

\*Nicodemus Mayflower and the Aliens\*

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Nicodemus Mayflower's ship raced for the Anne Boleyn, the second Wedding Ring circling cold, distant Henry VIII. Every few minutes he would send out a message on the scrambled channel, asking for some response from Sinderella, some signal so that he would know she was still alive.

He received no answer.

As he approached eighth Henry two alien ships came out to meet him. He fired the instant they showed up on his sensor screens, disabling one of them as the other evaded his laser cannon and returned fire.

He avoided the pulses of energy and headed for Katherine Parr, the outermost of the six Wedding Rings. Once there he hid in among the rocks and debris, shutting down his systems so the alien couldn't read any neutrino activity. He knew the alien would search for him, perhaps summon the other ships that had attacked Sinderella in the Anne Boleyn Ring, and he was ready for them. He'd been in enough battles to know that one ship could make a stand against two or three, but once the other side had four or more, the odds against victory were astronomical, because now they could put together an englobement, the ultimate offensive formation.

Well, let them try. No one was going to englobe him, not here about all God's leftovers. This was no asteroid belt, where the actual sighting of a nearby asteroid was a relatively rare phenomenon. This was a ring, and there were literally billions of rocks and iceballs racing around in a tight orbit. You could hide in a ring, but you sure as hell couldn't perform precise military maneuvers in one, not without putting your hull at risk.

He waited patiently, activating his sensors for two seconds every minute. It was enough time for them to spot approaching ships, but not (he hoped) enough time for an alien ship with sophisticated sensing devices (which he did not know for a fact that they actually possessed) to determine that there was sufficient neutrino activity to investigate.

Finally, after sixty-seven minutes, he struck paydirt: the sensors found an alien ship about sixteen miles away, carefully picking its way among the debris. His first inclination was to bring all his systems to life, lock onto the enemy ship, and fire -- but he realized that there might be hundreds, perhaps thousands, of rocks blocking a clear shot, rocks that would deflect or absorb the killing force of his various weapons while signaling his position to the aliens.

So he waited, and waited, and finally, when it seemed that the aliens would never give him a clear shot, their ship closed to within a mile. An alien voice, speaking almost perfect Terran, tried to raise him via the radio, but he chose not to answer. Let them think his ship was dead. Let them close in and prepare to board. Let them lower their guard just for an instant.

It was when the alien ship was only thirty yards away that he suddenly activated his laser and energy pulse cannons and fired point-blank at it. The ship turned red, then white, and then vanished from sight.

His instruments told him that the alien ship had signaled to its companions. He couldn't decipher the message, but doubtless it was telling them that they had found a human ship and were preparing to examine it more closely. Now that they wouldn't respond to any queries from their comrades, it seemed a dead certainty that the other ships would soon be seeking him out, trying to determine what had happened -- and they'd be a lot more cautious, since they had no way of knowing what had happened to the first ship.

How many had Sinderella mentioned? Five? He'd downed two, so there were at least three remaining. He figured he ought to be able to nail at least one the same way he'd just disposed of the last ship, maybe even two. Then, with the odds even, or nearly so, he'd break out of cover and match his skills against the remaining ship or ships in a good old-fashioned dogfight.

And then the scrambled channel came to life.

"Somebody! \_Any\_body!" said Sinderella's voice. "I'm in a bad way. My ship's disabled, and losing air. I have no motive power, about half my systems aren't working, and none of my weapons are operative. I'm -- "

"I know where you are!" interrupted Mayflower. "Let's keep it to ourselves."

"Nicodemus!" she cried. "Are you nearby? I'll be out of air in another half hour."

"Get into your spacesuit. Depending on the make, it's got from six to fourteen hours of oxygen."

"All right."

"Have you got any flares?"

"On the ship?"

"No, with your suit."

"Let me check." A long pause. "Yes. Two of them."

"Okay. Break radio contact before they can pinpoint your location. I'll signal you when I reach the right ring. Then leave the ship and fire a flare. With luck I'll spot the first one. If not, we'll try a second."

"Acknowledged."

The radio went dead. He realized that there was no sense pretending to be a lifeless derelict ship any longer, not after almost a full minute of radio transmissions. And he couldn't lie in wait for his prey while Sinderella's oxygen ran out.

He ordered the ship to accelerate above the plane of the elliptic. It would make him an easier target with no rocks to hide behind, but he didn't dare chance one of the other ships making it to Anne Boleyn first. His only advantage was that they probably didn't know where she was -- and then it occurred to him that of course they knew, that they were the ones who had disabled her ship in the first place.

