

Shifter

By

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Seven astronauts encounter a shapeshifting alien on their
ship.

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INT. BEDROOM 1 - DAY

TAFT, 30s, a leader, wakes up from hypersleep on a plain white bed. He wears white pajamas and has an oxygen mask over his face. He sits up and looks at a timer by his bed, it reads 05:00 and is counting down: 04:59,58,57...

Taft checks his pulse, flexes his hands, then puts his hand over his heart.

TAFT
(whisper to himself)
Human.

MONTAGE - WAKING UP

In 7 absolutely identical bedrooms, the other members of the crew wake up as the timer counts down:

WADE, 20s, a joker, does push ups on the floor.

SOLOS, 40s, introspective, meditates on the floor.

GAGE, 30s, logical, attaches a BRACELET to each wrist and performs SIGN LANGUAGE.

MERSON, 20s, geekish, plays with a small puzzle box.

CAMRYN, 20s, quiet, kneels down and prays.

INT. BEDROOM 2 - DAY

Finally KANE, 30s, looks at their PALM, it glows ever so slightly.

The countdown reaches 00:00, the door to the room slides open, Kane leaves and the door closes, but we stay in the room.

On the bed is a **DUPLICATE OF KANE**, dead, with blood dripping from their eyes.

INT. CANTEEN - DAY

The seven crew members walk out into a large room with tables, shelves, cupboards and a sink. They all size each other up, Wade scoffs.

WADE
So what now? We go around, say our names? Maybe a fun fact? Well here's one, I haven't eaten in 203 days and I'm hungry as shit.

Wade laughs and strolls over to a fridge in the corner, this seems to have broken the tension as everyone begins to mill about. Taft watches them all carefully, getting a read on them. Merson approaches him.

MERSON

First time?

TAFT

Yeah.

MERSON

Second for me. First was a H-2 implosion, we got the shields up, but not in time... guess they thought I deserved another go.

Solos overhears as he passes by.

SOLOS

(chastising)

Rule One.

MERSON

Crap sorry... don't mention command, don't mention the mission... sorry.

Across the room, Kane takes two ALUMINIUM FOOD BOXES over to Camryn, who sits at the far end of a table, Kane offers the box.

CAMRYN

I can never eat after hypersleep.

KANE

Just try. You'll need the strength.

Camryn accepts the box with a small smile.

Wade is still rooting through the fridge, Gage stands behind.

WADE

You want the grey paste, or the light grey paste?

GAGE

(robotic sounding)

Light grey please.

Wade flinches and turns around to look at Gage.

WADE

Oh tell me they didn't send us in with a mute?

Gage gestures in sign language, we see BRACELTS light up and a robotic voice comes from a speaker in their neck.

GAGE

(from the speaker)

Do you have a problem with mutes?

WADE

Third year academy exam, a mute's translator botched and signalled enemies to the left instead of the right, I got my head blown clean off, instant simulation death, had to repeat the whole damn year.

GAGE

Looks like you didn't learn anything on the repeat either.

Wade shakes his head as Gage grabs a food box and leaves.

Taft stands at the head of the table.

TAFT

Once you've grabbed your food, I think it'd be best to go over assignments.

WADE

(joking)

Yes captain, right away captian, sir.

TAFT

How did you know I was assigned captain?

WADE

Everything about you man... don't worry, I prefer second anyway, less pressure more fun. And it's Wade by the way.

TAFT

Good... Taft...

Taft nods around the circle of crewmates, they each answer:

SOLOS

Solos, science officer.

MERSON

Merson, security.

CAMRYN
Camryn, harvester.

GAGE
Gage, navigator.

KANE
Kane, systems.

They all look at each other, Wade scoffs.

WADE
Well, now that we've had that
scintillating little chat, what
next.

TAFT
We wait.

INT. CANTEEN - LATER

Camryn sits at a computer monitor full of numbers.

Gage and Wade have a planking competition as Kane and Merson watch.

Solos and Taft play chess at a table.

SOLOS
A millennia of game theory and we
still find ourselves coming back
to chess.

Wade falls to the floor, exhausted. Gage wins the contest.

WADE
Shit! There's no way you're pure
human. Did they give you a little
boost in the simmy to make up for
the vocal cords?

SOLOS
(calling over)
Rule 1.

Wade rolls their eyes, but suddenly a SIREN BEEPS. A RED LIGHT flashes at Camryn's monitor.

WADE
Finally.

CAMRYN
Hydrogen cloud. 2.4 across, we'll
be over it in five.

TAFT

Any security? Drones? Scout ships?

Gage approaches a monitor as well.

