

Romall Smith
superheroripped@gmail.com

About 2650 words

Primetime
on
Primus V

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It has been said that the greatest thing one can do is to give their life in the service of others. Out here on Primus V, the most significant thing you can do is live one more day.

Iontach stood at the edge of an ornate platform. The smell of ocean brine sprayed against him as it descended closer to the salt crystal-laden waters below. A silver sphere followed just above him. It moved about the air, its lens intent on capturing his every movement. He paid it no attention as his focus was elsewhere. Towering holo-stands hovered a few hundred meters away, each one filled with the opaque green images of screaming fans.

All of whom had paid to see the greatest gladiator on the planet. Fireworks explode overhead, their bright lights reflected off the metallic adornments of Inotach's armor. The polyurethane gloves he wore warmed, and electricity sizzled as his grip tightened on the trident. The thunderous cheers of the crowd crashed against his ears. He barely heard the horn of battle blare but, hear it, he did. Iontach knelt, his gaze on a shadow in the water. The shadow appeared to grow in size by the second. He tapped a sensor on his breastplate. Layers of ablative armor extended out the collar and covered his mouth. A Selachimorpha, the size of a bus with an eight-foot dorsal fin, leapt out of the water. Its maw, wider than seven men, gaped open, displaying rows of blood-stained teeth. Iontach exhaled, then dove from his platform toward the waters below.

The city of Scogliera is one of the largest found on Primus V. That isn't saying much, however, as there are only three cities and a handful of villages scattered across the aquatic world. A collection of shanties, canals, and floating docks, Scogliera is a man-made island, unfortunate for Jericho of the Pescatore clan. He is not the biggest fan of the islands, water, or people, for that matter. Born on Earth, before the cataclysm, Jericho is among the few citizens of Scogliera that can't swim. He even takes pride in that fact.

"You gotta learn sometime; jump in," shouted Brin, his arms fanned out to stay afloat.

Jericho stared out at the water. The sapphire blue expanse stretched to the horizon. Its unreal depths were interrupted only by the neon indigo crest of the waves.

"Primus herself would have to pull me in," said Jericho. He stood up and walked along the edge of the fishing boat. "If the universe wanted me to be a swimmer, I would have been born to the Nuoto clan. Those guys swim like fish," Jericho said

as he stopped at a small white box. His hand disappeared into the opening of the box.

“You know there were no clans back on Earth. Dive in, and I’ll teach you how to tread water at least,” said Brin as he bobbed in the water. “If dad were here, he would have just thrown you in.”

“Maybe,” said Jericho. He smiled. Dad would definitely have thrown him into the water and yelled, ‘sink or swim.’ Ironically, his dad would’ve also been the one to dive in and rescue him at the first sign of trouble. Jericho pulled a small cephalopod out of the cooler. Its tiny tentacles wrapped around each gloved finger.

“What happens if you fall off the boat?” Asked Brin.

“Well.”

Jericho tightened his hand into a fist. A faint smell of ozone drifted through the air. The cephalopod released its grasp and retreated into a ball as electricity crackled and coursed across the gloves. Jericho pulled back his arm and launched the creature. The cephalopod unfolded and flew as though it had wings. A shadow appeared to give chase beneath the waves. The tiny creature smacked the water a hundred feet away. The cephalopod struggled. Its efforts fruitless as the paralyzed creature began to sink. Suddenly a fish jumped out of the water, its metallic dagger-like teeth sheared through the defenseless animal.

“Nature will take its course.”

“That’s one way to look at things, not sure it’s the best way. One of these days, you’re going to have to show me how you do that.”

Brin began to swim towards the ship. Jericho walked back towards the stern. He stopped at a glowing blue pad on the ground, the heel of his boot clanged against it. Several beams of light emanated out of the deck. The beams searched the air for one another till they connected. One by one, each of the beams interlaced till a bridge was formed. The light bridge lowered into the water in front of Brin. He walked out of the water on the bridge and up to his brother Jericho.

“You two ready to head back to the city?” asked Ines as she walked out of the ship’s cabin.

“We are ready whenever you are, Mom,” said Jericho.

The deep lines of age around her mouth cracked and shifted into a smile. “I’ll go start the engines. You boys secure the ampoules. We have a storm coming in, and I can’t afford to lose any of this shipment,” she said.

