

PLANET ACADEMY

Ron J. Hammond

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1

Team Blue

DEEP space surrounded everything with its cold, dark, and silent emptiness. No life here, not in any direction.

Simon cut left then right with his arms out and knees bent. He didn't pay much attention to the harshness of deep space as he led Team Blue on a training mission toward a dormant star. Each Blue Team member had light speed capable travel sphere which eliminated concerns for gravity, oxygen, and g-force pressures. The spheres responded to the cadets in space the same way a surf board responds to a surfer in water.

Team Blue's travel spheres generated from a special turquoise stone in their belt buckles that glowed a transparent blue. Every Planet Academy teams' sphere glowed the color of their team's color designation and every team had a different stone in their belt buckles.

Simon's lean, five-foot muscular build fit perfectly inside his sphere. His hands and feet never touched the sphere membrane. The same couldn't be said for Chief. Chief stood six and a half feet tall with massive arms and hands. For him, surfing felt awkward. He always complained to Simon that he felt more like a potato sack racer than a space surfer. He exerted much effort to avoid falling against his sphere membrane and short-circuiting it's energy field.

Chief space surfed worse than all the others. In fact, he felt content just to survive an excursion without crashing. In spite of his lacking skills, Simon depended heavily on Chief's expertise as team engineer. It made Simon's job easier since Chief flawlessly handled the engineering aspects of the team missions.

Pearl, the only female on the team and Simon's science officer, struggled to keep up with Simon's pace. She stood only four foot tall. Her small frame mandated surfing dexterity—something lacking among her talents—and concentrated surfing effort. She often complained to Simon that space surfing had been overrated. Pearl's keen intelligence and hard work ethic ensured that Simon didn't have to bother with mission logistics.

The fourth and last team member, aYbil (pronounced "eye-bull") served as Blue Team statistician and historian. He stood as tall as Chief, but had lean and lanky thin arms and legs. His build and agility made space surfing an effortless activity. He frequently insisted to his best friend, Simon, that he surfed better than his teammates and perhaps best in all of Academy. Interestingly, Team Blue had no history nor statistical records.

Simon, Pearl, and Chief surfed in the prescribed linear formation. Not aYbil. He matched their speed but tried to hit every energy source or mass he could find. aYbil never cared about where they went. He just cared that he maximized his own fun along the way. Simon struggled to understand how aYbil's fun-loving nature had drawn them together as friends and allies in Pre-Academy, yet pushed them apart in Planet Academy.

"Simon, we have a debris field up ahead. Looks like heavy rock mixed with a variety of metals," reported Pearl.

"Thank you, Pearl," replied Simon as he studied the field. "Pearl?"

"Yes, Simon."

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Stage Two

SIMON scanned Hospital, the beautiful bushes, trees, flowers and plants in thousands of their varieties—all created by Prince Shepard. He felt gratitude that Prince Shepard had scholarshipped him and the other cadets to Academy. Peace had replaced Simon's fatigue and frustration.

"P e a r l ." A deep slow voice blew through Hospital like a gentle breeze. Simon stood to his feet, searching as he moved to the spot by the stream where Pearl and Chief recovered.

"Did you hear something?" Simon helped Chief to his feet.

"I think so," said Chief as he stretched his long arms above his head.

"I think I heard my name." Pearl reached both her hands up. Simon and Chief gently lifted her to her feet. Pearl adjusted her robe.

"P e a r l ." Again a deep slow voice blew through Hospital.

"There it is again," said Pearl.

"It's coming from Nursery, on the far end of Hospital. Follow me," said Simon as they cautiously moved over the stream, past the tropical plants, over the grassy knoll and down into Nursery.

"Don't we have class?" whispered Chief.

"Yes, but we can make it. Now shhh," Simon walked first down to the shoreline of the aquamarine tinted waters of the Nursery's sea.

“P e a r l ,” the voice called out as a mountain-sized, pale blue whale called out while surfacing onto the shore. It towered above the team members, dwarfing Chief in size.

“I’m Pearl,” she replied, standing on her tippy toes and extending her neck to see into its eyes. Simon and Chief walked in opposite directions to observe how far its body extended off shore.

“P e a r l ,” the whale repeated.

“What? It’s me. I’m here.” Pearl glanced to Simon then Chief for some feedback. They simply shrugged their shoulders as they rejoined her at the whale’s face.

“Wait a minute. Didn’t He Rainbow Trout say that the whale and elephant take a long time to get their words out?” Simon remembered aloud.

“Whales and trout can talk?” asked Chief.

“We were surprised too, Chief,” replied Pearl. “Hello, anybody,” yelled Pearl as loud as she could. “Is there another kind creature that could help us talk to the whale?”

“Hello, Pearl. I’m He Otter.”

Pearl searched for the otter.

“Up here, Pearl.”

She looked atop the whale’s back. There sat a three-foot long, sleek-furred, black otter.

“Nice to meet you, He Otter.” Pearl curtsied. “The whale is trying to speak but keeps repeating my name.”

“Oh, no worries, Pearl. Whales and elephants do that. When they speak, one has to be very, very patient.” He Otter gently caressed the whale’s head.

“He Otter, what does the whale want to say?” asked Simon.

“She Whale is worried about the storm.”

“He Rainbow Trout mentioned a coming storm. What does that mean?” asked Pearl, placing her small hand on She Whale’s face.

“The storm in Academy. All the creatures here worry that the planet will not be constructed because of the storm, the one building off in the distance.”

“Just what, specifically, is on She Whale’s mind?” inquired Pearl as she spoke to the whale in a nurturing, motherly tone.

“aYbil.”

“aYbil?” they all replied in surprise.

“What does aYbil have to do with the storm?” asked Simon as he folded his arms, worrying about his friend.

“Well, storms tend to change things, damage things along their path . . .”

“Has aYbil been damaged?” interrupted Simon.

He Otter hesitated to reply.

“Please tell me. He is a Blue Team member.”

“Simon, I’d tell you if I could. She Whale is the one who heard about it and she struggled to pick the word which described aYbil’s plight.”

“What word did she choose when she told you about him, He Otter?” asked Chief.

“Kidnapped. She said that aYbil had been kidnapped.”

“Kidnapped!” they replied in unison.

“Who did it?” demanded Simon. “And what ransom is required? I want a name.” Simon stepped back from the whale, arms straight and muscles flexed.

Chief and Pearl turned to Simon, looking surprised at his angry response.

“She Whale gave no names. Just said, very slowly, that aYbil had been taken.”

“K i d n a p p e d ,” whispered Whale in a massive exhale of air.

“I don’t believe it.” Simon climbed a nearby rock to look directly into She Whale’s eye.

“T R U E .” Whale’s voice rang of sadness as a cloud partially blocked the sunlight.

“aYbil will be in class, you’ll see.” Simon jumped down from the rock and climbed the bank, leading back to Hospital.

“Thank you, He Otter. Thank you, She Whale,” Pearl yelled back as she and Chief followed Simon, who stopped them just outside of Classroom.