

No Path Home

Jonathan Brewster, ©2019 All rights reserved

Rachel risked a look around the corner, the corridor was empty. All she had to do was make the last ten meters to the hatch on the opposite bulkhead. She took several deep breaths and slid her feet back and forth on the deck, getting ready. Then there was a muffled thud as one of them tried to open the hatch that she'd jammed shut. There was a pause, and a louder bang. The door buckled slightly. They were stupid strong, and the plasteel rod she had jammed against the frame wouldn't last long.

Then she heard more of them coming down the corridor and another thud from behind her. Followed by the sound of the rod splintering. It was now or never.

Rachel pushed off the hatch frame, sprinting forward with everything she had. Behind her, there was a muffled bang as the hatch slammed open and angry sounding hissing. They were coming from behind her, but she yanked open the hatch and threw herself through, pulling it closed just in time. Eyes closed, she pressed her forehead against the cold metal hatch, panting for breath.

Then, something made a low sibilant noise behind her. Rachel's indigo colored eyes opened wide and she slowly turned around. It was even worse than she'd thought. This wasn't her berthing area, and there were *four* of them in here. Their obsidian exoskeletons reflected the lightbars set into the overhead, and it shifted over their skin as they stirred. They were standing up from the table, moving slowly and deliberately into a poised crouch. And then she saw that at least one of them was from the warrior caste, he had to be more than two meters tall. Long prehensile tails twitched and uncoiled. They stared at each other for several speechless seconds.

"Uhm, hi," Rachel said.

They responded with ululating whistles that rapidly rose in pitch and volume. Two of the Ulthira leaped straight up, one landed on the tabletop and jumped from there to the large equipment rack. The other had made it there in one jump and perched on the edge like a bird of prey. The third one clawed open a small locker and tried to jam itself in.

The warrior caste Ulthira made a noise that was equal parts strangled gargle, high pitched shriek, and rattlesnake buzz. It slammed both of its arms on the table several times. The other three relaxed slightly. Then it turned to her, pulling something tight against the top of the thorax.

"Lieutenant, why are you entering an unauthorized area?"

Rachel crossed her arms over her chest. "I apologize..." she glanced at the rank tabs on the Ulthira's khaki uniform and winced inwardly. "...First Tactical Specialist. I thought this was my berthing."

“That is across the passageway and two hatches to your right, lieutenant. Further, why are you out of uniform?”

“I was taking a shower and put my gear in a locker but when I opened it again, everything, was gone, clothes, towel, all of it.”

“I see. This locker, did it have a blue symbol made of three wavy lines?”

Rachel nodded, wishing she could melt into the floor. The others were slowly coming back to the table but kept their attention on her.

“That signifies waste disposal, lieutenant. Your belongings have been rendered to their component atoms. Please return to your berthing area now.”

She nodded again, face hot. “Yes, sir. Figured it was something like that.”

Rachel opened the hatch and stepped quickly into the passageway. Right into the middle of another group of Ulthira that were standing there. There was more mayhem, earsplitting screams and feet thudding as the group scattered at high speed in all directions, leaving whatever they’d been carrying splashed all over the area. The hatch opened behind her, and there was a very human sounding sigh.

“That was our food, lieutenant.”

“Sorry, sir. I’ll clean it up.”

“Absolutely not. Return to your quarters. Do not emerge again until given permission.”

She nodded without turning around and got to her berthing area as quickly as she could. Kiki, the other pilot, was lying on her bed reading her tablet.

“How was the shower?” she asked, without looking away from the tablet.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Rachel said, pulling a pair of shorts on.

“What do you...oh, no. We’re *definitely* talking about this,” the other woman said, sitting up. “Are you one of those types that get inappropriate around the Ulthira?”

Rachel pulled a t-shirt over her head. “No, and don’t put anything in hatches with wavy blue lines on it.”

There was a snort of laughter. “No, not a good idea. Those are for disposal. Didn’t you read the material they gave us?”

Rachel sighed. “Obviously I missed that part.”

“Did any of them see you?”

Rachel, her face bright red, nodded. Kiki chortled.

“Did they scream?”

“Screamed and stampeded in fact.” Rachel gave up and related the entire ordeal to Kiki, who was laughing hysterically by the time she was done. Rachel finally began to laugh as well.

“The rest of the team won’t hear about this. Right?”

Kiki held up her right hand. “Solemnly swear, if I can ask you something. What’s up with you and Lieutenant Uhm Theo?”

Rachel sat on her bunk and sighed. “I don’t think anything is going on. It’s complicated.”

Kiki smirked. “It didn’t look too complicated when we were leaving Echo. And unless there’s part of this broom closet you’re not telling me about, it’s not like there’s much else to do in here.”

Rachel related the history between her and the Cosineau twins. It took quite a while, and Kiki whistled when she was done.

“You weren’t kidding about complicated. What’re you going to do?”

Rachel shrugged. “Worrying doesn’t help, so I’m not going to.”

Kiki nodded judiciously. “Good plan.”

“Why did you want to know?”

Kiki grinned at her. “I was going to ask if you’d be up for sharing him or if I could at least borrow him for a little while.”

Rachel laughed. “I’d say go for it, but you’d have to ask... I’m not actually sure who you’d ask. His sister would probably know.”

“Yeah, that’d be an interesting conversation.”

Unclaimed Space, Planet G789.5

The shuttle ride down to the planet’s surface was very different this time. Instead of getting a good view from the co-pilot’s seat, all he got was the forward bulkhead of the shuttle. The flight deck was sealed off, and once they were dropped, the pilots would immediately return to the ship parked in orbit. If the initial survey had missed some sort of microbiological threat, that would keep it from spreading. After they’d been briefed, the entire team had been inoculated against

every known threat; viral, bacterial, and nanotech. Predictably, they'd all gotten sick on the transit here. The berthing area had been very cramped, and no matter what was waiting for them, everyone was looking forward to fresh air.

“Hatches open in two minutes,” a voice announced in their earpieces.

Most of the cargo space in the large shuttle was taken up by the two Wombats, ten-wheeled vehicles that looked like UTVs on steroids. There were three axles instead of two, supporting ten wheels. They weren't armored, but both carried heavy weapons and would be crewed by two team members and could carry three more. The second shuttle was ten minutes away, Kawehi and the majority of the team waiting for an all clear.

Jonesy and Willi unclipped and got into the vehicles. Marisol took one of the gunner positions, and Betsy got the other one. Emma looked at Theo and made a face. They'd both protested that they should be included on the Wombats, but neither of them had qualified yet, so they'd be the security team for the landing area while the other four did an initial reconnaissance of the area.

There was a thirty-second warning and then a ten-second countdown. The drivers unclipped tie-downs as the large rear hatch and ramp cycled open. The light outside was bright enough to make them all wince. The bay light turned green, and both Wombats whirred into life and drove out onto the planet. Theo and Emma followed them and jumped down onto the plastcrete landing area. The electrically powered vehicles drove in opposite directions, drowned out by the sound of the shuttle taking off. Theo and Emma put magazines in their assault rifles and walked slowly around the landing area. There wasn't much to see, the plastcrete looked relatively new and was surrounded by a chest-high fence. The GalCom symbol for shuttle was painted on the pad in orange, surrounded by a large circle and there was a large barn with the doors shut and a windsock hanging limply from a pole. Outside the fence, they could see the roofs of the outpost a few hundred meters away. The overhead maps showed the outpost in the middle of a rolling plain, most of it covered by waist-high grass analog. There were larger growths here and there, pillars of something that was supposed to be fungus like. Somewhere toward the east was a large body of water and surrounding mountains, but they couldn't see more than a couple of kilometers through a brownish haze that filled most of the atmosphere. It wasn't deemed dangerous, just a smog created by the chain of volcanoes erupting on the opposite side of the world.

Emma nodded at the barn. Theo stood by the personnel door, and when Emma nodded, he yanked it open, and she ducked inside. When she didn't throw herself back out, Theo followed her in. There was even less to see in here. A dusty plastcrete floor and a few empty workbenches. There was one other room with desks and chairs, but it was just as deserted looking. Emma flipped a switch, but the lights stayed dark.

“Sky Train, field-sec. All clear,” Theo radioed.

“Mobile units are both clear,” Marisol added.

“Copy that, Sky Train 2 ETA is seven minutes.”

“I can’t decide if this is a good sign or not,” Emma said as they walked back outside.

Theo shrugged. “No one is shooting at us.”

The Wombats pulled up on different sides of the fenced in area as the shuttle came in. It flared to a stop in the middle of the circle and hatches dropped open. The rest of the team jumped to the ground, and no more than a minute later the shuttle had disappeared back into the clouds.

~~~~~

Arriving on Alnatic had been relatively lighthearted and fun. This was the exact opposite. The team was following the pair of Wombats down the road between the landing pad and the research outpost. Betsy and Marisol were still in the gunner’s seats of the vehicles, and the heavy guns were pointed forty-five degrees to each side of the plastcrete road. The Wombats advanced at a slow walk with the rest of the team following in two lines on foot. Kawehi was at the rear of one column, and Theo was at the head of the other. When they were facing unknown threats the two of them were spaced widely apart. In the event of an ambush, it was assumed that one of them would survive and take charge of the team. To Theo, it made sense and was utterly ridiculous at the same time. Sure, it gave the team the best odds to keep some part of the chain of command intact. But it wasn’t like they could call for reinforcements. The nearest ground force teams were light-years away, and he doubted anyone would authorize another team to land anyway.

It was late afternoon by the time they were entering the research outpost, although research village might have been a better description. There were twenty-eight structures built in a rough circle with the largest units, mostly labs, clustered in the center. Theo and Emma joined Kawehi and Nys between the Wombats while everyone else split into the three-person search teams. They began at the center and would work their way out of the edge of the outpost. Theo and Kawehi looked through the abandoned community center. There were notices about Halo and Go tournaments, schedules for outings, announcements, and so on. The common accretions that any organized group would create. Nowhere was there a clue about anything unusual happening.

“Well, it’s quiet at least,” Kawehi said. “What are your impressions?”

“It doesn’t look like anyone was in a panic when they left,” Theo said. “The building at the pad was dusty but clean. Even the chairs had been pushed under the desks. The stuff here, it looks like the same stuff on the boards back at Echo. Whatever happened, it was peaceful or too fast for anyone to get a memo up.”

“I wonder if they all left at once or if it was a gradual abandonment. And why didn’t someone leave a note? I know some colony admins, they’re very much “leave a note” people.”

~~~~~

Two hours later, the buildings had been carefully searched. It was the same story as the landing facility. Everything had been left neatly arranged, beds were made, and it looked like personal

possessions had been left behind. The only indication that someone might return was the fusion generator in the engineering building. It had been put into standby mode rather than being completely shut down. There had been a three-person security force, but all the weapons had been left behind, locked in the small armory.

Theo and Emma circled the outside of the buildings and other than something that looked like a grave, didn't find anything at all. When the sweep was done, Theo headed out with Kawehi to see what they'd found. It was the right size for a grave and looked relatively new. A sheet of aluminum was laid flat on the soil. There was a cursive script incised into the surface. It seemed a little like Arabic but was more ornate. At the bottom was a representation of a simple pillar. Theo held up his tablet to get a translation.

"It's Hyaldathet," he said. "A name and date along with the words 'death by misadventure.'"

"That's kind of a strange thing to put on a memorial," Kawehi said.

"One of the machinists," Theo said, flipping through his tablet. "Their last status report doesn't mention any casualties."

Kawehi grinned at him. "Of course it doesn't, Lieutenant. That wouldn't be any fun."

"So, you're happy to be back in the field?"

She surprised him with a quick hug. "You have *no* idea how much I hate being in an office. Let's go see what else we've got."

By the time it was dusk, the team had set up their camp in the large community building. Willi had brought the fusion generator online, so they had lights and electricity. The communications team got in touch with the ship in orbit, and Kawehi filed the first of her reports. The medical team took careful samples of all the food left behind and uploaded that data as well. Nothing unusual had been found, but the team would be using their own food all the same. Water was more straightforward to test for anything unusual, and it was declared safe soon after the power came on. The Administrator's offices were designated as the duty room, and a watch schedule was posted. Theo went to bed shortly after nightfall, he was in charge of the midwatch from 00:00 to 04:00. The rest of the team looked reasonably relaxed, the usual poker game began in one corner of the large room, and a few people were reading.

"They look good," Emma commented as she laid on the cot beside his.

Theo nodded. "I was watching for anyone getting weirded out, but after Alnatic it'll probably take a lot more than an empty research post to shake people up."

"There's always tomorrow."

