typed the duration of his rest into a keypad, and finally depressed the “SEAL” button.

His eyes had already begun to close, the sleeping agent kicking in, when the tube computer began to recite its sleep message. “Good night Isaac Adelann, ID 240006832.”

Cryo-Block, Deck 3, Kassad-class Star-Strider Restful. 15:00 light cycle; 2 hours to mission commencement.

“Wake up Adelann, your briefing is starting soon.”

Major Lufthaul rapped on the glass of Isaac’s Prolonged Inactivity Tube. Vibration sensors in the pod awakened subroutines, in turn bringing the pod’s main response systems to life.

“Please cease your disruptions Lambard Lufthaul, ID 239960727. The occupant is in rest cycle for a further 28 seconds,” declared the PIT’s AI, synthesizing speech through its outward-facing speakers.

“Yeah, yeah. Tell him he has a briefing.”

“Affirmative, I have set an awakening notification.”

When Isaac awoke, the pod presented its message, short and sweet.

“Good waking Isaac Adelann, ID 240006832. You have a briefing in 1772 seconds.”

Aboard landing craft K4-011, launched from Kassad-class Star-

Strider Restful.

6 seconds after mission commencement

Isaac's hand was beginning to ache, having been locked in ready position for more than an hour. The transfer to orbital station Lauhaad had been uneventful, but fuel line issues set the mission behind by 10 minutes. Unacceptable.

"Alright Adelann, I'm venting to the outside, so no more external air for you. Make sure you switch your suit over."

The pilot's warning was almost pointless for a veteran like Adelann; he had, after all, switched over the moment K4-011 had detached from the station, compliant with mission protocol.

Isaac reached up to the chin of his helmet, pressing one of the many buttons to enable voice relay. He asked the pilot simply, "what's the expected landing time?"

"30 seconds, or there about. We were a bit behind but lucky for you, I'm your pilot."

The light craft shook as the outstretched airbrakes crashed against the outer atmosphere of Palmas-3. Floor plates slid out of place, jumping up and slamming back down repeatedly, but Isaac remained in place, held still by his grip on the overhead handrail.

"Gear's deploying, we're setting down in a moment, be prepared for green."

The ship hit the ground, bounced twice, and skidded to a halt. The main bay of the K4-011 was strewn with loose covers, emergency gear, rations, and spare parts. The pilot was certainly fast, though at the cost of almost everything else.

One of the constants through the journey, a bright red indicator light, abandoned Isaac, replaced instead by the green of safe debarkation. Behind him, the bay door lowered, revealing the green-orange landscape of Palmas-3's fourth major landmass.

Goosiere guide house, Lausine sanctuary region, 4th major landmass, Palmas 3. 17:03 light cycle; 1 minute and 16 seconds after mission commencement.

Isaac walked up to the synthetic wood door of the guide house. Each guide house was identical across every planet under Tormassian rule, save for a few modifications on planets with more hostile environments. The wood, a familiar sight for humans, had a reason, it brought a sense of familiarity to even the most unusual areas of operation.

Isaac held his hand aloft and rapped thrice upon the door, a number calculated as Ideal in the guidebook, before reaching down to the peculiarly large orb-like doorknob. The door swung open, turning easily on freshly oiled hinges. Inside, Isaac sat down on a solitary couch in the entryway. It was just wide enough to have too much room to be a chair for one and much too small to fit two people, as if it were purposely designed to have the least desirable form factor.

A few moments after taking his seat, his heads-up display alerted him to a heat source in the other room. Isaac quickly switched over to external audio, wary of missing anything said by the inhabitant.

"Greeting, Mr. Adelann, I think. My name is said Balowee Taebus, would you like a cup of tea?"

"I would be honored Mr. Taebus."

"Please, Balowee if you would."

Balowee came around the corner carrying a peculiar tray topped with two beverages in vessels even stranger. Balowee held the tray by a bulbous protrusion, gripped in the center of his gooey abdomen.

"Take, enjoy. I made it blend of Laupine fir, recommended me as human tea, you like?"

"I don't mind it."

"Wonderful—ah, but do you know way to drink? It is odd one our planet, for you humans."

Balowee tilted his blob-like form quizzically to the side. Seeing Isaac's uncertainty, Balowee proceeded with his explanation.

"We Palmos, as you call, have no hands of course and our fluids are taken much oddly. For you, with hands, press button and sip from opening, very simple I think."