

## Time to Exhale

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The door slid up with a hiss, and Sully stepped inside, never more relieved to see his bed. The instant the door closed behind him, he finally released the tension keeping his muscles straight. His arms went limp, and his knees threatened to give out as his shoulders slumped and his back lost all posture. A heavy breath let out as Sully's head dropped, facial muscles exhausted from holding up a smile long after he'd grown tired of wearing it. He hardly noticed the thud of his armor as he let gravity pull him into the wall.

*Please, go away.*

The conflict was over. The crew was home, safe and sound. It was supposed to feel nice to see them hug and celebrate and just generally start moving on from everything that had happened. That was always the best feeling when they came home, but it wasn't there. No matter how hard Sully tried to look at anything else, the same vision kept coming back to the forefront of his thoughts.

The gaping void of an eyeless face that should have been dead stared back at Sully. It had been a man only a minute before, alive and healthy. He'd probably been happily living his best life a couple days prior, but even then, he should have made it through the battle. People were supposed to be safe in that med-center. The glowing red crystals breaking through his skull when Sully killed him had taken it all away. Maybe he'd already been dead, and the things inside him were just puppeting his corpse. Maybe he was still alive with all those things burrowing through his insides and keeping him going, in spite of the hole through his brain.

*Stop.*

That consuming, controlling crystal, whatever the hell it was, had been within a quarter-inch of taking Sully. Zig would have been next. It would have been so easy for him, if that thing had pushed down a little further and pierced his heart.

*Just stop.*

No more Sully. No more Zig. Not even dead, just something wearing their bodies. Would they have even known it was happening? His shaking hands ripped out a few strands of tangled hair just thinking about it. He couldn't make the thinking stop.

Some of those things could have still been out there when everyone pulled out. They could still be hunting, spreading, ripping victims away from their lives, their independence, their ability to self-govern and even act on their own voluntary will. Not people anymore, just bodies enslaved to whatever the hell was making them move. One prod from a crystal, and they'd never be themselves again. Or worse, it made them *want* to become monsters.

Which was even worse?

How long until they found their way off the planet?

Who would they try to take next?

No matter how he saw it, Sully would have to fight them back again. Better they get to him than anyone else, right? But that didn't make it any less terrifying. He'd still been Sully as a slave; not anymore, if these things took him. Could he even die, at that point? He still had to see Jaren again, someday.

A face stared at him behind his clenched eyelids: His own scarred and brutalized features, but eyeless, soulless, and broken apart by piercing red crystals. It roared an unholy cry at him.

Sully's fist bored a hole through his wall before he realized he was swinging. Pain shot through his knuckles up his arm, still shaking. He grit his teeth, trying to force down the sudden racing in his breath and heartbeat. Damn, his knuckles hurt.

But it hurt good. He could feel it — That meant he was alive and himself, no monster. Just Sully.

The pain started to creep deeper into his hand. Sully swallowed a lump and gently pulled off his glove, though it already looked bad. One glance at his knuckles was enough to see his hand was broken. Given the hole in his other palm's prosthetic shell and the jury-rigged reattachments inside still waiting for a proper fix, that more or less made two broken hands. He tried not to think about how the hole in his prosthetic was the only reason he was still Sully and not—

*...and not something that isn't Sully.*

His muzzle scrunched, fighting the agony. It was grounding, though — a bodily pain he could feel, not a bad thought that wouldn't leave. Anything else to hold his attention was good, at that moment. What were those digits' names again? He'd read this — *actually* read it, with all that medical stuff. He could go tell a medic which bones he'd broken, and Zig could freak out over not keeping either of his hands intact for more than a few days.

If she could just talk to him about anything other than the last few days, that would probably make his day. Sully picked himself up and stepped out, hooked on that thought and no others.