Usually a fishing vessel, The Amelia had been modified for a different purpose. Atop her weathered deck sat four large, polished silver ampoules. Thirty feet long and eight feet tall, each was capable of holding ten thousand gallons of Indigo muon. A scarce and addictive substance, Indigo muon can be found only on Primus V. The two-teenager moved quickly to secure their precious cargo.

“You ever wonder how different life would be back on earth?” asked Jericho.

“Are you kidding me?”

“I am serious. You ever wonder where we would be or what we would be doing?”

“Well, I doubt we would be running muon for one.”

“That’s true, and Dad would probably still be here.”

The two went silent for a moment. The only sound audible was the hum of the ship’s repulsors pushing against the wave beneath them as the craft accelerated. It was a sound that seemed to grow and change more than expected. What started as a low pitch rumble began to grow into a high pitch whine.

“Something’s wrong. We are moving too quick,” said Brin. He held on to the side of the ampoule and moved to the aft of the ship. He opened a panel, flicked several switches, then pushed a flashing button. “Is everything all right, Mom?”

“Nope, we got something closing on us fast,” Ines said, her voice hurried.

“Selachimorpha?” Asked Brin, his voice shaky with terror.

“It’s a ship,” Ines said. “Can one of you get to the bolt thrower?” she asked.

“On my way,” Brin took off running towards the starboard bolt thrower of The Amelia.

“Everything all right?” shouted Jericho. He watched as his brother sprinted past.

“We got company; I’m going to man the bolter. Finish securing the cargo.”

“I’m on it.”

Jericho ran to the third container. His hand reached out to a keypad. He quickly tried to key in the lockdown sequence. His fingers froze just above the last digit. At first, it felt like a bee had stung him, then a myliobatid, but in just a couple of seconds, the pain stopped him cold. Electricity coursed through his body. Jericho’s head seized as he tried to look down. Blood poured out of his side and down to the deck floor. A tingle went up his neck, tightening his jaw as he struggled to lift his head. Looking down to the end of the ampoules, there was a cruiser on fast approach. It’s fore ship bolter lit up as it fired another salvo. He felt another sting on his shoulder, and the world went dark.

Sweat dripped and heat radiated from the mob. Two pillars stood atop a platform; energy arched and swirled between them. The air filled with the smell of dry paper as the fabric of spacetime between them ripped, revealing a blackness so dark even light seemed to disappear. Thousands of voices crashed together in the street like a raging river as the mob flowed into the portal. In the midst of the chaos, a small boy stopped. The world may have been coming to an end, but in that moment, it was silent for Jericho. He lifted his head to the sky and held up a card. The rolling cloud of darkness cascaded from one end of the horizon to the other, with flashes of blue and purple. Light exploded in the air, raining down sparks like fireworks celebrating the end of the day. Lighting arched from the sky.

“Jericho, wake up,” said a man, his voice fading with the darkness.

The metal deck was cold against Jericho’s jaw. In front of him lay Brin and Ines.

“What do you want to do with them, Captain,” asked a burly pirate.

“Fighters, the whole lot. We either take them all or none,” said the Captain.

“Can’t we just keep the woman?” asked the burly pirate.

“She’ll sooner slit our throats in our sleep. Do what you want but secure the cargo and throw ’em overboard.”

The burly man moved to grab Ines. Not in the best shape but still coherent, she resisted, pushing him away. The pirate slammed his giant fist into her face.

“Oh, you are going to be fun,” he said.

Jericho screamed into the void, but nothing came out. Paralysis persisted as he tried to will his body back to life. A twinge of something shot up the back of Jericho's neck. He wasn't wholly unstunned, but the sound of cloth ripping echoed in his ears. Finally, a flood of adrenaline flowed throughout his body.

"Toilteanas," he screamed, the word half caught in his throat. Several of the pirates turn towards him. The captain stopped mid stride. "Toilteanas," Jericho said again. Like his father before him, he now offered his life in exchange for the freedom of his family. The captain walked over to Jericho and kneeled. The old sailor's sunbaked face stared at the young man with curiosity.

"Boy, do you even know what you are saying?" asked the captain.

Jericho steeled his nerves and stared back at the pirate.

"I challenge any one of you cowards to Toilteanas. I win, we go free."

The pirates each let out a hearty laugh.

"You lose, you die, and we keep them as slaves," said the captain.

"I am already dead," Jericho said with adrenaline still surging through his body.

"Bring him to the ship," said the captain pointing to the burly man.