He rose high above Katherine Parr and raced toward Henry VIII. Within a minute three ships were in hot pursuit. He dove down between Catherine Howard and Anne of Cleves, then spotted an empty vacuum in the middle of Jane Seymour and raced through it. All three ships plunged into the hole behind him. Two made it out; the third was crushed by a vagrant chunk of ice.

He felt confident that his ship was quicker and more maneuverable at sub-light speeds, and wished he could engage the other two in combat -- but he couldn't take the chance. Sinderella had only a few minutes worth of air remaining in her ship, and once she abandoned it, she was floating out in the open, defenseless, and on a limited supply of oxygen. He couldn't chance being killed or disabled, because any shot that destroyed his ship would kill Sinderella as well.

He tried a few evasive maneuvers, couldn't shake his two pursuers, and decided that he didn't have any more time to try. Instead he headed directly toward Anne Boleyn, and as he came within a few hundred

miles he broke radio silence.

"Are you still in your ship?"

"Yes," answered Sinderella.

"OK, when we're through speaking, jettison yourself and use your jetpack to make your way to the edge of the ring if you can."

"Then what? Do I fire the flare?"

"I'm thinking. There's no way I can brake and pick you up without turning myself into a sitting duck for the two ships that are following me." He paused for a moment, considering alternatives. "All right," he continued. "We'll have to do it the hard way."

"This isn't the hard way?" she said ironically.

"Cancel what I said. If you get to the edge of the ring they'll be able to spot you as easily as I can. Go to the very middle of it and then fire your first flare. If I spot you, I'll contact you, and then just wait until I work my way to you. If you don't hear from me within ten seconds of firing the flare, that means I missed it. Raise me on your suit's radio and let me know, and we'll try again."

"Are you sure this is the way you want to do it?" she asked. "It's like a meteor swarm here. You'll be in more danger from the rocks than the aliens."

"The aliens are trying to kill me. The rocks won't care."

"Whatever you say. I'm leaving the ship now."

"Good luck," said Mayflower.

He maintained his lead over the two pursuing ships and raced alongside Anne Boleyn, waiting for the flare. A minute later his radio crackled to life.

"I didn't hear from you."

"You fired one?"

"Yes."

"Damn! My sensors missed it."

"I've only got one left. When do you want me to fire it?"

"Let me get 180 degrees around the ring -- or, rather, 180 degrees around from where it is now, since it's spinning too. I'll let you know."

He wanted to hit light speeds to get to his destination in a hurry and perhaps lose his enemies, but he knew such a maneuver would take him clear out of the ring system, and by the time he got back he wouldn't know if he'd achieved the proper position vis a vis the ring, so he simply increased his speed to seventy percent of light and raced around Anne Boleyn. When he felt he'd circled half the ring, he contacted her on the radio again.

"Okay, shoot it."

"Here goes."

Once again his sensors couldn't spot any flares.

"Did you see it this time?" she asked.

"No."

"Shit! What are we going to do? Can you home in on my radio signal?"

"I can approach you, but I can't pinpoint you much closer than maybe forty or fifty miles." He was lost in thought for a moment. "All right, I've got an idea. Keep broadcasting until I do get close."

"Then what?" asked Sinderella.

"How far are you from your ship?"

"Only a few miles."

"Start making your way back to it."

"Then what?"

"Then overload the nuclear pile and get the hell out of there again. It'll explode in about four minutes, and I guarantee I'll spot \_that\_."

"So you'll get that much closer, but you still won't spot \_me\_," she said. "Not with all these rocks."

"Sure I will. You'll see me first, since my ship is much bigger than you are. As soon as you do, pull your laser pistol and fire at my nose."

"What if I hit you?"

"No handgun can penetrate my hull, but I'll spot where the fire's coming from and pick you up."

"Are you sure this is going to work?"

"In theory."

"What do you mean, in theory?"

"I mean, if the explosion doesn't send a few million rocks at your head, and if the force of it doesn't send you careening a couple of hundred miles away, and if the aliens don't shoot me before I reach you, and if I can maneuver through all the debris, and if nothing happens to your life-support system, and if we can make it away from Henry VIII before reinforcements arrive, then we've got a pretty good chance of surviving."

"I find your notion of a pretty good chance somewhat optimistic," said Sinderella grimly.

"If pessimism would help in a situation like this, I'd be the damnedest pessimist you ever saw," he assured her. "Now get moving. One of them's starting to fire at me again."

"I'd hate to compute the odds of our living through this."

"All the more reason for you to be grateful after I rescue you," he said wryly.

"You get me out of this in one piece and I'll show you gratitude like you never dreamed of," promised Sinderella.

"I'm counting on it," replied Nicodemus Mayflower.