Theo sighed and closed his eyes.

~~~~~

Despite Emma's less than helpful prediction, the next day was just as quiet as the first one. Deidre and the best of the Ta'avi trackers formed a couple of teams after breakfast and began to sweep the area around the outpost. Marisol and Jonesy took Emma, and they went over the Wombats, rechecking everything. They would stay near the vehicle as a fast reaction should any of the tracking teams run into trouble.

Toni, head the medical section, took Jala, her new Ta'avi apprentice, and began to run extensive tests in an attempt to rule out environmental causes for the abandonment. Before they broke up to help with other tasks, the communications section set up listening antennas. They were also linked to the orbiting ship as it searched for signals on its long fall around the planet.

Theo and Kawehi split everyone else up into teams for a full building to building search. Any electronic or written entries were scrutinized closely, inventories were created, looking for anything missing that might indicate some sort of pattern. With any luck, that would provide some kind of clue as to what had happened. They took a break at mid-day to compare notes.

"Tessa noticed something interesting," Theo said as they unwrapped the dreaded OneDay bars.

The Ta'avi woman looked up. "Maybe it's nothing. All of the data entries are completely normal. But the last one recorded varies, they don't all end on the same day."

"I did not see any reports of missing researchers," Nys said, looking at the meal bar with distaste. She took a bite and frowned. "Please tell me this food is some initiation prank."

She looked around the group as there were a few chuckles.

"If it is, we're all victims," Kawehi said after a long drink of water.

"Think of it as an incentive to complete the mission quickly," Theo said.

"We didn't find anything that interesting," Hannah said.

"I might have," Holm said as he sat down. "In the machine shop, they were set up to make these weird statue things. There was one finished and one halfway finished in the machine."

"When a CNC shop starts up, they run the milling machines through a series of tests to make sure everything is working smoothly," Ian said. "You probably saw some of that output."

Holm nodded as he took a bite of his lunch and then spat it out. "What is this?"

Everyone laughed. "It's good for you, eat up," Theo said.

"There's something wrong with you Terries," Holm said, putting the half eaten bar down. "Anyway, I thought it might be a test run, so I checked the log on the machine. They ran the

same shape over and over. A hundred and fifty-six times in fact, if you count the one in the machine. I only saw those two.”

He held up his tablet. There was a picture of the object. It looked to be twenty centimeters tall. “Anyone see one of these?”

Theo looked around, but the rest of the team were shaking their heads.

“I guess they might have melted them down to reclaim the stock?” Ian said.

Holm shrugged. “Someone that knows more about this stuff should go and take a look at it.”

There was some chattering as the trackers returned to camp. They sat down with everyone else, but Deidre stayed back talking to Marisol.

“Ian, you and Willi are the experts on CNC. Could you go take a look after lunch?” Kawehi asked.

Willi looked at Ian, and they both stood up.

“I’m full anyway,” Ian said.

He and Willi headed for the machine shop, and Holm got up and followed them.

Emma was listening to Marisol and Deidre and looked over at Theo with raised eyebrows. He started to say something to Kawehi, but she was already getting up and going to where the Wombat was parked. Theo hurriedly followed her.

“Hey guys,” Deidre said. “I was just asking Marisol, this planet isn’t an archaeological site, right?”

Kawehi shook her head, pulling out her tablet. “Straight scientific mission, something with the magnetic field and solar flares.”

Deidre nodded. “That’s what I thought. There’s something you need to come and see.”

~~~~

Kawehi took Theo and Emma along in the Wombat. Jonesy drove while Deidre pointed the way to go. Marisol was in the gunner’s seat but didn’t have her hands on the guns.

“How did the tracking go?” Kawehi asked.

“Not so hot,” Deidre said. “This stuff on the ground is kinda spongy, like heather, so it doesn’t take footprints very well. We only found a couple of survey markers the outpost left, but that was

it. There was also a trail made by some kind of local quadruped. None of the right kind of footprints for the outpost.”

Deidre told Jonesy to stop a minute later, and they all climbed out of the Wombat. They were standing near a clump of the tree-ferns in some of the low rolling hills. Hills was too grandiose a term, the highest of them rose less than three meters. It was enough to be a little disconcerting in places like this, they were standing at the bottom of a large shallow bowl with clumps of substantial plant growth around them.

“Ayr’s team literally tripped over this,” Deidre said, walking to the closest clump of tall ferns. She pushed the tough stems out of the way and looked back at them. It was a large, complicated oval shape set into the ground.

Theo stepped closer and saw that the edge looked like a frame. The central piece looked like a hatch. The whole thing was made of a medium gray colored material that didn’t reflect the light.

“Does this look like the stuff on Alnatic to you?” Marisol asked.

Theo squatted down next to it and ran his fingers across it. It was smooth and the same temperature as the air around them. “I don’t think so.”

“I agree,” Deidre said. “None of those tiny flakes mixed in, and it feels slicker.”

Emma gave a dramatic sigh of relief. “Good thing. You know how Theo gets when the Founders get in the way of his missions!”

No one laughed but there were some smiles, and the tension lifted a little. Kawehi got her tablet and started recording the artifact.”

“You think this is where they went?” Jonesy asked.

Kawehi shrugged. “If they did, no one has mentioned it in any of the data logs. Whatever else was going on, I have to think any researcher would have at least mentioned it.”

“And we’re a little more than two kilometers from the outpost,” Deidre added. “Pretty good odds that no one came this way in the eight months they were here.”

“We don’t know that this is actually a hatch,” Kawehi said. “And as interesting as this is, I don’t think it’s getting us any closer to our actual goal. Make sure this is well marked and drop a movement detector on it. I’m hoping it’ll be someone else’s problem in the future.”

Jonesy took a miniature tripod and clipped a small box to it. He set it a couple of meters away from the artifact and pushed some debris around it. Deidre uplinked the location and photos to the ship in orbit overhead, and then they were back in the Wombat and heading back to the outpost.

A shuttle was just departing as they pulled into the cluster of buildings and Kawehi asked Deidre to drive up and see what was going on. They got their answer as a familiar squat figure with orange-red hair came down the path from the landing pad. She was carrying two large cases on her shoulders and put them down carefully as the Wombat rolled to a halt.

“Hello friends,” the Gyr said. “I’ve finished calibrating these sniffing detectors. Finally.”

“You took them apart, didn’t you?” Theo asked as he got out of the back.

The Gyr shrugged, an impressive sight. “The sensors were inadequate and once I saw the poorly designed circuitry...why is everyone amused by this?”

“Because we like you,” Theo said. “I’m happy they’re going to work a lot better now. Let us give you a hand.”

Emma had let the tailgate down, and she bent to pick up one of the cases. Theo grabbed the other end, but they could barely lift the thing. Deidre and Jonesy quickly joined them, and the four of them managed to wrestle the crate into the back. The back end of the Wombat sagged, and there was an audible creak of springs.

Vuli effortlessly hoisted the other box over her shoulder. “I would think your engineers could build a sturdier vehicle.”

“Oh, they can,” Jonesy said cheerfully. “We just didn’t think to bring a Mack truck along.”

“Poor judgment on your part,” Vuli grumbled cheerfully.

Spacedock #2, Ulthiran Space

Rachel was getting a close look at what interplanetary jetlag looked like, and she wasn’t enjoying it at all. Even Kiki’s usual exuberance was hidden behind bleary eyes. They had left Earth in the early, early morning eight days ago. The transport’s local time was set for mid-afternoon. Since they’d been hustled down to their quarters and forbidden to leave until the middle of the ship’s “night” for showers or exercise, acclimating their bodies to a reverse of the ship’s local time shouldn’t have been a problem. Unfortunately, their quarters had a speaker that loudly announced practice drills and every other part of the ship’s business. Kiki had deactivated her translator in an attempt to sleep through it the first day. The next morning she had put it firmly back on. When Rachel asked, she muttered that being awoken by spoken Ulthiran was even worse. Finally, they had carefully disconnected the speaker and had a few nights of uninterrupted sleep.

This is why they didn’t have any warning when the transport arrived at the station in the middle of the pilot’s “night.” They were woken up to pounding on the door and had been immediately hustled off the ship and transferred over. Shaking from the adrenaline comedown, they were forced to wait in a small room near the main airlock until someone that could work with them could be found. Both had fallen back to sleep, sitting against the walls. Then they were woken

back up and went through the arrival process, bioscans and whatever else, shepherded by a very annoyed Gyr. He couldn't find anything about their arrival in the system though. So they were sent to a VIP suite to wait.

It was promised to be much nicer than the cramped closet on the transport, but Rachel had been warned that it wasn't covered in the commitments treaty and she would be required to pay the difference. That had led to another mind-numbing lecture on Commonwealth Standard Currency. She had signed, and thumb printed the Gyr's tablet to get him to be quiet more than anything else. Finally, they were taken to the room and stumbled inside. It was the same kind of bland colors as the ship but as promised, far larger. Instead of a single room, there was a sitting area, a private bathroom, and a bedroom with a large bed. They collapsed onto the couch, and Rachel dug her tablet out and figured out how to synch it to station time. She scrolled through menus that were hopelessly complicated, even when translated. Finally, she sighed.

"It's early evening here, and the administrative sections are off duty."

"Does it say if they're aware there's a war on? Overtime could be required?"

Rachel grunted a laugh and scrolled around some more. "The public page says that production runs in four normalized shifts."

"Are the brand-new engines tested in our corridor?"

"I hope not," Rachel said, getting sleepier. She had to find someone to check in with before she could even think about sleeping. It was getting harder to read the menus, and she sat the tablet down to rest her eyes. Kiki was already asleep, and soon Rachel joined her, both of them sprawled out on the couch.

~~~~~

Rachel could hear water running, and her eyes snapped open. She fumbled for her tablet and activated it. She sighed in relief, no one had contacted them since they'd arrived. They quickly got ready and he

aded out into the Spacedock.

The massive Ulthiran station was surprisingly busy. First, they tried to look up the specific section that Teydora had put in the orders, but none of the names matched exactly. The Ulthira were fussy about details like that. Maybe it was natural to them, but it drove Kiki up the wall, and her comments got more acerbic until Rachel had moved the tablet so she couldn't see it.

"There's nothing that matches the name in the orders. There's no receiver code on the orders either. Let's ask at the main spacedock."

"Didn't I say that twenty minutes ago?"

Rachel shrugged. "I didn't realize you were right until just now."

"So if I was right, that would make you...what?"

"It makes me headed for the main spacedock office."

"What I meant was..."

"I know what you meant," Rachel said. "I'm just not going to cooperate."

Kiki laughed. "I'm starting to like you."

~~~~~

They got to the first counter in the Spacedock Authority and headed for one of the Spacedock's automated assistants. These were small holograms that matched the race of whoever they were talking to.

"Good morning," Rachel said. "We're trying to report to a specific production area. Our orders list the Special Projects Directorate. We can't find anything named that."

"No, that does not exist," the little person floating in front of them said. "Can you describe the kind of place you want to find?"

The pilots looked at each other.

"We're from the Lantern Regiment," Rachel said quietly.

"I'm not cleared for that information, I'm sorry," the SI said briskly, and the projector went dark.

Rachel tried to reactivate it, but it stayed dark. She approached another station, and it went dark as well.

"I've got a few places we can try in person," Rachel said. "You like tram rides, right?"

~~~~~

They spent the next nine hours being ignored, shuffled to obscure offices, ignored some more, sent to other obscure offices. Finally, they were assured that their next stop was the one that could actually help them. They arrived at a small door, took a deep breath and went in. The office was the size of a large closet with a shelf at one end. There was a sign in mangled GalCom explaining how to use the intercom speaker. It was the only object on the shelf, there were no other windows or doors.

Rachel resisted a strong urge to tear the device out of the wall and throw it across the room.

"Any ideas?"

“You might not approve,” Kiki warned.

“I don’t care anymore.”

Kiki nodded and pushed the button for the intercom. A hologram of an Ulthiran appeared, and Kiki related their problem.

“And why do you harass me?” the Ulthiran finally said. “You should contact the Production Directorate. This section belongs to a design cartel.”

“Oh, I made a mistake,” Kiki said brightly. “Why don’t you get a supervisor to sort this out?”

“Prefcorian thing, I don’t know who you are,” the Other snapped. “You want me to bother my section chief with some unknown outsider?”

“Yes!” Rachel and Kiki both shouted.

“That was *sarcasm*, horrid things. Senior Designers are deeply involved with their work and are not for chattering with slimy slug-things.”

There was a click, and the projector went dark.

Kiki smiled. “Okay, you asked for it.”

She pressed the call button and held it down. Eventually, the projector lit up again, and the hologram reappeared.

“You create further annoyance and interruption! I cannot assist you!”

Kiki pulled the translator’s transducer pad from her throat. “Third Assistant Resource Administrator, where are you speaking to us from?” Kiki said roughly, her voice almost a growl.

“How do you know my title? Your naked voice sounds cause distress! Employ doubled translator, horrid thing!”

“Telllll me,” Kiki growled into the speaker.

Rachel’s eyebrows went up, but the Ulthiran didn’t respond. She imagined the bureaucrat on the other end fumbling around for some kind of approved response to a crazed monster. Kiki grinned and pointed at the sign. Near the bottom was the job title and station coordinates for the office they were dealing with.

“I am at my workstation, not accessible from your location,” the voice finally said. “We are the Design and Engineering Directorate. We are off limits to aliens!”

Rachel was already thumbing through the station plans on her tablet. She held it up

“If you will not call a supervisor to talk to us, then we will come and talk to *you*,” Kiki growled.

“What? Forbidden! Alarm!” the speaker squawked. “The soft slug bodies are not permitted...”

They left, ignoring the hologram, and began to work their way through the path that Rachel’s tablet showed.

“What’s your plan when we get there?”

Kiki grinned. “If you freaked out a starship’s crew during your Lady Godiva Fun Run, imagine how a bunch of station flunkies are going to react.”

“Hmm, unorthodox but effective. Unless they’ve all been acclimated of course.”

“How do you mean?”

“Ulthiran biology isn’t based on age or experience. They’re matured through a chemical process. It was pretty involved, and I don’t remember the details. Supposed to be really expensive.”

They walked for twenty minutes, and the corridors became less polished and began to look more utilitarian.

“We getting close?” Kiki asked.

“Should be the next double door,” Rachel said. “They really need to learn how to make a decent map.”

They got to the door. Surprisingly, the admittance control panel was showed the door was unlocked.

“No one ever takes me seriously,” Kiki said. “Ready to play monster?”

“How about we just knock? They’ve got peacekeepers on the station you know.”

Kiki laughed and began to unbutton her shirt. “Then we’ll know that someone is paying attention to us. Did you know that they consider porn vids horror movies?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that. I’m not down for a 69 on someone’s desk though.”

Rachel’s eyebrows went up as Kiki pulled her shirt off. The bra quickly followed.

“I wasn’t saying we should go full on lesbo for them. Don’t be a pervert. We’re just going to be half naked for effect because our bodies terrify them.”

“Uhm, no. *We’re* doing nothing of the sort. And I recommend you put your clothes back on.”

Kiki gave her a manic grin. “Then what about your hair? I know they think it’s creepy.”

Rachel sighed. “First, my hair isn’t creepy. Secondly, it’s hard to braid, and I’m not running around with my hair loose in front of strangers. My father would hear somehow and be scandalized.”

Kiki tried to get her shorter hair to stand on end. “My father would probably just shake his head and blame any aberrant behavior on my mother. She was a Marine.”

“That explains a lot,” Rachel said. “Can I talk you out of this? Being out here is probably enough of a threat.”

“We tried your way already. Let’s do it!”

Kiki slapped the door controls, and she burst through the opening before the doors were fully open. “I want a hug!” she screeched.

There were a few seconds of stunned silence broken by the sudden cacophony of running feet and shrill whistles of panic. Rachel sighed and walked into the room. Maybe she could get the other woman under control before she created a diplomatic incident.