The giant pirate lurched over to Brin. He effortlessly picked the boy up off the deck. He pushed Jericho, and the two walked to the pirate's vessel. Twice the size of the Amelia, this ship was meant for more than fishing. The ship was lined with metal plating and bristled with bolt throwers. Jericho caught a glimpse of what looked like a laser cutter at the bow of the ship. This ship is a fighting ship meant for raiding. Jericho and his family never stood a chance.

The two men stopped at a small platform on the opposite side of the pirates' ship. Their Captain waved his hand. The platform beneath the two men hissed, steam released from its edges as it lifted into the air. When it stopped, small devices rose out of the ground. Jericho grabbed the two closest to him. Gripping the device, he squeezed till a burst of light emitted from the devices. The one took the shape of a shield. The other resembled a sword. The large burly pirate took off his vest. The barrel-chested monster grabbed the weapon and left the shield.

“I, Qiknas, will be your challenge,” said Qiknas pounding on his chest.

Jericho still felt the bolters’ effects. Even as the world wobbled around him, he charged Qiknas. The man casually sidestepped. Jericho lost his footing, stumbled forward, and dropped his shield. The light deactivated just before it made contact with the water. The group of spectating pirates roared with laughter.

“You embarrass yourself.”

Jericho gritted his teeth. The heat of anger rushed over his face and down his back. He charged Qiknas. This time, he feinted left, then stabbed right. The large pirate was not expecting the quick movements. Caught off guard, he allowed Jericho to draw first blood with the blow glancing off his pectoral. Jericho smiled; his mobility was returning. Qiknas winced, then launched a series of attacks. Every swing was more thunderous than the last. Jericho’s grip, not at full strength, couldn’t hold against the onslaught. A powerful swing knocked his sword away. It slid to the edge of the platform, then Qiknas’ blade pointed at Jericho’s throat.

“Warning. Selachimorph fifty meters out,” chirped the ship’s computer over the P.A.

“You are better than you look,” yelled the captain. “Join my crew, and only the others have to die here,” he said.

“Go eat a Tetraodontidae,” said Jericho. His disdain and defiance saturated every syllable.

“Warning Sciliamorph twenty meters out,” chirped the ship’s computer.

“Okay then, now you can watch them both die,” said the captain. “Throw the boy over.”

“No!” shouted Jericho.

One of the pirates picked up a barely conscious Brin and tossed him into the water. Jericho’s chest ached, and his heart tightened. The taste of the sea air was washed away by the tide of vomit cresting in his throat. Jericho looked around, then his eyes locked on the enormous dorsal fin speeding towards Brin. The voice of their father echoed in the back of his mind.

Jericho knocked Qikna's blade away with his forearm. He turned and dove to the edge of the platform, his outstretched fingers grasping for the small device that was moments ago his sword. He rolled over the sword, then leapt off the platform. He gripped the weapon as though it were one of the cephalopods. Electricity crackled and burst out his gloves, consecrating the weapon he held, just as 30-foot Selachimorph rose from the water. Its razor- sharp teeth ready to feast. Jericho drove his blade through the top of the shark's head. The beast thrashed, bucking him off. Thrown against the hull of the ship, Jericho's world once again grew cold and dark.

"Jericho, wake up, my boy," said Hionach.

The tingle of electricity numbed his arms while the pain of fire ripped through his body in waves. Ines ripped off shreds of her shirt and handed them to Hionach. The smell of grilled meat and ozone filled the air. Jericho looked down at his body. Charred flesh and blood were everywhere. Brin poured water over the wounds. The ground trembled as if in fear of the inevitable.

"Ines, you and the boys have to go. They can help you on the other side," Hionach said.

"What about you?" she asked.

"We only have three passes left. The greatest thing I can do..."

Jericho watched them exchange final affections, unable to voice his disagreement or say goodbye to his father. Standing on the platform before the portal, Hionach handed him over to the guardians. He leaned down and kissed Jericho's forehead.

"Survive," Hionach said.

He watched his father fade as they carried him into the darkness.

It has been nearly seven years since he last saw his mother or brother. The pirates that day were a mix of Concorso Clan and Guerreiro Clan. Both of whom respected the Toilteanas or one's willingness to sacrifice. He lost that rite of passage, but with his bravery, he earned his family's freedom. The catch to losing a rite of passage is you lose your name and clan. That was the day Jericho of the Pescotore died, and Iontach "Shark Slayer" of the entertainer clan, Concorso, was born.