

**SECOND PLACE, FLASH FICTION**  
**TRAVIS GREEN**

**We Come In Pieces**

Location: Public Park

Prop: Broken Watch

Line Portion: "This was a mistake"

"This was a mistake," Astraia murmured to herself as the sound of the battered starship's engines ground unnaturally to a halt. She frowned at the vessel's instruments, most of which were flashing shades of orange to red or had gone completely dark. She wasn't looking forward to squeezing into the cramped engine compartment to attempt repairs.

"Well, we didn't have much of a choice, did we?" Irini replied, a hint of irritation showing through in her normally placid voice. She unclipped her seat restraints and began pulling off the fingerless leather gloves she always wore when piloting their patrol cruiser. "The fleet's not exactly supplying us with the highest caliber of ships these days, and four pirate destroyers were a bit much for us to handle. Even in trusty old Calliope." She glanced sideways at Astraia, hoping her reference to their pet name for their patrol ship would soften her response. It worked; her copilot rolled her eyes and smiled halfheartedly.

"That motivator's failure wasn't Calliope's fault, and you know it," Astraia countered, leveling an accusatory finger at Irini. "If I remember correctly, it was *you* who said it was fully functional again," she teased.

Irini stuck her nose in the air with mock indignation as she began pulling her hair back in preparation to seal her helmet to her flight suit. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean." Astraia chuckled and turned to evaluate her equipment stash. Her broken watch was useless, of course, crushed in the chaos of the tense engagement with the pirate gang just outside the Agora system. Astraia sighed. The watch had been a graduation gift from the academy and one of her prized possessions. Now it was crumpled like much of the bulkhead of their damaged ship: sad and useless. The pirates' ambush had caught the two Peace Corp troopers off guard, and the asteroid belt they'd had to fight their way through hadn't helped. They were lucky to have escaped with their lives and most of their aging ship intact. Astraia counted it as a personal victory that she had managed to take down one of the surprisingly agile pirate destroyers before she and Irini had made that frantic transition into zerospace, and without the aid of the ship's impaired targeting computer, to boot. She was pretty sure they had lost several pieces of the ship in the leap.

"Whoa," Irini breathed. Astraia looked up at her pilot then followed her gaze out the cockpit window.

They had landed (Astraia's professional pride wouldn't allow her to think of it as a crash) in some kind of field. Short green blades of vegetation covered huge swaths of the mostly open

space, while clusters of shrubs and tall woody stalks topped by green leaves of varying shapes and sizes dotted the landscape. Astraia had never seen so much greenery. To their right, water splattered from a fountain of what looked like some kind of decorative shaped stone. On the other side of the open space, tall buildings of similar stone stretched to the horizon, each of a different style and shape, but all obviously designed by the same species. Irini craned her neck to look at the ground surrounding their ship and noted with a twinge of guilt that their rapid descent through the atmosphere had resulted in their patrol vessel burning the flora to a crisp for several meters on all sides. Destruction of public property wasn't the best way to meet the planet's natives.

"What world are we even on?" Astraia asked, leaning forward to survey the blue sky brushed with wispy white clouds of what she presumed was water vapor. "Not sure," Irini answered, twisting in her seat to flip a few switches and tap the cracked screen of the main computer. "It looks like the piloting assistant picked the closest planet that was within the realm of habitability and shot us off in that direction just before its decision-making matrix crashed. Good thing the planetary proximity sensors were still online to pull us out of zerospace at the right time."

"Well, not knowing where we are is going to make *this* especially awkward," Astraia said pointedly, inclining her head toward the area in front of the ship.

Irini peered through the dusty cockpit window and scowled. Great. The locals were coming.

Cautiously, several dozen of the planet's native inhabitants were beginning to inch their way toward the smoking patrol ship. The aliens were bipedal and short compared to Astraia and Irini, the tallest of them likely reaching only to the two Peace Corp officers' shoulders. Their skin was varying shades of something like pink to very dark brown. Their facial structure was more or less similar to Astraia's and Irini's, and it was clear from their stances and the tentative way they approached the ship without coming too close that they were afraid. Very, very afraid.

"Well, that's just perfect," Irini grunted, rubbing her temples. "Not only do we not know where we are, but based on the natives' behavior, it looks like we've landed in the middle of a community recreation space on a planet that hasn't progressed to interstellar travel yet. Let me see if I can get the ship's knowledge database and locator package online."

Astraia busied herself with stowing supplies in the compartments they had fallen out of during the space battle while Irini crawled under the control panel to try to coax life back into the failed computer system. After a few moments of hotwiring, sparks cascaded around Irini, who yelped and then pulled herself back into her seat, surveying the readout screen that now glowed with flickering columns of data.

"Success!" Irini tapped a few keys and grimaced at the results. Her suspicions had been correct.

"Well, congratulations," she said with a bit of mock cheeriness as she swiveled to smile at Astraia. "We're planet Earth's first contact!"