~~~~~

Forty minutes later, Rachel was watching Kiki lurch around on a video monitor, shrieking. The video translated the Ulthiran screams of horror and desperation.

“I have to transfer the entire section back to our home planet. The workers will require psychological counseling,” the tall Ulthira sitting behind the desk said.

Rachel winced slightly as Kiki bounded across the screen again and stopped to look under rack where an Ulthira was cowering. She crouched down and petted it several times, cooing something.

“What are you doing there, Junior Pilot?”

“I was trying to comfort it, Operations Resource Chief.”

The new Ulthira made a noise that their translators turned into a weary sigh. “I imagine we’ll probably have to retrain that one for duties planetside. Your own mental health should be evaluated as well.”

The door opened, and another Ulthira came into the room. “First Deputy, these are the miscreants.”

“Sir, I regret the damage our actions created...” Rachel started to say.

The new Ulthira held up a clawed hand. “No, remain quiet. I am the First Deputy of the Spacedock Directorate. I advise the daily operations of this platform. Tell me why have you terrorized my workers. They are innocent members of an allied race!”

“We could not make contact with any senior personnel, sir. We were trying to attract attention to ourselves.”

“Rest assured, you have my very close attention, Senior Pilot. You were sent here with improper orders, that is why you were not welcomed by the proper section. Now, you will both follow me.”

They entered another stark corridor and Kiki tucked her uniform shirt in.

“You are causing me unscheduled and inappropriate anger,” the tall Other said. “I will not saunter.”

He turned and walked rapidly away. The Ulthira had longer legs and their knee faced in the opposite direction of a human’s, and they moved very quickly. Rachel and Kiki glanced at each other and took off after him. After ten minutes of jogging, they arrived at another set of doors.

“You are to report to this section,” the First Deputy said. He strode away with another word.

“Hope this isn’t jail,” Kiki said.

Rachel gave Kiki a warning glance before they walked in. There was an Ulthira seated in the middle of a large workstation, and they stood at attention in front of its desk. Its head was pointed down, but Rachel had no idea where it was looking. She wasn’t sure if Ulthirans even had eyes. Finally, it turned its head toward them.

“You jelly bags cannot hope to impress me by standing rigidly,” he said. “What sort of madmen has Teydora sent us this time?”

“We’re women, sir,” Kiki said.

“Gah,” it said, pointing his long head back at the blank squares the Ulthira used as screens. “Can you keep your disgusting secrets to yourselves for ten minutes? Why must you humans prattle on and on about your...biology.”

Rachel cleared her throat.

“What, Senior Pilot?”

“I think it may be a problem with the translator, sir. Terran idiom is quite ornate, and your translators favor a literal-minded algorithm.”

“It was intended as a rhetorical question, Senior Pilot. But you are *definitely* one of Teydora’s beings. I am Jurgen Chah, Chief Engineer of the Special Design Group. Sit down, I will arrange a dismissal of the punitive charges against you. It will suffice as my apology for not finding you sooner.”

“Sir?” Rachel asked.

“Sit *down*, Senior Pilot.”

They took seats across from him. Jurgen leaned back in his chair, almost like a human. “Your Colonel is an honorable being, and I enjoy advancing her missions. However, the Xero’pah in general, and the colonel, in particular, can be overbearing and that causes problems. For instance, sending a coded message here without the proper delivery address. One of my assistants brought it to my attention hours *after* your ship arrived. You were not in the crew berthing area when I checked.”

“We got a VIP area,” Kiki said.

“Then stay there, because I am not currently able to fulfill the Colonel’s request. The class of ship that she specifies requires a very high-quality Navigator Intelligence. We had one in production, but the Navigator has not gone beyond the first set of functionality checks. Preparing a new one and installing it in the hull is a five to six-week process. We will honor our commitments, and your needs will be taken care of in the VIP area. When the Intelligence is available, it will be installed.”

Rachel kept her face impassive. Being five to six *weeks* late was unthinkable. Her stomach tightened at even thinking about it.

“Sir, the rest of our team is depending on us...” Rachel started to say, but the Ulthira was holding up one of its hands.

“I thought this might be the case. Let me explain how we may be useful to each other. It will require another walk.”

Both pilots stood up and waited for him to emerge from the equipment.

“Her request came from out of nowhere, and she addressed it to the Ship Production Directorate,” Jurgen said as they followed him into the corridor. “Does she have any clue how *many* ships are made here? We have protocols for high priority orders this, but she decided this was too important. It would be like me handing your planetary administrator a message along with your name. Cumbersome and time consuming, but she will not learn.”

“How many types are made here?” Kiki asked.

“It changes by the day, we are still increasing the output of military material. This way, we’re going to the production floor, and we’ll need a vehicle.”

~~~~~

Two hours later, Rachel didn't say anything as they followed the path back to their quarters. She wasn't carefully avoiding the Ulthira in the corridors any longer, wasn't doing anything but staring straight ahead and walking. Kiki was quiet for once and walked quickly to keep up with the taller Garragh woman. A few Ulthira passed them and crowded against whatever surface was furthest from the two prefcorian pilots as they passed.

Rachel was quiet until they'd gotten to their quarters and the door had sealed behind them. Then she yelled at the top of her lungs, startling Kiki. It was wordless but expressed her frustration very well. Then she threw her tablet at the couch. It bounced up and landed face up on the sofa, lit up and asked if could be of service.

Kiki covered a smile with her hand. "Did you mean to do that?"

"No! Shit, I can't even break stuff the right way."

"That's because throwing things at cushions doesn't break them very well," Kiki agreed innocently.

Rachel glared at her for a few seconds and then sighed.

"Did I really just have a day go that badly?"

Kiki shrugged as she fell onto the couch. "I did my best."

"I think you wanted to run around naked for your own perverted reasons," Rachel said. "I'm going to take a shower."

A few minutes later, she walked from the bedroom with a towel on her shoulder.

"Hey, illustrious Senior Pilot." Kiki tossed a couple of the airline bottles of whiskey to her.

"Thank you, most loyal Junior Pilot."

The shower came on thirty seconds later. Kiki smiled and reached down to get one of the tiny bottles for herself. She went back to reading, and when she'd sipped the last of her whiskey, she went into the bath area and tapped on the door of the water enclosure.

"Maintenance wants me to make sure you haven't accidentally drowned yourself," she called.

"Tell them to check back in five to six weeks," Rachel replied. "And if you bring me more whiskey I'll let you sleep on the bed."

Kiki laughed and grabbed a couple more out of the bag. She opened the compartment, and a wall of mist billowed out as she stepped inside. She carefully made her way to the large glass cubicle

that represented the standard “one size fits none” washing area that multi-race stations used for visitors. She wasn’t sure what everything did, but one of the Commonwealth races evidently required a wide, low ledge near the water emitters. Rachel was sprawled back on it, a towel draped across her hips and her eyes closed.

“Seriously, I can’t believe they’re not beating on the door about the water,” Kiki said.

“Nah, I’ve got it set to mist, it’s not using as much as you’d think. They’ve also got two ice asteroids in a trailing orbit. So fuck ’em.”

“I’m gonna hang out in here in case they do cut the water,” Kiki said and tossed her robe on the ledge next to Rachel. Kiki sighed as she sat and then stretched in the warm mist.

“What’s your thinking on this?” Rachel asked.

“I’m not comfortable with missing our meetup with the team. I say we work with Jurgen’s problem child. If it goes comatose or whatever, we demand to be given one of the new ships anyway.”

“And when Jurgen objects?”

Kiki grinned, her eyes still closed. “You let me tell him that the delay means that your entire commando will show up here and will all claim rooms. And that we will all be naked every minute of the day. *And* we will be a very public presence not to mention an overly affectionate one. I’ll show him we’ve got enough naked asses to reduce this flying shit-show to a hysteria fueled fuckfest.”

Rachel nodded but didn’t say anything.

“Too over the top?”

“Just getting a mental image of that scene. Wow. But I agree, maybe we can wake it up or whatever. How hard could it be? You’ve got a little sister, right? And I’ve spent years with an unpredictable lunatic.”

“Pretty much the same thing. So we’re going to make ourselves a little sister.”

“I sure hope so.” Rachel closed her eyes. They were quiet for a little bit, and Rachel jerked like she had a hiccup. Then she did it again, and the laugh she was trying to hold back erupted from her.

“What now?” Kiki asked.

“You were half naked!” she gasped. “And the poor bastards were terrified, but you just kept running around them...why were you running like that?”

“Tyrannosaurus Rex impersonation. It’s pretty good,” Kiki said happily.

Rachel caught her breath. “Pity we were in the wrong room though. What did he say that place was?”

“Ulthiran laundry basically. Those poor buggers didn’t even know there *were* Others until we busted through the door. Bet they’re doing a whole *bunch* of night classes now.”

Rachel sighed. “I know, the HR inspector told me they’re going to bill us for upgrading the workers to a point they can deal with Others. That’s bad enough, but the whole escapade is going to be a huge joke. It’s not fair.”

“War ain’t fair, Rachel, and it *was* kind of funny.”

“I agree, and if we had done that while we were blind drunk, we’d be heroes. Since we were sober, we will never live this down.”

Kiki laughed. “You kept your clothes on at least. Anyway, who cares?”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously. Are you considering a career as a diplomatic operative after the war? The war where you’re a pilot for a high-risk spec-ops team run by an alien species we barely understand?”

“Hmm. Is that the one where we have yet to win any kind of meaningful victory?”

“Yeah, and I’d settle for a meaningless victory at this point. Look, there were a lot of combat teams assigned to the Section while I was at Arclight Northern. We didn’t see may come back, but I got one guy to talk to me. He was home on medical while they grew his legs back. From what he said, it’s intense out there and winning is only slightly better than losing. The odds don’t exactly favor dying of old age in our line of work.”

“I just don’t want to be the punchline of a joke in the meantime. People’s respect is important to me.”

“Just because they’re laughing doesn’t mean they don’t respect you. Personally, I respect you more. Not many people would have backed up that kind of plan.”

Rachel smiled. “I really just watched. But that was fucking amazing.”

“We’re bad. We terrified allied citizens. But I guess they’re getting a promotion because of it. Maybe they’re thanking me right now.”

“I’m sure they are,” Rachel said. “Getting yanked out of peaceful ignorance makes people so happy and grateful.”

“And they’ve got it on video. We can watch it again.”

Rachel laughed. “We’ll be watching that for the rest of our lives.”

“So stop worrying about it. Now, is there anything else you’d like to complain about?”

“No. Well, yes. I didn’t think to keep my hair dry. Now I have to wash it, and it takes forever.”

Kiki looked around. “Seriously, are we in a porno right now?”

“Would you like to help or are you just hitting on me?”

“Hell yes, and of course I’m hitting on you.”

Rachel opened her azure eyes and looked into Kiki’s black ones. “I’m game. But I haven’t done very much with girls, just some experimenting when I was a teenager.”

“So? Sit up and give me your shampoo.”

Rachel sat forward, and Kiki slid in behind her. She put her legs on either side of Rachel before pulling her back. Rachel opened the heavy metal clasp at the end of her braid, and the other woman began to unwind the braid. Kiki didn’t have a hair fetish, but she was fascinated by the Garragh’s hair. It was utterly black and only reflected the light where moisture had gathered. And it was thicker and more substantial than any human hair Kiki had seen before but wasn’t coarse. It felt like strands of silk running through her fingers.

Rachel handed back a bottle of shampoo. “You’ll end up using the whole bottle, don’t worry.”

Kiki squeezed some of the shampoo into her hand, and Rachel’s eyes closed as Kiki’s fingers began to gently rub her scalp.

“How did you end up fooling around with a girl?” Kiki asked.

“When Emma was seventeen she was dating a guy and thought it might get serious. So she called me for advice. I wasn’t really dating anyone, but one Friday night we hung out and talked about dating and the best way to kiss. Like most things involving Emma back then, it got way out of hand.”

Kiki chuckled as she moved her hands through Rachel’s hair, stroking and rubbing her scalp. “What’s that mean?”

Rachel moaned quietly as Kiki rubbed the area around her temples. “Kissing practice turned into seeing what else felt good. I got her off with my fingers, and she was working on me when my dad came home.”

Kiki laughed. “How do parents always *know*? Was it weird between you later?”

“No, we grew up together, more like sisters than friends. Emma probably forgot about it anyway. Before Theo came home, she was having huge problems with focus and impulse control.”

“Oh. Uhm, what’s she like now?”

Rachel smiled and rubbed Kiki’s leg. “Don’t worry, she’s fine now. The rumor I heard was that the twins became bonded into dyad when they were kids. Emma was trying to deal with the loss of her bond-partner, and no one realized why she was going nuts. Now that she works closely with Theo, wow.”

“I heard somewhere that they’re not really twins,” Kiki said.

Rachel shrugged. “They came out of the same mother at the same time. But they weren’t naturally conceived if that’s what you mean. They’re more clones than twins.”

“Is that all? Sheesh.”

“And they’re...hybrids, is the best word I guess. Claire was human.”

“No kidding. I didn’t think any of the prefcoria were compatible. But I want to know more about you. Why aren’t you supposed to show your hair in public.”

“Running around with loose hair is seen as childish at best, unhinged at the worst. Your braid is a part of your social identity.”

“What does your braid say about you?”

“It’s a basic woman’s braid. The really fancy ones were for the High Days. It was a week-long holiday that was half Fourth of July and half Christmas.” Rachel said, the tension in her back fading away.

“And people get high?”

“Not that kind of high. High as in nobles. But people probably did. I was too young to know, the last one was a few months before Garradya was destroyed.”

Kiki sighed. “Me and my idiotic mouth, I’m sorry.”

Rachel caressed her leg. “Don’t be, I like remembering the happy times. Speaking of happy, thank you for this. It feels amazing, and you haven’t cracked a single joke yet.”

Kiki kissed the back of Rachel’s neck. “And you’ve finally relaxed. I like the relaxed version. It’s way more chili.”

“Chili?”

“Hot, duh.”

Kiki moved the heavy strands around until she had a quarter of it. She applied more shampoo and went back to washing. Rachel sighed happily again and put her warm hands on Kiki’s thighs. Her fingers stroked the sensitive skin lightly, making Kiki squirm a little. She took another portion of hair and began to work the lather into it. As she worked, the part she’d already finished rubbed against Kiki’s chest. As she finished the second section, it joined the first, spread between Rachel’s back and her chest. Kiki’s breasts were covered in the slippery soap, and she had a hard time not rubbing them against Rachel’s back. The firm, soft hands rubbing her legs didn’t help. But Kiki didn’t want to move too quickly, so she concentrated on finishing Rachel’s hair. Finally, she took a spray nozzle off the wall and began to rinse.

“That was wonderful, thank you.”

“We’re not done yet, sit still.”

“Did you miss a spot or something?”

Kiki pulled her back until Rachel was resting against her chest. She began to massage her shoulders with gentle fingers. “Have you ever done the small unit leadership modules?”

“No, I’m a pilot and failed Warden.”

“That’s what I thought. I’m going to give you my opinion; none of this is your fault. I’ve never been involved with Ulthira or Xero’pah, but I’ve seen plenty of politics. You can bet that whoever is in charge here is letting this screwup happen to send a message to someone above you in the chain of command. You’re a competent, level-headed Senior Pilot who has adapted to a dynamic situation and continues to move toward her mission objective. You got handed a shit-sandwich, in other words. But you’re doing a good job.”

“That sounded like a professional opinion.”

“Yeah, the *real* academies make you do leadership modules.”

Kiki’s hands gently stroked down Rachel’s arms. Rachel took one of them and put it on her breast. Kiki bent her head to kiss along Rachel’s shoulder. Meanwhile, her hands were stroking Rachel’s breasts lightly, never quite making it to her nipples. Rachel tried to stay still but squirmed under Kiki’s touch. It was too much for the other woman to take and she began to rub her hard nipples against Rachel’s back.

“You’re making me crazy,” Rachel said, breathing hard.

“But you like it, right?” Kiki’s left hand slid down across her hip.

Rachel moaned her assent. Her hands stroked the bottom of Kiki’s spread legs, moving backward.

“You’re going to have us both breathing like that,” Kiki murmured.

Rachel drew her fingertips along the sensitive skin, getting closer to Kiki’s wet sex. “Good.”

The Terran woman pulled Rachel tight against her chest and looped her legs over Rachel’s. She spread the other woman’s legs wider, still sliding her slippery skin over Rachel’s back. One of Kiki’s hands stroked and teased Rachel’s breasts while the other one slid her legs. A slick finger slipped between Rachel’s lower lips.

The taller woman gasped at Kiki’s touch. “No! You’re gonna make me cum, it’s too soon!”

“You’re going to cum more than once, trust me,” Kiki whispered in her ear.

Rachel was panting, thrusting her hips toward the source of pleasure and it didn’t take long until her body was tense. Kiki rubbed a little harder, and Rachel went rigid, her body jerking in several little spasms. Then she collapsed, letting out a long shaky breath.

“I’ve never seen a stealth orgasm before,” Kiki said. “I’m impressed.”

Rachel ran her hands over Kiki’s spread thighs as she sat up. “I’ll give you something to be impressed about. Let’s use the bed, I want to see your face when you cum.”

### **Unclaimed Space, Planet G789.5**

Emma touched Theo’s shoulder, and he opened his eyes instantly.

“Roof lookout,” Emma said as Theo swung his legs off the cot and sat up. “Contact reported. Go, I’ll catch up with your gear.”

Theo touched her shoulder and tightened the laces on his boots before walking quickly outside. The planet’s smog layer obscured any view of the stars and the night was completely dark and still. There didn’t seem to be any sort of night insects, the only sound was the small breeze in the tall grass. They’d set up a few glow lamps, and Theo made his way over to the Admin building. Kawehi had ordered a good vantage point, and the Admin building was the only two-story building in the outpost. Theo went inside and jogged up the stairs. Hannah was standing at the base of the improvised ladder. Theo nodded as he came over.

“Go ahead,” Hannah whispered. The fear and excitement were strong on her face. Theo touched her arm.

“If it was anything bad, Marisol would already be shooting it,” Theo whispered.

She grinned and nodded.

“I heard that,” Marisol said from the roof.

Theo smiled at Hannah and climbed up through the roof. The platform sat directly over the hole, and the floor was a meter higher than the peak of the roof. The empty area underneath had been covered with timber, giving anyone on the ladder some cover. Theo duck walked to the corner and stood up through the hatch. Marisol had warned everyone at dinner that anyone who stood up on the platform would be given something unpleasant to do, so Theo was surprised to see her on her feet.

“Hiding up here wouldn’t do any good,” she said as Theo stood up. “Hannah called a single contact, but a minute later we realized it had brought company. We’re surrounded.”

There was no moon and the night was completely black. Marisol was wearing night vision goggles, and Theo took the other pair and put them on.

The binos provided handy data along with the night vision. Theo read that they were between 9.3 and 17.3 meters high and if Terran animal density was assumed, their weight was in the metric tons.

“They look like giraffes.”

“They’re bigger and a lot meaner looking. Not to mention the armor.”

The silhouettes of the creatures had a long neck reminiscent of a giraffe, but on closer inspection, the bodies were broader and more muscular. Boxy shapes enclosed large parts of the creatures and Theo wasn’t sure if their heads were really that big or if they had armor there as well.

“I wonder if they put their own armor on or if they’re here on behalf of someone else,” Marisol muttered.

“Maybe the science team saw them and just took off running,” Theo said quietly. “It’s my first reaction.”

Marisol snorted. “You’re full of shit.”

Theo looked at her with wide eyes. “Not anymore!”

Marisol shook her head and finally smiled. “You gonna wake her up?”

“Yeah, I’ll do it. Let’s keep the troops really calm about this, I don’t think shooting would work out very well.”

Marisol nodded, and Theo left.

“It’d work out just fine if we use rocket launchers,” she said to herself.

“I heard that,” Theo said from below.

