

# **Journey Through Night**

## **Part 1**

*By Pete Planisek*

Too many ghosts, Cayda thought to herself as she rounded another corner.

“Clear,” she announced almost absentmindedly at this point this to other members of her unit. Cayda paused and shook her head lightly; monotony was a soldier’s enemy she reminded herself. She must remain vigilant in spite of it. The lives of her unit depended on her ability to do so.

“This whole station’s clear,” Rifran sneered as he almost calmly strolled past his commanding officer. It was a careless move and Cayda realized it was time to rest. Minor mistakes she could live with as long as they were addressed efficiently. Wordlessly, she halted her unit with a hand signal before pausing to consult her visor’s holo map.

“Sure, yeah. This place is clear. Tell that to the roomful of guys we found two days ago,” Hazler reminded Rifran.

“Those guys were wearing old uniforms from the beginning of the war. Whatever happened to them went down long before this place got abandoned,” Rifran observed as he sat down on a crate after testing to see if it would hold him. “Tell her Doc. Hey, Tomlinson.”

“Huh? Yes?”

“This place getting to you too, Doc?” Rifran laughed at Doctor Tomlinson as he studied his pad.

“Something like that,” Doc replied, lost in thought.

“Let’s rest here for ten,” Cayda said as she loosed the strap on her helmet. “St. Crux, Henta on point, scout ahead. Abandoned or otherwise I don’t like surprises. Check the neighborhood and make sure we’re alone. And remember Sargent Isa’s unit probed ahead two days ago. Look for signs they passed this way but if you see movement shoot first. We aren’t supposed to meet up for another three days,”

“Right LT,” St. Crux’s baritone whisper acknowledged before he and Henta nodded and began to move off into the darkness of the station.

Cayda stole a momentary glance at her unit before allowing herself to relax a measure. She even permitted herself a tight smile. This was only their second mission with her in command but they’d been fighting for nearly five years together before she’d earned her field commission. So far it had been a smooth transition. Of course, by now V Company was so used to change it hardly mattered. How many had come before her?

For a moment a host of all but forgotten faces swam before her mind’s eye but she abandoned them almost immediately. They were dead. She was not; though she could hardly still be called whole. She reached down to her pack to retrieve her rations.

“How are you holding up?”

A moment’s peace, that’s all she wanted. She removed her ultra-vision helmet fully and allowed herself to be swallowed up by the eternal night that the station truly existed in.

“What do you mean, Doc?” Cayda asked with just a hint of edge in her tone.

“This is something of a homecoming for you, isn’t it?”

“I was four when they ran us off this station,” Cayda commented before taking a bite of her ration bar. “Not many fond memories of ... home. Occupy, abandon, occupy, abandon. Never could figure out why either side wanted this place so bad or even why you’d build it here once you knew what lay in the space beyond. This place is nothing but a death trap and that’s all it’ll ever be. You’re walking through a tomb doctor, an endless tomb.”

Doc Tomlinson was quiet for a moment.

“You’re fortunate to have escaped the initial assault.”

She worked to stifle the bitterness before it could take hold of her emotions. Her parents and older siblings dead, the new horrors she continued to witness in this war, countless friends lost ... fortunate.

She never should have become involved with this man prior to becoming the unit’s commanding officer. He seemed to now feel entitled to exploit that past under the guise of professional concern. But that would soon end. She’d already requested a new medical officer be assigned to the unit during their next rotation off the front. To Cayde’s surprise, Tomlinson had beaten her to it by applying for a transfer after this mission. The unspoken reality that both were ready to go their separate ways made conversations like this tolerable.

“My parents sent me to visit my grandparents two weeks before. When we heard, I knew I’d never see my family again.”

“Still. It must be difficult to be here again.”

“The mission, Doc. I’m only here for the mission; the radiation ionized my parents years ago. This place is just another battlefield, one I intend to hold until we draw them into our trap.

Now. I know part of your job is psychological counseling so why don't we try a little on you. Rifran's an idiot but he's right. You've been obsessing about those bodies for two days. If we run into the enemy we'll need you mentally present as well as physically. So what's going on?"

The visor on Cayde's helmet began to flash. She hesitated only a moment. What could be going on that they'd break the standing order for communications silence?

"Go," she said to the image of St. Crux.

"Henta's down. And we've located at least half of Sargent Isa's unit—all dead."

"Where are you?" Cayde asked, ignoring her heads-up display with St. Crux's location. Too often these "improved" helmets failed to display the proper coordinates. Knowing this, Cayde always insisted members of her unit either use the older tracking devices they'd never turned back in.

"I'm not sure," St. Crux admitted. "We kept finding depressurized sections and had to double back a lot."

"Heads up says you're in Grid T, sub-section 45, Level 27. Confirm."

A blast of static tore through Cayde's communications display forcing her to silence it.

"They landed on the far side. How could Isa's unit be in this section of the station already?"

"Doesn't matter right now. All we can do is guess. Did you get a fix on them?"

"No he had it set for private display. But I've pulled up the location you called out."

“What’s in that section?”

“According to this a sub-reactor station,” Tomlinson shook his head. “Inaccessible, even when the station was fully operational.”

Cayde addressed her helmet. “Computer, minimum estimated time to search Level 27?”

The estimate appeared. Why hadn’t she ordered them to link their helmet telemetry to hers? At least she’d have a better idea where to begin looking or what areas were depressurized. An unexpected surge of pain shot through her temples.

“What’s wrong?” She dimly registered Tomlinson ask.

As her vision cleared, Cayde thought she saw a figure appear for only a moment beyond Tomlinson.

“Did you see...,” she stopped. It must have been a member of their unit walking past the corridor they were in. Besides, his back was to the corridor.

The doctor began to scan her with his pad.

“There’s no time for that,” Cayde declared as she fully resumed command of her faculties. Whatever had happened it was over now. And if they were going to complete their mission she must determine that status of Sargent Isa’s unit. She touched the central address button for her unit.

“Assemble in the side corridor. We have situation.”

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**Story continues in Part II**



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