GAGE

Nothing, all clear.

WADE

And here I thought we'd get a welcome party.

TAFT

Camryn. The harvesting pod is in the south section. Myself, Kane and Merson will go with you, make sure the systems are optimal... Wade, Gage and Solos, maintain course here. Make sure we're over the cloud in less than five.

WADE

Aye aye boss.

Wade puts his feet up at a desk.

INT. HALLWAY 1 - DAY

Camryn, Taft, Merson and Kane walk down a hallway.

TAFT

Merson, arms-wise, what did they equip you with? Splitter? Half-count?

MERSON

Taser.

Taft shakes his head, but suddenly the lights snap off. The hallway remains lit by glowing green cat-eyes in the wall.

TAFT

Kane? Systems?

Kane looks at a small tablet-like device.

KANE

Disruption in the cadmium cells. It sometimes happens over a cloud.

TAFT

Can we still harvest?

KANE

No... but I'd be more worried about cloaking, with the systems down we can be tracked pretty easily.

TAFT

How quickly can you get it back up?

KANE

Simultaneous coupling should get us online almost instantly, I just need another set of hands.

TAFT

Alright, Merson, go with Kane, get us back on. Camryn and I will head to the harvesting pod. I want the cloud extracted and all of us out of here within a hour.

KANE

Understood.

Kane and Merson head off down a corridor. Camryn and Taft keep walking, but Camryn looks uneasy.

TAFT

Nervous?

Camryn shakes her head, frustrated.

CAMRYN

I... I only took intro systems.

TAFT

Pardon?

CAMRYN

I only took intro systems at the academy... but if it's a cadmium disruption, that wouldn't show on the the diagnostics, you have to manually confirm.

Taft's face drops, something is wrong. Camryn doesn't realise the gravity of the situation.

CAMRYN

I don't know how Kane got that wrong?

TAFT

Keep going, but if the systems aren't on in ten minutes head back to the mess. And if you see Kane, run.

Taft hurries back down the hall.

INT. HALLWAY 2 - MOMENTS LATER

Merson and Kane walk down the hall, approaching a section of metal rods.

MERSON

I'm thinking ten years in the program, then go straight into consulting. HP maybe... huh... Kane the cadmium cells seem fine--

Merson is cut off as Kane's hand suddenly covers their mouth. Kane's palm is GLOWING, and Merson screams into it.

Merson thrashes, trying to jab the TASER into Kane's body, but can't. Merson slowly goes weak in Kane's arms.

Blood drips from Merson's eyes as Kane lowers them to the floor.

TAFT (O.S.)

Merson!

Taft rounds a corner and comes into view, he stops horrified.

Taft stares down the corridor, but Kane is no longer there, instead there are TWO MERSONS, one alive, one dead.

The live Merson flashes a grin and lunges at Taft with a glowing palm.

Taft dodges out of the way, slamming Merson into the wall. Taft scrambles along the floor and picks up the TASER Merson droppped.

Taft jams the taser into the live Merson's arm, but Merson doesn't even flinch.

Merson reaches up for Taft's face with a glowing palm.

CAMRYN

Taft!

Merson glances back at Camryn, who runs into the hall.

TAFT

Run!

Taft kicks Merson, sprints down the hallway and ducks into a doorway.

INT. COMMS ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Taft slams the door shut and keys in a locking code.

BANG - Merson on the other side of the door.

MERSON (O.S.)

Captain!

Taft braces the door. Merson growls.

MERSON (O.S.)

Not good enough.

Taft listens as Merson's footsteps recede down the hallway. Taft exhales, and checks his body for injury, but - BANG BANG at the door, Taft flinches.

SOLOS (O.S.)

Captain?

TAFT

Who is it?

SOLOS (O.S.)

Solos sir. What happend?

Taft goes to open the door, but then thinks better of it.

TAFT

Solos, what did you say to me,
when we were playing chess?

SOLOS (O.S.)

A millennia of game-theory and we
still find ourselves coming back
to chess.

Taft nods, relieved, and opens the door, Solos waits on the other side.

TAFT

We have a problem.

SOLOS

I know.

INT. CANTEEN - LATER

Solos and Taft stride into the canteen, on the main table is KANE'S body, surrounding it are Gage, Camryn and Wade.

WADE

Found it in the sleep chamber...
don't think they even woke up.

TAFT
It's a shifter.

WADE
Course it is. This far into the
Sakar belt... so who's it got?
Kane?

TAFT
Kane first, then Merson.

WADE
Merson? Shit! He just... man, he
was just in here, said you told
him to head to the engine room.

TAFT
The engine room?