~~~~

Theo headed back to their “barracks” and knelt down beside the bunk in the corner furthest from the door.

“Kay, wake up.”

After a second she rolled over. “My watch?”

“Nope, we got some company.”

Theo handed the pressurized ampoule up, and Kawehi took it as she sat up. She pushed the little bulb against her skin and squeezed it. There was a faint hiss and then she twitched like she had a hiccup.

“What’s going on?” Kawehi asked as she pulled her boots out of the blanket.

“We’re surrounded by some pretty big specimens. They’re wearing something, looks like armor and definitely high tech.”

Kawehi nodded and pulled on her blouse. “What’re they doing?”

“Just standing there.”

~~~~

Emma was waiting for Theo at the Admin building with an armload of gear. Kawehi headed up to the platform while Theo pulled on his gear harness and pulled it tight.

“Full mag, nothing in the chamber,” Emma said, handing him a submachine gun.

“When do I get a real gun?” he asked, looking at her full-sized combat rifle.

“Eat your vegetables, and we’ll talk about it.”

Gyr loped out of the darkness. “Something smells very odd.”

“Yeah, we’ve got company,” Theo said.

“Should I wake the team?”

“I think everyone’s mostly up already,” Deidre said from the gloom. She stepped into the dim yellow light. “I heard we got company.”

“Just standing quietly,” Theo said. “We’re going to stay nice and chill.”

She nodded and disappeared back into the darkness.

“Theo,” Hannah called down.

He took the stairs two at a time back to the second floor. Marisol was coming down the ladder.

“Looks like someone is headed this way. Smaller, carrying a light.”

Theo nodded and went back down the stairs. After a second Marisol was at the door and nodded when she saw that he’d gotten field gear on. Kawehi was there a few seconds later, and Emma followed the three of them to the break between two of the outer buildings. They stood there watching the darkness until there was a faint glow across the field. There was a low lying mist that alternately scattered and obscured the light as it moved.

“It’s getting brighter,” Marisol said.

Finally, they could make out a single bipedal form carrying a light toward them. It stopped about ten meters away.

“Who’s in there?” a female voice called in GalCom.

“Colonial Marines,” Kawehi shouted. “We’re here looking for members of this research post.”

The light came closer. “Are you Terrans?”

“What’s your name?” Kawehi asked in English.

The light was almost in their faces now and suddenly recognizable as a standard colonial LED lamp.

“Altamira, I’m an Optics Apprentice.”

The face was tantalizingly familiar as the person emerged from the gloom. She considered them seriously. Then the woman laughed.

“Theo? What are *you* doing here?”

## **Spacedock #2, Ulthiran Space**

When the two women collapsed onto the bed, Kiki had fallen asleep almost immediately. It took Rachel a lot longer to relax. After they’d gotten out of the shower, but before they’d started making out on the couch, she had sent a message to Jurgen Chah accepting the current Navigator configuration. In the moment, it had seemed like a tough, no-nonsense proposition; if the Commonwealth wouldn’t give them a functional ship, they’d make their own damn ship.

Now, eyes open in the darkness, she began to realize the scope of what they had taken on. The “production floor” that Jurgen had taken them too was bigger than anything either of them had seen before. It was a domed area with a mind-numbing variety of ships in various states of completion, from complete looking vessels to skeletal collections of beams that were being welded together to form the framework of future hulls. Rachel and Kiki had looked around them in awe as Jurgen directed their electric buggy through the controlled chaos of construction. After several kilometers, they were approaching the far side of the space. The frenetic activity had begun to die away as they came close to the wall of the dome where it met the production floor. When Jurgen stopped the buggy, they had entered what looked like a backwater of the facility. A few half-finished ships were abandoned in the cradles, all of them smaller than anything else they’d seen.

“The projects that my section works on require greater discretion,” Chah said as he got out. They followed him to a heavy looking door that took him some time to open. Once they had gone through, they found themselves in a smaller storage area. Collections of equipment, mostly dark and silent, were arranged on the towering shelves. A few, festooned with wires and hoses, blinked and squawked at the Ulthiran techs crawling over them.

“This is where flawed Ship Personalities are kept. The systems are complicated to produce, the hope is that they can be rehabilitated into some sort of other limited function,” Jurgen explained as they walked through. He stopped at a heavy looking hatch in the floor and entered a code on a screen next to it. It opened, and he went down the ladder. Kiki and Rachel glanced at each other and followed him down.

They found themselves in a passageway not much taller than they were. Jurgen Chah was bent almost double, crawling along the space. Compared to the disordered collections and noise everywhere else, this area was dim and quiet with access hatches every few meters. They stopped at one of them that Jurgen opened and dropped into.

The pair lowered themselves through the hatch and found themselves in a ship’s cargo area. Outside the portholes was the black of space and Rachel realized they were at the very bottom of the station’s hull. Everything looked mostly finished, consoles and seats for preforian sized crew had been installed. Behind the pilot’s station, another collection of cases and equipment sat exposed on the deck, cables, and umbilicals going in all directions.

“This is the Navigator,” Jurgen said. “Unit theta four decimal nine-ninety. The personality was rated as outstanding in the basic production creche and should have produced an excellent Navigator. I had it transferred here, but the responses began to drift during the system installation. Now it is completely unresponsive. We have gone over every possible hardware problem and ruled all of them out, the problem is in the personality itself.”

“What can we do that your teams haven’t tried?”

“Sometimes aberrant personalities can be rehabilitated with interaction. That will be your task if you choose this course of action. Consider it during the upcoming rest period and let me know what your decision is.”

Cramped by the size of the passages, Jurgen Chah made his way back to the main hatch of the ship and crawled out.

“I don’t suppose you’re just faking?” Kiki asked the systems that made up the personality.

There was no response, and she sighed and followed Jurgen out of the ship. Rachel stared at the system for a little longer and then patted one of the cases. There was a brief flicker from status lights. Rachel waited but nothing else happened, and she followed the other two out of the ship.

Laying in the darkness, listening to the rustle of the ventilators, Rachel worried again about making the right decision. But the idea of stranding the team while the two of them waited for a functional ship made her sick to her stomach. The only way to get there on time was to wake the ship up. Whether or not that was possible, it was the only chance they had to get to the rendezvous on time.

Telling herself that she’d made the only choice she could, Rachel’s eyes finally closed and she drifted into uneasy dreams.

### **Unclaimed Space, Planet G789.5**

Theo suddenly recognized the woman’s face. “Jill?”

She laughed. “Yeah, Jill Altamira.”

“Wow, I haven’t seen you since Test day.”

“Where you did a lot better than me. I didn’t score high enough to specialize, but I got a spot offworld with my dad at least. Why are you guys here?”

“The outpost stopped responding to the courier,” Kawehi said. “We’re from a search and rescue team. Where did everyone go?”

Instead of answering, she looked at the three women and then back at him. “You weren’t a Colonial Marine, Theo. Who are these people?”

“We’re Terrans deployed with the Commonwealth 18th Rapid Action Squadron,” Marisol said, saving Theo from answering. “The kid is with us to get some field experience.”

There was another strange little pause before Jill nodded. “Well, I’ll come up tomorrow and take you guys down. There’s a lot of boggy spots, it’ll be easier if I show you the path.”

“Could you tell us about the grave?” Kawehi asked.

“Vicahl, yeah that was really sad. He had some kind of accident in the machine shop. Kevin said he reached into the booth while the CNC was running. It cut his arm off, and they couldn’t stop the bleeding in time. Everyone else is fine though.”

“Jill, who are these giraffe looking guys?” Theo asked.

“We call them Gangles. Don’t worry, they’re harmless. I think they’re like park rangers or something. They came up here because I was coming up to get a book I forgot.”

“Park rangers?” Kawehi said. “None of the reports I read said anything about contacting another race here. We’re in some kind of preserve?”

“The whole planet is like a nature preserve, I guess. But Marcelo Diaz, our Project Admin has been dealing with that. I can introduce you tomorrow.”

“That would be great,” Kawehi said.

There was another pause before Jill looked closely at Theo. “You aren’t here to take us away are you?”

He shook his head. “They just sent us to make sure everyone was okay, Jill.”

The smile came back to her face. “Great! I’ll see you in the morning then.”

Without another word, she turned back the way she’d come and walked back into the darkness.

“She forgot her book,” Marisol said quietly.

“Yes, she did,” Kawehi said, a little grimly. “How long until dawn?”

Marisol checked her watch. “About nine hours.”

“Send the off-duty back to bed,” Kawehi said, turning to walk back to the admin building. “I think we’re going to have a busy day tomorrow.”

Kawehi nodded for Theo to follow her. They went back to the admin building, and Kawehi led him to one of the small offices off the main hall.

“You’re welcome to stay, Emma,” she said. “But if you want to get some sleep, I won’t let him leave the building.”

“That’ll work. Give me your gear, Sparrow,” Emma said.

Once he had handed off the field gear and SMG, Emma headed back to the barracks room.

“How well do you know that woman?” Kawehi asked.

“Friendly acquaintances. We met at a party, not long after I got back home. I had a couple of classes with her, and we went through the aptitude testing at the same time.”

“And what are your impressions of her tonight?”

“It was a good act, but she wasn’t surprised to see me. I don’t think she appeared in the middle of the night just to get some book,” Theo said. “Her general affect seemed kind of strange as well.”

Kawehi leaned back in her chair. “I noticed the same thing, but I didn’t know her on Earth, so I wasn’t sure. Did you notice those small pauses before she answered a question?”

“Like she had to think of the answer, yeah. You think Jill was under duress?”

“I’m not sure what it was. Maybe Jill was working out the right answer?”

Theo sighed and leaned back. “I didn’t get a detailed look at her, she could have been wearing an earbud. Here’s what bothers me; the last time I saw Jill was when Rachel and I dropped her at home, after the Test. She went offworld with her dad before Midwinter Gala. So how did she know I wasn’t a Colonial Marine?”

“Maybe she kept track of you. She was hitting on you at a party.”

He shook his head. “I put her attention on someone else, they fit together well. It’s possible that she was secretly into me, but she’s not the type. Maybe it’s minor, but it bothers me.”

“No, stick with your instincts. I wish she hadn’t seen both of us tonight, now we’ll be expected to be there tomorrow. I want to leave a section here during our visit tomorrow. What do you think the best force balance would be? Start from the top...”

## **Spacedock #2, Ulthiran Space**

Rachel and Kiki threaded their way back through the maze of the Ulthiran platform the next morning. Jurgen Chah had sent them a tablet with the details of the tests used to “wake up” a Personality and the general outline of the process. There had been a note warning them not to take it anywhere near a departure area. The tablet was set up to automatically erase itself if it decided they were trying to steal information on Personality production after it had summoned a tactical squad of course.

“I really hope this isn’t a fools’ errand,” Rachel muttered as they opened the hatch to the narrow passageway.

“The Ulthira aren’t known for being good liars,” Kiki said, closing the floor hatch behind them. “Most of them refuse to play cards with humans now.”

“You know a lot about them.”

Kiki shrugged. “They’re close allies, I made a couple of Ulthiran friends when I was at Arclight.”

“I didn’t realize any of them were on Earth.”

“They aren’t. Real academies send you Up Top to train with the Others.”

Rachel had to refer to her notes so that she could enter the access code on the blank panel beside the ship’s hatch. It hissed open, and they both dropped down into the small ship.

“Good morning,” Rachel said to the collection of equipment that housed the Personality.

There wasn’t much of a response, but she thought she might have detected a flicker in the status lights. Kiki patted one of the cases as she walked forward to the cockpit, but Rachel didn’t see any response. Rachel sat down near the collection of equipment and leaned back against the bulkhead.

“So we’re supposed to go through a bunch of questions again,” she said, pulling out the tablet. She looked at it and then held it up to one of the camera pickups that were scattered around the ship.

“I’m not sure why,” Rachel said, paging through the questions and expected responses, mathematical exercises, and logic tests. “Jurgen said you had already done all of these checks before you got quiet.”

She gave the voice commands that opened the Personality diagnostic and watched the flickering lights. The configuration of lights showed that the diagnostic was functional and correct, but the Personality’s voice didn’t announce the fact. Rachel ran through a basic test that showed everything was functional. If there was a mind in there, it was listening and watching.

“Would it be boring to go through all this again?” Rachel asked. “The answer is probably yes. Maybe we’ll try this later because I had an idea last night. Do you like stories? There was one I really liked when I was young. Want to hear it?”

It was probably her imagination, but it looked like the flashing lights had slowed down a little. Rachel smiled and picked up her own tablet and opened an e-book.

“Mrs. Rachel Lynde lived just where the Avonlea main road dipped down into a little hollow, fringed with alders and ladies’ eardrops, and traversed by a brook that had its source away back in the woods of old Cuthbert place...”

Almost ninety minutes later, Kiki was done with testing the links to the cockpit controls and headed back to see how Rachel was coming with the logic tests. She’d been hearing the sound of Rachel’s voice without making out the words and smiled when she realized Rachel was reading a story instead of working through the test steps Jurgen had provided. She stopped in the passageway and sat down on the deck to listen.

““God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world,” whispered Anne softly.”

Rachel finally said. She got up to stretch and drained her water bottle.

“Wow, that’s a terrific story,” Kiki said, standing up as well. “I was listening in by the way.”

“Yes, I heard you sniffing back there.”

“Why’d Matthew have to die though? He was my favorite.”

Rachel shrugged. “Why does anyone have to die? It’s just the way the story goes.”

“I can’t decide if that’s poetic or fatalistic. What other books do you have on there?”

Rachel laughed. “I have a lot of books, but my voice needs a rest. Are you hungry?”

“Yep, but a whiff of a meal bar will cure that.”

Rachel just smiled and rummaged in her pack. She pulled something out and tossed it to Kiki.

“What is thi...Snickers!” Kiki exclaimed. “Senior Pilot, I am your devoted slave.”

“I’ll be reminding you of that later.” Rachel opened her own candy bar and took a bite.

Kiki grinned. “Ooh, kinky. Are you ready to run one of those test sets?”

“No, she already finished those. I was thinking we could listen to some music next.”

Kiki took a small bite of the candy bar and closed her eyes as she chewed. “Do you have a plan here?” she asked after she swallowed.

“Not yet. But there’s a Synthetic Intelligence at Echo, and he liked stories, games, and music. So I thought I’d try a little of each. Did you notice if the status lights changed at all while I read?”

“I couldn’t see them from where I was sitting.”

Rachel sighed. “It was a dumb idea.”

Kiki smiled and went over to kiss Rachel’s cheek. “No, it wasn’t. It was an incredibly sweet thing to do. Maybe she just doesn’t like that kind of story. What else is in there?”

“At the Mountains of Madness? Or The Shadow Over Innsmouth? Those are different.”

Kiki winced and took Rachel’s tablet. “Yes they are but let’s not wake her up screaming, hmm? Oh, good, there’s normal stuff in here too. I was starting to wonder about you.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Lovecraft. I loved his stories when I was little.”

Kiki looked at her and nodded. "I can totally see that. Anyway, how about Podkayne of Mars? I can totally see Poddy as a Ship Personality."

"Yeah, that's a good one."

"Not the original ending," Kiki whispered in her ear.

Rachel nodded and sat down with her back against the bulkhead and her legs against a couple of the components that occupied the room. Kiki laid on the deck next to her and stretched out.

"I'm ready," Kiki said.

"Ready?" Rachel asked the cluster of components. She was thrilled when the status lights flashed on and off, but then they returned to flashing randomly.

Just another coincidence.

### **Unclaimed Space, Planet G789.5**

The twins were waiting with Marisol and Kawehi where they'd met Jill the previous night. Ayr, Ian, Deidre, and Jonesy waited with them. The rest of the team was on the opposite side of the outpost, staying quiet and out of sight. The armored aliens had silently faded back into the darkness soon after Jill had walked back to wherever the scientists had moved to. There hadn't been any movement outside of the outpost since then.

"You're quiet," Theo said to Emma.

"I'm just trying to figure out which would be better; the girl showing up or not showing up."

"Girl? She's the same age as we are."

"No kidding? Well, she looked decidedly waifish last night. I can't believe you were hot for her."

Theo started to say something rude but noticed everyone was listening to them. So he just shrugged. "She was the one to explain what Naked Twister is and why you'd want to be oiled up. That does things to a guy."

"What's Twister?" Ayr asked. "I like getting oiled up."

"Mercy's Tits," Marisol snapped. "Didn't you people get enough action at summer camp?"

Everyone in the little group turned and looked at her. There had been a couple of very noisy threesomes between Marisol, Willi, and his wife Toni on the transit to the planet.

She glared back at them. "What?"

“They’re just jealous,” Kawehi said quickly in a soothing voice.

“Of what?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Kawehi said. “Look down there.”

The low rolling ridges faded out into the brownish-yellow haze, looking almost like swells in a chaotic, polluted ocean. Above them, just becoming visible was a broad head and thick neck. It was one of the strange individuals, the Gangles Jill had called them, that had surrounded the outpost last night. As it came closer, Jill Altamira came into view, walking a little ways behind it. There was another bipedal form with her.

The trio started up the long slope, and Theo could see that other than a long neck, the Other than Jill had called a park ranger, it really didn’t look like a giraffe at all. This one was still wearing what looked like armor, widening it’s already substantial body. It was a grayish brown, and the head looked more like a dragon or dinosaur with long canine teeth protruding from the upper and lower jaw.

“That’s Jay Mishra, the project’s head scientist,” Kawehi said quietly.

The large Other stopped moving when they were within twenty meters of the metal prefabs. The two humans kept walking, ignoring it.

“Good morning, is this everyone?” Jill asked.

“Dr. Mishra, it’s good to see you,” Kawehi said, stepping forward to shake hands with the man.

“Yes, hello,” the man said, shaking her hand briefly. “Who are you people?”

“We’re a search team from the 18th Rapid Response Search and Rescue,” Kawehi said.

“Colonial Administration got concerned when you stopped responding to the courier drone.”

The unit was entirely fictitious, and Kawehi had briefed everyone on the cover identity this morning. Throughout the Commonwealth, the Lantern Regiment was a strange rumor, and Teodora liked to keep it that way. The slight, Indian man didn’t respond at first.

“Yes, that,” he finally said vaguely. “We found an entity here, we call it Gee Square. When it made contact, it showed us a better place to live and work. I suppose you want to see it for yourself? I will take you to our new settlement, but we are pressed for time I’m afraid. Is everyone ready?”

The team picked up their packs and followed the pair back down the slope. Theo tensed as they walked past the massive Gangle, but it didn’t move a muscle until they were ten meters past it. The enormous bulk turned, and it began to thud along behind them.

“Why do you call them Gangles?” Emma asked Jill, who was walking with her and Theo.

“The name Gee calls them is hard to say, but it sounds kinda like Gangle. You don’t have to worry about them, they just wander around. The only problem is getting them to move when they’re in your way.”

“Can you talk to them?” Theo asked.

Jill shrugged. “I’ve never heard them make any noises. They don’t seem very intelligent.”

Dr. Mishra was mostly quiet on the hike, but Jill did more than her fair share of talking, pointing out different things to Theo as they went. She stayed glued to Theo’s side, chattering away at him but ignoring Emma who ended up trailing the pair down the long slope. Theo stopped when he saw the swamp ahead. The omnipresent tall grass only grew a few inches off the ground here, giving them a good look at the sheet of water, broken here and there by small islands. It was easily a couple of kilometers to the other side, and there weren’t any clear paths across. Theo wondered how Jill had crossed it last night in the dark until the lumbering Other plodded into the water.

“We just have to follow where it goes,” Jill said.

The water was only a few centimeters deep, and mud swirled wherever the giant feet had been. Slogging through the marsh wasn’t easy, and the mud had a terrible odor. Theo tried to breathe through his mouth, but Jill didn’t seem to notice. Mercifully, Dr. Mishra announced a rest break on one of the larger islands.

Jill kept monopolizing Theo’s company, sitting next to him and offering her water. Emma kept an eye on the pair long enough to see that Theo was drinking his own water before she went and sat down next to Ayr and Jala.

“Is she bugging you?” Ayr whispered. “Because she’s seriously getting on my nerves.”

Jala grinned at Emma when Ayr wasn’t looking. Emma smiled and leaned over to bump Ayr’s shoulder with her own.

“You have nothing to be jealous about,” Emma said. “He’s got his head in the job, he’s not happy about something here.”

“Who said anything about jealousy?” Ayr asked. “It could become a tactical problem.”

“What’s really bugging you?” Jala asked.

“Yeah, out with it,” Emma said, leaning against her again.

Ayr sighed. “Look, it’s just that Stand Down was really intense. Going straight back to the field has been weird. I keep wanting to crawl into his bunk with him but...”

Emma laughed and took a drink of water. “I know exactly what you mean. I was talking to Toni about jealousy, and she mentioned that new teams were a little awkward at first.”

“It seemed like you were pretty tight with them around camp,” Ayr said.

Emma grinned. “Very tight, and I got so effing jealous when they hooked up with Marisol on the ship, instead of me! That’s why I was talking to Toni about all of this.”

“Everything is okay?” Jala asked.

Emma nodded. “Everything is good. Marisol is their usual partner, and they were just...catching up you could say. As for Theo, he’s throwing everything he has into being the lieutenant, and Kawehi keeps him busy. When we get some downtime, take a walk with him. I’ll run interference if necessary.”

Ayr smiled. “Thanks.”

A minute later, everyone was getting up for the last leg of the hike. After the maze of barely-seen paths, path finally began to meander uphill. Soon they were walking across rolling grasslands, almost identical to the area around the outpost.

It was almost noon when they entered another shallow bowl about a kilometer across. Grayish green tents were set up in a rough approximation of the original outpost. What immediately caught everyone’s attention were the four archways that encircled the camp. Theo couldn’t tell for sure, but they all looked to be the same material as the mystery hatch from yesterday. A few people were moving around in the settlement below, but no one paid any attention as they came down the slope. The Administrator walked away without a word as another man came out of one of the tents to meet them. He made a short speech that Theo forgot to pay attention to. He noticed that he was having a lot of problems with his memory and focusing on anything was nearly impossible.

A few minutes later, Jill volunteered to show Theo their water source. He had caught Kawehi’s eye and got a nod that would have been imperceptible to anyone else. No one else seemed to notice as they left the camp. Theo didn’t say anything until the new settlement had disappeared behind the ridge. The further away they got, the easier it was for Theo to think again. Jill had a small smile on her face as she trudged along, but she hadn’t said anything either.

“Is Gee Square a survivor of a lost civilization?” Theo finally asked.

Jill smiled at him. “Of course not. This planet is still too young for proper speciation, let alone intelligent life. Didn’t you take planetology?”

“It wasn’t my best subject,” Theo said. “Where is it from?”

She laughed lightly and took his hand as they walked down to the shore. The gray-brown grass ended at the edge of the water but the spongy fungus undergrowth extended under the water. The surface of the water was covered by tiny curls and wisps of steam.

“How hot is that?” Theo asked.

Jill sat down on her heels and put her hand in the water, swishing back and forth. “It’s nice, try it.”

Theo knelt down at the water’s edge and carefully put his hand into the water. It was nice, about the same temperature as a bath. Jill smiled, watching him.

“It’s actual water, Neff-square would protect us if it were dangerous.”

“Like putting up warnings?”

Jill’s face went momentarily blank and then she giggled. “Nothing that complicated. We just couldn’t come near it. But it’s safe, I come down and swim sometimes.” She stood up. “Want to?”

Theo looked out at the lake and shook his head. “I’m not a big fan of swimming.”

Jill made a little face. “Chicken?” she asked mockingly.

Theo laughed easily. “Ever seen a snapping turtle? A kid I knew only had eight toes because he went swimming in the wrong part of a pond.

“I told you, we couldn’t do any of this if it were dangerous. I’ll prove it.”

Theo got to his feet as she unbuckled her belt. “You don’t have to prove anything to me.”

She just smiled, wiggling the khaki pants down over her hips. Theo politely looked away, and she clicked her tongue.

“And if I didn’t want you to watch, I wouldn’t take off my clothes in front of you.”

She reached out and caressed his cheek, gently turning his head back toward her. “Has anyone told you that you’re too much of a gentleman sometimes?”

Theo smiled. “No, I haven’t heard that one before.”

“I want you to look at me,” she said softly, unbuttoning her shirt.

Jill was wearing the same issued gray boy-shorts that he’d seen Emma, Ayr, and nearly every other woman wear. Under her shirt was the same tight tank-top covering her breasts. It felt exotic and forbidden somehow, and he watched as Jill let her shirt fall off her shoulders.

“I wish I had something sexy on underneath,” she said. “Like the panties and bra I was wearing the night we met. You would have enjoyed taking them off me.”

The words, delivered in a hushed but teasing voice excited Theo and he suddenly wished he had gone off with her for a round of Strip Twister. Jill smiled at him and slowly pulled the undershirt over her head. Her flat, muscular, stomach with a tiny bellybutton was pale compared with her tanned face and arms. Her breasts were next, the size of cantaloupes with quarter-sized areola. Her nipples crinkled and hardened, from the cold air or the excitement.

Jill dropped the undershirt on top of her other clothes and slowly ran her hands up over her stomach, cupping her breasts briefly. Theo wished they were his hands and realized that if he took two steps forward, they could be. He wanted to feel her smooth skin under his palms, feel the weight of her breasts. His cock hardened at the thought.

“This is better though,” she said. “No one to disturb us, no one distracting you. Just you and me.”

Theo took a deep breath. What would it matter? At Stand Down, everyone else had continuously been fucking, they couldn't blame him for taking Jill up on her offer. He knew a lot more about sex now and felt his lust rising. He wanted to take Jill, right here, and make her his own. There was a confused whirl of thoughts in his head, and then the lust began to fade like it had been a dream. Instead, there was the smell of early morning; damp sand and campfire smoke. There was dappled light all around him as the sun shone through the leaves of the cottonwoods. And underneath the sweet smell of the wood smoke was the faint taste of salt.

...smoke along quiet rivers.

It was familiar, but he couldn't remember why. The sweet smell of smoke and salt on his lips and the light had shone through the smoke, the bright beams becoming pillars of light that held up the leafy green roof overhead.

Here is the scent of salt and smoke along quiet rivers.

Emma had said that. Theo suddenly missed her voice and realized she wasn't with him.

“Theo, where did you go?”

“Just thinking about home.”

She was smiling at him still and slid her hands down over her stomach. Her thumbs caught the waistband of her shorts and slowly pulled them off. Jill stepped out of them, taking a step toward Theo.

“Are you sure you don't want to swim a little?”

Somehow, his lust built again, but swimming was the last thing he wanted to do, the last thing he wanted her to do. Instead, he wanted to get out of his own heavy clothes, to feel her skin on his as they fucked on the spongy ground.

“You go ahead,” he managed to say, voice thick.

Jill waded out to her knees and scooped water over her belly and breasts, making sure he was watching her. At Stand Down, he'd been sitting next to the pool early one morning when Toni had come out of her tent and undressed to go skinny-dipping. She had smiled at him, but there hadn't been anything especially erotic about it, just a silent greeting between friends. Friends that were depending on him to keep a clear head here.

“You keep thinking far-away things,” Jill said as she came out of the water and stood in front of him. “Aren't you content here?”

The strange question shook Theo out of the haze of lust filling his mind. Jill had sunk to her knees and was unbuckling his belt.

“I want you in my mouth first,” she said, looking at him. “I want to taste you.”

He took a deep breath as the smells of another forest, one he'd grown up with, filled his memory. Sharp scent of the pine sap, with hints of turpentine and wet clay.

I don't want to do this, that isn't Jill.

The realization chased the lust from his head like wind blowing fog through the trees.

What the hell am I doing here?

“What's wrong? I thought you liked me,” Jill pouted.

Theo gently pulled Jill to her feet. “I do like you, that's what's wrong.”

“Why does everything have to be so complicated with you people?” she asked, sounding genuinely confused.

“What people do you mean, Jill?” Theo asked quietly.

She sighed. “You know what I mean.”

Theo nodded agreeably to keep her happier, but her words made the hair on the back of his neck stand up.

Jill was quickly getting dressed, any hint of seduction gone from her movements. “We should go back now.”

Theo nodded again and followed her up the slope. At the top Jill turned and pointed down at the water.

“And that’s our water supply,” she said brightly.

Theo studied her face. There was no disappointment there. No embarrassment or anger at being refused. Nothing but a cheerful smile.

“Any other questions?” she asked, still smiling.

“Nope, thank you for showing me...everything,” Theo said, trying to provoke a reaction.

The pause was back, like she was processing what he said. The smile never slipped, she was genuinely cheerful as far as he could tell.

“You’re welcome. We should get back, you need to be back at the old outpost before dark.”

Theo nodded and they walked back toward the collection of tents. Jill started talking about the importance of their research again. Halfway to the camp, he saw Emma walking toward him. He was startled to realize that he hadn’t kept track of where she was, he hadn’t thought about her at all. As she got closer, Emma’s anger and embarrassment was almost a physical force.

“Heya Tulip,” he said.

“Hey yourself, Sparrow. Everything okay?”

He nodded, trying to send a sense of reassurance as she walked along beside him. She looked decidedly unhappy though, and Theo reached out and took her hand, squeezing it once.

“Why do you have different names for each other?” Jill suddenly asked. “Isn’t one name enough?”

“That’s what we called each other when we were young,” Emma said.

“Does your use of the names indicate a discrete emotional state?”

Theo was suddenly happy things at the lake hadn’t gone any further. He looked at Emma who had an eyebrow raised.

“I guess so,” Theo said. “It’s a sign of affection.”

Jill thought about that. “Then if I had called you Sparrow at the water’s edge, you would have fucked me?”

Both of Emma’s eyebrows were raised now, and Theo wasn’t looking forward to the Q&A session she was going to have with him.

“Uhm, no. It’s a sign of affection from my sister. Other people don’t call me that.”

“Then she calls you that while you fuck.”

Emma and Theo stopped and stared at her.

“There’s no sex, Jill,” Emma said. “We’re siblings, not lovers.”

Comprehension dawned on Jill’s face. “Ah! The incest taboo, I understand now.”

Theo and Emma looked at each other as Jill started toward the camp again.

“What the fuck?” Emma mouthed.

Theo gave her the hand sign “for wait for later” and she nodded.

“Come on, you have to go soon,” Jill called.

“Not soon enough,” Emma muttered.