GAGE
It's keeping the engines off,
we're right over the cloud.

TAFT
It's making us an easy target.

WADE
Shit. Knew there'd be a welcome
party.

TAFT
We need to get the engines
online. Get the ship moving.
Gage, you pilot, Camryn...

Taft looks around to give orders, but stops at Camryn,
realising something is amiss.

TAFT
Camryn, why didn't tell them
about Merson?

CAMRYN
I didn't know. It was dark, I
just saw shapes.

Wade looks at Camryn suspiciously.

WADE
What are you saying Taft?

TAFT
Have you all had eyes on each
other this whole time?

The others all shake their heads.

WADE

Shit! It's one of us ain't it?

SOLOS

Let's not leap to conclusions.

WADE

It's the mute!

GAGE

I was in here the whole time!
You're the one that left.

Wade goes to grab Gage.

SOLOS

Calm down!

WADE

I left and the mute got shifted!

TAFT

Stop!

Wade and Gage stop, inches from each other. Taft holds his hand up for quiet.

SOLOS

Captain?

TAFT

Solos... is there anything
corrosive on board, colourless?

SOLOS

Hydrochloric acid.

TAFT

Get it. Everyone else, don't
move.

INT. CANTEEN - LATER

Taft places two beakers and pipettes on the table, both have colourless liquid in.

TAFT

I tazed the shifter, but it
didn't even flinch... it can't
feel pain...

Taft pushes the beakers forward.

TAFT

Water. Acid... you close your
eyes, I drop water on your hand,

(MORE)

TAFT (cont'd)
then at a random time, I switch
to acid... if you're human you'll
flinch, if you're the shifter,
you won't even notice.

The others all look at each other, tense.

TAFT
I'll go first.

Taft nods to Solos, then closes his eyes and holds out his
hand. Solos drips water on Taft's hand.

TAFT
Water.

Solos drips more.

TAFT
Still water.

Solos finally drips the acid pipette, Taft flinches.

TAFT
Acid.

SOLOS
He's human.

Everyone exhales relief - it works.

SOLOS
Who's next?

WADE
Well I'm human as shit, so let's
get this done.

Wade closes their eyes and reaches out a hand. Taft drips
water, once, twice, three times. On the fourth time, Taft
drips acid, Wade winces.

WADE
Son of a bitch burns.

TAFT
Human.

WADE
Like I said... now the mute.

Taft turns to Gage, who looks nervous, they slowly hold
out their hand.

WADE

Wait!

Wade grabs an aluminium box from the side, flattens it and fashions it into a makeshift knife.

WADE

One wrong answer, and this goes
in your eye.

Wade holds the knife up to Gage's eye, they swallow.

GAGE

I'm human.

WADE

We'll see.

Taft starts the process: One drip, Wade stares at Gage, but it's just water.

A second drip: Wade's hand quivers, but Gage doesn't flinch.

Third drip: Gage flinches.

GAGE

Acid! It's acid.

TAFT

She's human.

Wade exhales, lowering the knife.

WADE

Shit.

TAFT

Camryn.

Camryn wanders over, tense.

CAMRYN

I want him away from me. He's too nervous.

WADE

Bullshit--

TAFT

-- Wade, step back.

Wade sighs and steps back as Camryn closes their eyes.

Taft reaches for the water pipette, but then changes his mind and goes straight for the acid one. He drops it on Camryn's hand - no flinching.

Camryn looks straight at Taft, who can't quite believe it.

TAFT

Acid--

Before the words can be spoke, Camryn pushes Taft aside and grabs hold of Gage. Camryn raises a GLOWING PALM to Gage's face.

CAMRYN

Don't move! Don't! Try anything,
the mute dies!

Camryn pushes her hand into Gage's face. Gage moves their own hand, signing.

GAGE

Kill it! Now!

Camryn grabs Gage's arm, stopping them signing. Wade goes to rush Camryn with the knife, but Taft holds him back.

TAFT

No! Stand down!

Solos takes hold of Wade, Camryn shakes holds Taft's stare.

CAMRYN

Not good enough Captain.

Camryn slowly backs out of the room, still holding Gage, then slams the door behind them.

Wade rushes the door, but can't open it.

WADE

Locked. Shit!

TAFT

It's buying time for back up, we
have to get the engines on and
get out of this cloud.

SOLOS

The shifter will be protecting
the engine room.

WADE

I can distract it, lead it
somewhere... I reckon I can take
it one on one.

TAFT

Stab it if you can, or trap it
somewhere, turn the oxygen off.

WADE
Choke the bitch to death.

TAFT
We stay together until we find
it, then it's on you Wade.