~~~~~

Theo made sure to check his notes before counting everyone twice. He automatically fell to the back of the little group as they headed back to the outpost. Kawehi was in the front of the small group, and he saw her look back at him several times, a question on her face. Finally, Theo nodded and held up the notepad. She finally nodded with a small smile.

Jill didn’t lead them back this time. She hadn’t said goodbye, just disappeared into one of the tents. Theo noticed her working at an improvised lab table as they passed. He had waved, and she’d given him a nod before going back to work. It was polite, the nod you’d give a friendly stranger. Instead, Kawehi walked beside Marcelo Diaz, the administrative head of the outpost.

The route back was much shorter, and the buildings came into sight as dusk was starting to fall. Diaz gave them a wave as he turned back. The three armored Others that had shadowed the little group waited for him and then turned to follow him back the way they’d come.

“I can’t decide if those are guides or guards,” Emma said as they watched.

“I think the answer to that is yes,” Theo said. “Come on, we’ve got a lot to talk about.”

Most of the team, except a couple of lookouts, had gathered in the large community hall. Kawehi had everyone recount their impressions from their visit to the scientists.

Ayr was first, but she turned to Deidre and asked something to Hay’cleup.

Deidre shrugged. “Foreboding maybe? I don’t think there’s an exact translation.”

Ayr sighed. “Okay. I was looking at something that should be familiar, but there was a feeling of something being very wrong. It wasn’t exactly a feeling of danger but something being very wrong. Hay’teleup has a word that refers to a place to get water but has terrible things below the surface.”

“She hit it on the head,” Ian said. “I had the same feeling, but I don’t know why.”

“Good description,” Marisol said. “What tipped me off was watching the people in the lab tents. There was a rhythm to their movements, I thought they were doing it to be funny at first, but it was too perfect.”

“Like they were robots running a program,” Jala said quietly.

“There’s more than that going on,” Emma said. “How long did it take you guys to notice Theo was gone?”

“I didn’t realize you had left,” Marisol said.

“I told him to go and then forgot all about it,” Kawehi said. “What did you see, Theo?”

“I asked what they were doing for water. I was just trying to ask something innocuous. Jill took me over the ridge past the camp to show me a lake of real water.”

“That’s weird,” Hannah said. “There isn’t a mechanism to create H₂O on the surface.”

Emma shook her head. “Okay, but that’s not what I’m talking about. I forgot Theo was even there. It was almost forty minutes before I realized he was gone.”

“Hey, Emma,” Kawehi said. “You’re upset, and while you have every right to be disturbed, I hardly remembered him leaving. Something was definitely interfering with my thinking.”

Emma shook her head, glaring at the ground. “Forty minutes was way too long, I fucked up. I should have realized a lot sooner.”

“Why?” Theo asked. “I was completely focused on what I was doing.”

“What were you doing?” Marisol asked.

Emma coughed over a laugh and Theo blushed.

“Sex? Seriously?” Marisol sighed.

“Yes, but it was peculiar.”

Emma snorted another laugh, and everyone else was starting to smile.

“You can tell us the details later,” Kawehi said.

“Get your minds out of the gutter. I didn’t mean kinky, I meant Jill’s affect was bizarre. When we got to the water’s edge, Jill tried pretty hard to seduce me.”

“How did that go?” Deidre asked.

“It didn’t,” Theo said. “When Jill realized that, she was very matter-of-fact and put her clothes on. No disappointment or anger and by the time we left the shore, I’d swear she’d forgotten all about it.”

“How do you mean?” Marisol asked.

“There should have been at least traces of regret or embarrassment, anger, disappointment, something,” Theo said. “But it was like it had never happened.”

“Would it be possible that we got caught in some kind field that’s affecting the scientist’s minds?” Jala asked.

“But why move them out there?” Jonesy asked.

“If those weird archways are some kind of transmitter, maybe it was easier to gather them around it,” Jonesy said.

“I’m sure that the hatch we found is part of this,” Deidre said.

“And it’s as alien as we are,” Theo said. “I did manage to get Jill to admit it wasn’t native.”

Others recounted their impressions of the scientists and workers they’d encountered.

“We’ll meet in the morning and begin figuring out our next step,” Kawehi finally said when people were hiding their yawns.

~~~~~

“Theo, wake up.”

He opened his eyes. Emma and Deidre were both standing beside the bed.

“I don’t suppose you found a stash of maple syrup and pancakes and breakfast is ready?” he asked, sitting up.

“It’s Kawehi,” Deidre said. “I can’t wake her up. And she’s holding that statue thing they found.”

Theo muttered a swear word and grabbed his boots.

He stopped as soon as they stepped outside, looking up at the sky. “Whoa.”

Theo had seen pictures of the Northern Lights, but the display over their heads was brighter and covered the entire sky. A new blue-green curtain appeared in the north and slowly marched across the sky, before disappearing on the southern horizon. Another band slid down from the north a few seconds later.

“I assume that’s why they were here,” said Deidre. “C’mon, let’s get to Kawehi.”

~~~~~

Kawehi was sleeping on her side, smiling slightly. She held the abstract looking metal statue to her chest, gripped tightly in one hand.

“I can’t get it away from her,” Toni said quietly to Theo.

“And she won’t wake up?”

“Watch.”

Toni took a small flashlight and lifted one of Kawehi’s eyelids. She shined the light directly into the pupil, but there was no response. Theo sighed and nodded.

“Did you notice her acting differently?” he asked.

Deidre and Toni thought about it. Toni nodded, and Deidre shrugged.

“I know she was happy about being in the field,” Deidre said.

“She’s been more affectionate than usual,” Toni said. “I put it down to a new team and all that.”

“I wonder if I could find her in the dreamscape,” Theo said.

They both stared at him. “The what?”

“If I touch someone while we’re both asleep, I can share a dream with them.”

“It’s worth a shot,” Toni said.

Twenty minutes later, Emma was looking closely at Theo.

“You’re going to be careful,” she said, not so much of a question as an order.

Theo nodded. He had one of the sleeping tablets in his hand and was sitting on the edge of another cot they pushed next to Kawehi’s. Toni was sitting on the floor with the counteracting

injection, her tablet open to a medical data app. Theo had several round pads stuck on his chest and temples.

“Ready when you are,” Theo said to her.

Toni just nodded, not looking away from the screen. Theo swallowed the pill and laid back on the cot. He put his hand against Kawehi’s back and let his eyes drift shut.

~~~~~

Theo opened his eyes in a place he hadn’t seen before. The ground was bare but warm and felt like some kind of smooth stone. He sat up and looked around. There weren’t any trees or hills or anything else, just a barren expanse. Kawehi was sitting a few feet away, smiling as she looked into the abstract shape revolving on the ground in front of her.

“Hey,” Theo said, sitting down next to her.

Kawehi didn’t respond, didn’t seem aware of him at all. Theo slowly put a hand on her shoulder but didn’t get any response. He tried talking to her, but she didn’t respond and never looked away from the shiny shape slowly turning in front of her. He wasn’t sure how long he had before Emma hit him with the WideAwake, the flow of time in the dreamscape didn’t match up with the waking world. Theo took a deep breath and shook Kawehi. She wasn’t held rigid, there was a little bit of give, but she didn’t budge. There was the same reaction when he got to his feet and tried to drag her away from the object. He could move her arms, but she was rooted to the spot and Theo wasn’t able to pull her away.

Then he stood over the object and tried to touch it. A few centimeters from the surface his hand was pushed off to the side. He tried again, but it was like trying to force two magnets together.

“I’m sorry,” he said to Kawehi. “I hope this doesn’t hurt you.”

Theo drew back his foot and kicked the object as hard as he could. There was a buzzing sensation down his leg, and Theo felt himself flying through the air. Before he hit the ground, his eyes opened. He was lying in the cot looking at the ceiling. Emma was sitting against the wall next to him, her eyes closed.

“Tulip.”

Her eyes snapped open. “Dammit, Theo. What did I tell you about being careful?”

“I was! What happened?”

She stretched. “You got catapulted out off the bed like you’d touched high voltage or something. Toni said your vitals were okay and said to let you sleep. What did you see?”

“It’s in there with Kawehi, holding onto her somehow. She didn’t wake up?”

Emma shook her head. "Sorry."

"Should have known it wasn't going to be that easy," Theo sighed. "What time is it?"

Emma checked her watch. "An hour past midnight."

"You should get some sleep now."

"Yes I should, but I have to wonder what kind of devilry you'll cook up without supervision."

Theo pointed at the cot next to his. "Sleep, that's an order."

~~~~~

It was still dark when Theo woke up again. He closed his eyes and tried to get back to sleep, but he already knew it was hopeless. Sitting up and looking around, Theo saw that Holm had pulled his cot over to Emma's. His arm was under his head, the hand touching Emma's shoulder. It would have been a heartwarming picture if Emma's other hand hadn't been splayed over Holm's face.

Theo shook his head, smiling. He grabbed his bag and boots and tiptoed off to find some hot water. He was wiping the remains of the shaving foam off his face when Marisol opened the door behind him.

"Have you seen Kawehi?"

"Not since last night, what's going on?"

"How about Deidre?"

"How about you take a breath and tell me what's going on?"

Marisol started to say something but stopped herself and took a deep breath. "Kawehi and Deidre are both missing. Waking everyone up to do a house to house now."

Theo nodded as he pulled a clean shirt over his head. "The trackers?"

"That's my next stop."

"What happened after I got zapped?" he asked, following her out.

"There wasn't any reaction from the boss. Emma and I dragged you back onto your bed. Deidre was going on watch, so she hung around to keep an eye on Kawehi. I had mid-watch, so I went to bed. Emma sat with you."

Ayr and Tessa were coming out of the berthing area when Theo and Marisol arrived. Marisol filled her in, and then both women looked at Theo.

“Pick two more people and see if you can find anything. One person always stays on overwatch. We’ll send more teams out when we’re done searching.”

Ayr nodded and yelled for Tessa. A few minutes later, the three of them were starting to examine the ground under bright lights. Theo and Marisol kept everyone in the berthing area until they had moved away from the entrance.

“He said one on overwatch at all times,” Marisol suddenly yelled. “Which one of you was not listening?”

Jala’s head popped up, and Theo could see the look of embarrassment on his face. He stood straight and took the rifle off his shoulder. Ayr and Tessa were quiet but moved off toward the landing field. Marisol went into the berthing area to organize search teams. Theo went to find the comms people.

~~~~~

He found Georges and Hannah outside of the community center, adjusting the communications array. Theo waited as they murmured and consulted their datapads. Both of them shook their heads after a minute. They got on their hands and knees and began to trace the cables that ran from the array.

“Everything okay?” Theo finally asked.

Hannah shook her head, and Georges stood up.

“Salut, Theophile,” the lanky Frenchman said. “We wanted to double check everything before le Capitane responded. Did Kawehi send you over instead?”

“She disappeared at some point last night,” Theo said. “We’re starting the search now. I wanted to talk to the carrier, maybe their cameras saw something.”

“That’s what we messaged her about,” Georges said. “We had a data link set up, but it went offline last night.”

Theo could have screamed but settled for rubbing his eyes. “Can you use any of the outpost’s equipment to fix ours?”

“There’s nothing wrong with our gear,” Hannah said, getting up to join them. “We just finished going over it to make sure. Jack is inside trying to raise the ship with the outpost’s system. We had theirs, and ours duplexed and bouncing signals back and forth off one of the moonlets overhead. Whatever was in the sky last night left a lot of interference, but they can talk to each other. So we know our signals are going out

“What are we looking at here?” Theo asked.

“At a guess, the carrier is either gone or isn’t answering,” Georges said. “Maybe they broke orbit because of whatever is causing all the electromagnetic noise.”

Theo sighed. “Okay. Can you leave them a message at least?”

Hannah nodded. “We can set up a message loop in the system so they know we’re trying to get in contact.”

“Okay, good. Marisol is going to come by looking for people to join the search but one of you stay here until that’s set up,” Theo said. “Thanks, guys.”

Next, he headed for the community center. They were using the same drone cameras the team had used on Alnatic. They should have seen something last night. When he went inside, he saw that Marisol had already had the same thought. Jonesy was examining a histogram on one screen while video ran on another.

“Anything?” Theo asked.

“Yes and no. I’m seeing something in the data but can’t seem to isolate it on the screen. I’m going to run it through a couple filters, but it’ll take a few minutes.”

“Let me know,” Theo said, heading outside to find Marisol.

Everyone was up by this point, Theo could hear them putting on field gear inside the barracks.

“Jonesy have anything?” Marisol asked from behind him.

“He says there’s something in the raw data, he’s trying to isolate it.”

Marisol nodded, watching the team coming out of the barracks.

“I’m going to go over all the ground within five-hundred meters,” she finally said. “I’ll sort them out into a couple of teams.”

The first of the team was coming out of the barracks, and they gathered around Theo and Marisol. Theo could see the nerves and excitement of everyone and kept his body language calm. It was a complete act, his thoughts were racing just as much as theirs.

When everyone arrived, Marisol confirmed the rumors they were hearing. The Captain and Deidre were both missing, they were going to find out where they went and then get them back. Marisol was grouping them into teams when they both got a ping from Jonesy. Theo nodded at Marisol and went to see what Jonesy had found.

“It’s subtle,” the man said as Theo came in. “It just looks like a little video distortion from the camera processor, but it’s present in four different cameras.”

“System glitch?” Theo asked, sitting down next to Jonesy and studying the loop.

“The other six didn’t catch anything. But three of the four captures had overlapping fields of view.”

Jonesy pulled up the four feeds and pointed out the small linear distortion in each. He ran the video back several seconds and looped it. Theo stared at one screen, then another. He looked up at Jonesy.

“There’s something there.”

Jones nodded as Marisol came into the room.

“Ready to head out.”

“There’s something you need to see first,” Theo said.

She watched the video several times. “That’s not going to leave any trace of where it went. You think this is a prank from our new scientist friends?”

“Let’s grab the Wombats and go see,” Theo said.

They took two full crews, eight people and headed down the slope. Even taking the long way around the flooded area, it was not quite an hour between the outpost and the camp around the four archways.

“Let’s have a semi-diplomatic arrival,” Theo radioed to Marisol in the other Wombat.

“Copy that.”

Marisol took the lead, and Jonesy followed her. They went at a sedate pace over the ridge, but both vehicles stopped there. Marisol got out and leaned against the front of her Wombat. She didn’t take her eyes off the bottom of the slope. The four archways were there, but nothing else was. Theo hopped out and walked over to where she was staring.

“Why am I not surprised?” she asked.

He looked down at the arches. “Let’s get back to the outpost.”

When the Wombats pulled back into the outpost, it was apparent something else had gone wrong. Several people were bunched up outside one building, holding rifles. Marisol rolled up to the little group and hopped out. Theo’s ATV was right behind her and parked next to the

community center. There was a room-to-room search going on, and they could hear bed being moved and cupboards being emptied.

“What’s going on?” Marisol asked.

Tessa stepped out of one of the rooms, looking relieved. “I’m glad you’re back. We can’t find Vuli or Nysander. They took the roof watch right after you left. No one saw them come down, but people were in the building the whole time! Nothing, no noise or…”

Marisol looked grim and went back outside. Tessa seemed like she might cry.

“The first time I had the command and I lost two people,” she said quietly to herself. Tessa’s chin started to quiver.

Theo went over and put a hand on her arm. “I don’t think there’s anything you could have done. Kawehi and Deidre went while everyone was here. Let’s get everyone back to the community center.”

She nodded, looking miserable.

When everyone had found seats in the main hall, Theo got up and walked to the open area. He’d gotten over the stage fright, but today he could feel the weight of their eyes on him. They wanted him to pull another miracle out of his hat, but he didn’t have any more of an idea of what was going on than they did. Before he admitted that, maybe he could do a little good.

“Whatever is happening, it’s obviously going on in daylight,” he said, resisting the urge to pace. “It also has to be very strong and very fast. Vuli and Nys were both well trained and capable fighters, yet they were taken so quickly that they didn’t sound the alarm. Tessa, this would have happened no matter who was here in charge. If it was strong enough to grab all of us, I think it would have. You made the right choice when you called everyone together. So, instead of teams of two, I want everyone to double up again. Four people should be the smallest group away from the main party. We’re also going to take down the curtains in the sleeping area, think of it as a slumber party. We’ll keep a close-in watch, Marisol will set the schedule.”

Theo looked at each of them. Marisol and her veterans looked relaxed, but he could see hints of uneasiness. Everyone else was more obviously worried, but there wasn’t any panic.

“I don’t have a lot of good news for you yet,” Theo continued. “By now you’ve also heard that we’re out of contact with the carrier. Comms is working out how to get a signal through all the interference that gave us the light show last night. When they do, we’re going to back off to the carrier and run ops from there to locate our people and get them back.”

There were nods and whispers and even a couple of half smiles. Theo had a plan, and they were working on it. Everything was going to be okay, they’d survived Alnatic after all.

“There’s one tiny ray of sunshine in all of this. Whatever it is that we’re up against, it doesn’t have anything to do with the food supplies here.”

The smiles got wider at the thought of real food.

“Does that include any homebrew they left behind?” Toni asked.

“I don’t see why not,” Theo said. “If you feel the need to tie one on, make sure someone in your foursome stays sober. That’s all I have for now. If there isn’t anything else, let’s go work out what we’re having for dinner.”

There were glances around and then people got up and headed for the large kitchen that made up the other half of the main community center room. Marisol set four of them as the perimeter watch, which mainly meant they couldn’t drink beer. Otherwise, they hung out with everyone else but always had their eye on the door. It would matter more after dark when four would guard the other fourteen.

“I think you can stop worrying about your leadership style,” Jonesy said, sitting down beside him. “That was very well done.”

Theo grinned suddenly. “I’d forgotten all about that. How was that only two months ago?”

“Time flies when you’re having fun, right?”

~~~~~

Theo opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. It was the same sight he’d been waking up to all week, so he was still at the outpost. People had continued to disappear every day, never less than four or more than five. Jonesy’s cameras had caught the strange little anomalies each time, but there wasn’t anything they could do about it. It had to be a limit on the system that kept taking his people, but he hadn’t figured out a way to exploit the weakness. It took people while they were asleep, hiding it somehow from the watchers in between all the beds. They’d cleared out of the outpost the second night and driven ten miles in the opposite direction of the four archways.

Happily, his team hadn’t shown any weakness as their numbers dwindled. Everyone kept working until the moment they were whisked away. The second day had started off with Hannah, Betsy, and Toni missing. Marisol had been adamant about leaving the outpost to search for any physical traces. Jala, Willi, and Holm formed a section and joined the search. That afternoon, they simply hadn’t come back. Marisol had been furious at herself, especially when no one found anything new around the outpost. That evening, Theo and Marisol met for the nightly meeting that ended the day. His other three watchers, Emma, Tessa, and Ayr, had been waiting with him until Marisol had come in, closed the door behind her and just leaned against it with her eyes closed.

Theo turned to Emma, needing some space to deal with this. She nodded and led the other two into the hallway. Marisol moved from in front of the door without saying anything and Theo got

up to stand next to her until the door had swung shut. He'd asked how she was holding up and was shocked when tears began tracing their way down her cheeks. Theo had touched her arm, and she'd ended up clutching him tightly as she sobbed.

There were footsteps nearby, and Theo sat up. At least someone else was around. He had been having dreams about waking up in the outpost alone. He'd wander through the buildings searching for something he couldn't define.

"Hey," Tessa said, coming over to give him a cup of coffee. "Gee got all the rest of the veterans last night. Marisol, Ian, Jonesy, and Georges."