Wade nods.

INT. HALLWAY 2 - MOMENTS LATER

Taft, Solos and Wade stalk down the hallway.

WADE
Command really did a number on us
with this one.

SOLOS
Wouldn't expect anything less.

Taft pauses briefly... Solos didn't chastise Wade for
breaking rule 1. Wade keeps on walking as Taft gestures
Solos to hang back.

SOLOS
Captain?

TAFT
I'm worried about Wade... I think
we should come up with a
codeword, between us, just in
case.

The two of them slowly move after Wade.

SOLOS
Okay?

TAFT
When we were playing chess, I
checked you with a knight... it
was off E5 right?

Solos pauses.

SOLOS
I think so.

TAFT
You're sure?

SOLOS
Yes.

TAFT

Because you'd already taken both
my knights.

Taft suddenly grabs Solos in a chokehold.

TAFT

Wade!

Wade turns and scrambles towards them, but Solos kicks at
a door panel, smashing a mechanism, the door slams shut.

Wade bangs on the window of the door as Solos and Taft
grapple on the other side.

WADE

Taft!

Taft grips harder, choking Solos to death. Solos reaches
out with a GLOWING PALM, trying to get it to Taft's face,
but Taft squeezes.

SOLOS

Better...

Solos finally dies, his face loses all its features,
becoming an AMORPHOUS BLOB.

Taft gasps, exhausted.

WADE

Taft! What happened.

TAFT

We shouldn't have assumed there
was only one.

WADE

Shit! What do we do?

TAFT

Stick to the plan. Get to the
engine room, lead it away. I can
circle around, try and fly!

WADE

Okay. Okay! Captain. Good luck.

Wade puts his fist to the window, Taft touches the window
with his own fist, a gesture of comradeship. They both
turn and leave.

INT. HALLWAY 3 - DAY

Taft hurries down a hallway, he turns a corner and suddenly sees a viewing window out into space, he stops for a second, struck by the beauty. The gas cloud surrounds them, swirling with majestic colours.

Taft puts his hand to his heart, in respect. But suddenly sees the blinking of another spaceship in the distance, his face drops.

Taft rushes down the hallway.

INT. ENGINE ROOM - DAY

Taft bursts through a door and into the engine room.

TAFT
Wade! They're coming.

WADE
Captian! Stop!

Taft comes around a corner and sees Wade and Gage stood face to face. Wade holds up the makeshift knife, Gage holds up their hands in surrender.

GAGE
Captain! He's the shifter!

WADE
I'm not!

TAFT
Is it her?

WADE
I don't know!

GAGE
I'm not!

WADE
I can't tell.

Taft looks from Wade to Gage.

WADE
Captain, you gotta get the acid.

TAFT
There's no time. Wade, just--

WADE
-- I'm not killing a human
Captain, even a mute. Get the
acid!

Taft takes one last look, then glances back at the door.

WADE

Captain?

Taft steps back out of the door.

INT. HALLWAY 4 - CONTINUOUS

Taft locks the door and looks through the window in the door to see Wade run towards him. Gage still has their hands up.

WADE

Captain, what are you doing!

Taft looks at a computer console beside the door. He taps several buttons, an O2 readout slowly starts reducing. Wade bangs on the window.

WADE

Captain!

Wade bangs harder, Taft watches as Wade drops to the floor on the other side of the door, dying from lack of oxygen.

Taft peers through the door, Gage is dead on the floor, their face an amorphous blob - they were a shifter.

But Wade is dead too, still with a human face.

Taft taps the O2 button on the keypad, then opens the door.

INT. ENGINE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Taft walks in and past Wade's corpse. Taft reaches a control panel, and keys in some buttons. Suddenly the ship shudders and moves.

Taft closes his eyes.

FADE TO WHITE.

INT. SIMULATION CHAMBER - DAY

Taft opens his eyes, he is lying in a bed, with a helmet over his head and an IV in his arm.

An OPERATOR strides in with a clipboard as Taft looks around, waking up from the simulation.

TAFT
Good enough?

OPERATOR
You passed. Welcome to the team
Captain Taft.

Taft shakes the Operators hand. Two other ORDERLIES come in and help Taft to his feet.

Taft looks around the room, the other CREWMATES are all lying in beds with helmets over their heads.

TAFT
You should give Wade another
try... it wasn't his fault.

OPERATOR
We'll bear that in mind Captain.

The Orderlies help Taft out of the room. The Operator points to the other beds, more Orderlies come in and remove the crewmates' helmets.

Underneath the helmets, the crewmates are all dead, bleeding from their eyes.