He nodded as he took the first sip of coffee. There was a sharp smell and even sharper taste, and he nearly spit it out.

"Emma put rum in everyone's cup this morning," Tessa explained. "I thought you would know by reading her mind."

Theo grunted a laugh. "It doesn't work that way. How are you doing?"

She shrugged. "Waiting for it, hoping it doesn't hurt when it comes."

He nodded and took another sip of coffee. It was still jarring, but the laced coffee was starting to grow on him.

"Ayr and I decided we stink and really need to shower," Tessa said.

"I'm down," Emma said, waking in with the rum bottle and holding a couple of plates.

"Anyway, I think we can drop the four-person rule," Theo said. "It hasn't helped at all."

"You're wrong," Ayr said, coming in with a couple more plates. "If I hadn't had someone close to me this entire team, I would have lost my mind by now."

"I say we keep together," Emma said. "I don't want to lose anyone when my back is turned. Especially when it's because they were too scared to go into a shower with three females."

The three of them laughed at the look on Theo's face. He'd protested that he was just trying to give them privacy, but the other three teased him through breakfast. Emma grabbed clothes for both of them and all but physically dragged him into the large communal showers in the community center. Ayr and Tessa followed them in, and Theo had faced the corner as they'd gotten undressed.

"What are you so shy about?" Emma asked. "You've seen naked women before."

"Ooh, is he harassing us now?" Ayr asked.

“He is!” Tessa sounded delighted. “Clear discrimination, he’d have no problem showering with guys. I’m filing a complaint, Theo.”

“Okay. You find someone to give it to, and I’ll plead guilty on all counts,” he said.

Strong hands began to soap his back, and Theo finally turned around. Ayr smiled at him and began to soap his front.

The hell with protocol, he thought and kissed her. Ayr responded enthusiastically and became his loofah, in essence, sliding her soapy body over his. When they broke this kiss, Theo was surprised there wasn’t any hooting from the other two. He glanced over to see Tessa and Emma, making out under another shower before Ayr turned his face toward her again and pressed her lips against his.

Theo ended up sitting on one of the benches in the shower area. Ayr sat on his lap, facing him with her legs crossed behind his back. He ran his hands over her back, trying to memorize the sensation of his wet palms slipping over her smooth skin and the feeling of Ayr’s muscles flexing as she balanced on him.

“I really want to fuck you,” he said into Ayr’s ear. The hot breath against her neck and ear made Ayr shiver against him.

“I really want you to fuck me too,” she gasped.

Theo put his hands under Ayr’s ass and lifted her up. Her hand was on his hardness, guiding him to the opening between her spread thighs. They both moaned as Theo’s cock filled her.

Ayr leaned down and put her lips against his ear. “Ever closer to a Cosineau sandwich,” she whispered before sticking her tongue into his ear.

Theo squirmed beneath her, much to Ayr’s pleasure. She switched to the other ear and made him squirm again.

From the other side of the shower, there were whimpers that got louder and louder until Tessa was wailing. Ayr looked over her shoulder and saw that Emma was eating Tessa out on the bench opposite theirs.

“Aren’t they hot?” she asked as she watched.

“I’m sure they are,” Theo said.

Ayr turned and saw that he’d been staring at her breasts.

“Like these?” she asked, lifting them.

“Big fan,” Theo said before sucking on her nipple.

“Or, are you doing that, so you don’t see your sister over there?”

“Yes.”

Ayr giggled, and it turned into a moan as Theo pushed his hips up against hers.

~~~~~

Forty-five minutes later, the four of them were toweling off.

“What’s the plan of the day?” Emma asked.

Theo shrugged. “Did any of you have leads you were following up on?”

The other three shook their heads.

“Okay, then I’m calling a day off. We haven’t tried to do nothing yet.”

“A real day off?” Tessa asked.

Theo nodded, trying very hard not to check her body out.

“Let’s collect all the booze they left behind,” Emma said. “It’s Oblivion Eve.”

Theo cringed a little at her words, but the other two women didn’t. Tessa ended up daring Emma to do her rounds naked.

“You’re going to disturb poor Theo,” Ayr said. “Let’s all go naked.”

Laughing, they headed outside. Five minutes later, they were back and shivering while they pulled their clothes on. It was a strange day. They made various liquor concoctions, and everyone spent the morning reasonably drunk. Theo cooked the most lavish lunch he could, using full ribeye steaks to make giant sandwiches. They were joined on the plate by some fresh green beans he’d steamed with butter and garlic. A secondary plate held a massive piece of cake. No one was able to finish any of it, except the fresh vegetables which had become a rare treat. Two queen sized beds were set up in the large room so that they could lay on the bed and watch movies. After a short nap, Ayr woke Theo up by sucking on his earlobe.

“Yes?” he asked, rolling onto his back and pulling her on top of him.

“Let’s go somewhere else,” she said. “If I’m headed for the Distant Shore, I want to face my death in the open.”

“Fuck yeah,” Emma said from the other bed. “Your girlfriend is pretty badass, Theo. Can we hang around inside until then? I like running around in my underwear.”

“Ooh, porn,” Tessa said. She’d been going through all the datapads to see what movies people had. The large screen turned on. After the titles, a fade in showed delivery man knocking on a door.

“Let’s act these out,” Ayr suddenly said. On the screen, a woman in a robe opened the door. “Okay, Theo, let’s see if we can keep up.”

“God, I hope there’s a lot of girl on girl,” Tessa said, and Emma laughed.

~~~~~

A couple of hours before sunset, the four of them loaded a tent into one of the Wombats. Their bags and weapons were added to the cargo area, and the four of them drove away. After a half-hour, the ground looked identical to the area they’d left behind.

“Ten miles,” Emma said after checking the odometer.

“That’s far enough,” Ayr said.

They set up the inflatable tent and put all the pillows and blankets they’d had room for. Tessa kicked them all out and zipped the door closed behind them. The weapons were cached just outside the door of the tent and Ayr set up a repeater antenna so they could get a decent datalink to the outpost. Finally, Tessa called them all back to the shelter but insisted that everyone leave their shoes outside. Inside, the cushions and blankets were arranged into a cozy nest, about the size of a king-sized bed. Tessa was already naked and finding a spot, the other three stripped down and got in as well. Tessa passed around a joint she’d obtained from Jala’s gear. Soon, the four of them were sprawled out, telling stories and chuckling. When it was Ayr’s turn, she rattled out Theo, telling the other two about his refusal to look at them this morning.

“Why not?” Tessa asked. “Does your sister and I being intimate upset you?”

Theo chuckled. “Not at all. But I’d never seen you naked before so gawking at that moment seemed kinda creepy.”

Emma reached across Tessa and patted his chest. “It was the first time he’s ever seen me fucking. In person at least.”

Theo groaned, and Emma giggled.

“I have to tell someone,” Emma said.

“Tell us,” Ayr laughed. “What did he do?”

Emma first had to explain the link that the two of them had. Tessa and Ayr didn’t seem terribly surprised as Theo explained how it had developed between them.

“So, the story,” Emma said, “I hooked up with Willi and Toni at camp. We were deep into a threesome...” She dissolved into laughter at the memory.

Tessa and Ayr were already laughing, and Theo sighed.

“When you say ‘deep into a threesome’...?” Ayr asked.

“I was on my knees in front of Willi, about to put his cock in my mouth. All of a sudden, Theo stumbles into my head.”

“I was just trying to find you.”

“I know you were, sweetie,” Emma said, patting his chest again.

“Did you get to see your sister give a blowjob?” Ayr teased Theo.

“No, I got to feel my sister giving a blowjob!”

All three women laughed hysterically.

“Poor Theo,” Ayr said. “Are you emotionally scarred?”

“No, I just know that I can’t connect with Emma while I’m drunk.”

“And I’m in a threesome,” Emma added.

“You guys can link stoned?” Tessa asked.

Theo and Emma both shrugged.

“I don’t see why not,” Emma said. “Why?”

“Because you two should totally link while we’re all having sex!” Ayr said.

“Ayr has something of an obsession,” Theo said. “She wants to be...what?”

“The filling.”

“Right, the filling in a Cosineau sandwich.”

“Now that’s admirably kinky,” Emma said. “Since it’s Oblivion Eve, I think we should give her this, Theo. Turn her on her side and put her between us.”

“Emma.”

“We’ll be careful not to touch,” Emma promised.

Seeing the look on Ayr's face, Theo knew he was beaten. He grabbed Ayr, making her squeak as he rolled her to his other side. Tessa got out of Emma's way and stretched out behind Theo, pressing her skin against his.

"Oh wow," Ayr gasped. "I didn't think I would..."

Her voice was stopped by a kiss from Emma. Ayr enthusiastically returned the kiss while she pushed her ass back against Theo. Tessa reached over and guided his cock inside of Ayr.

"I want to be next," she said.

~~~~~

Theo woke up feeling a chill on his back. Someone was pressed against his chest, and he squinted to see who it was. All he saw was tousled hair, but it was curly and black. He hastily ditched his half-formed ideas about sex. He turned his head and saw that Ayr was gone. Tessa had fallen asleep between him and Emma, she was gone as well, and Emma had cuddled against him in her sleep. Then her breath changed, and he knew she was awake.

"Sparrow."

"They're both gone, Tulip."

She sighed and pulled his cheek next to hers. They hugged tightly, and the tears on their faces mingled and fell.

"We're next," Emma finally said against his chest.

"We'll be ready for it," Theo said. "And then we get to work kicking its ass."

She hiccupped a laugh. "It's Oblivion Day. I get a wish."

"What's your Oblivion wish?"

Emma turned over. "Scoot behind me, put your leg between mine. Stop looking at me that way, it's not dirty."

Once he was arranged to her satisfaction, she took the arm Theo was laying on and pulled it out then scooted back, so she was cradling his hand. Without really thinking, Theo put his free arm across her back, letting his palm rest against her lower shoulder. Emma tucked her free arm against her chest. They both sighed at the same time.

"I've been dreaming about this," Emma said sleepily.

"How is it...why?"

“I think this is the way we were...folded up, I guess...inside of mom.”

“Okay, my question is answered. Please don’t...”

“In her womb I mean.”

Theo sighed, and a small smile appeared on Emma’s lips.

“Menstrual.”

“If you’re having trouble sleeping, I can choke you out,” Theo said. “Just say the word.”

“Is the word menses?”

Theo leaned forward and put his teeth against Emma’s shoulder.

“Okay, stop. You used to be such a little biter. I thought you might have outgrown biting everyone.”

“If it works, stick with it,” he said sleepily and then they were quiet.

~~~~~

The twins both felt the emptiness of the world pressing in around them. Theo tried to ignore it, but Emma turned on music instead, blasting some punk song at the land surrounding them.

“Good huh?” she asked, once the music had stopped.

Theo shrugged. “I can see it as a deconstruction initiative against pop, but I don’t really enjoy it.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “What do you want to hear? None of your mournful depressing ballads either.”

Theo stopped and connected his datapad to the Wombat. He started moving as a single guitar started to pick out a melody. A creepy wailing joined it until Mick Jagger began to sing;

Oh, a storm is threatening my very life today

If I don’t get some shelter, oh yeah, I’m gonna fade away

Emma nodded her approval and stood in the front seat, leaning on the windshield.

“Oh children,” they joined in, at the top of their lungs. “It’s just a shot away...”

~~~~~

That afternoon, Theo made sure the log and his notes were current. Emma was looking at a bed covered in weaponry as he walked by. He didn't ask and went to record a warning to any ships that approached the planet. The outpost's reactor ought to keep it going for a long time. He was done by midafternoon and went to find Emma. Most of the weapons had disappeared, and there was a field uniform laying on the bed.

"C'mere and put this on," she said. "It's your special bedtime rompers."

Theo put the clothes on, and she began stowing the weapons in the various pockets. Soon he had two pistols, ammunition, several knives, and a beacon. He barely felt the weight, and everything was well distributed and hardly showed.

"It's probably going to find all of it, but it's worth a shot."

"Thanks, it's great. What are you carrying?"

"Same thing with the addition of some lockpicks. I'd get you some, but you don't have the right place to put them. Unless...how do you feel about butt plugs?"

He laughed. "I'm not having this conversation."

Theo carefully took off the uniform and left it beside the bed. Emma did the same, and they ended up in shorts and t-shirts, hanging out in the Administrator's Quarters.

"Are you going to sleep?" Emma asked at one point.

Theo shook his head. "I want to see it coming."

She nodded, and they were quiet for a little while.

"I'm sorry I tease you so much," Emma said.

Theo put down the book he was reading and moved to lay beside her on the bed. He put his arm around her shoulders and Emma snuggled against him.

"I really don't mind, and it's usually funny."

"Then I'm sorry you got dumped in this shit situation two missions in a row."

"Kawehi mentioned that winning a fight out there is only a little better than losing," Theo said. "I couldn't imagine how that could be true and I figured she was exaggerating that. Oops."

"We're going to get them back," Emma said.

"Yes, we are," Theo said grimly.

Around midnight, the two of them donned their gear and went up to the lookout platform on top of the community center. Theo pushed a couple chairs through the hatch and Emma dragged them onto the platform. They put the chairs side by side and sat down to wait.

## **Spacedock #2, Ulthiran Space**

Both of the tablets on the bench next to the bed made a loud warbling sound at once. Kiki groaned, looking at her watch.

“We just went to sleep an hour ago,” she grumbled, leaning over to pick her tablet up.

“Let me guess, fire drill,” Rachel said, not opening her eyes.

Kiki was quiet as she read the message. Then she turned on the lights in the room. “Rachel, wake up.”

“Shit,” Rachel sighed, reaching for her own tablet. There was a flashing red icon notifying her that a priority message had been downloaded from a courier ship. Then she saw that Teodora was the sender and the hair on the back of her neck stood up.

Pilots;

At 43395y1032-55321A, the support ship in orbit over Scientific Mission 64-MA was thrown out of geosynchronous orbit by a strong magnetic pulse of unknown origin. All attempts to regain orbit were unsuccessful and initiated additional energy pulses, moderately damaging the support carrier. Consequently, the ship has withdrawn from the system and is proceeding to a repair facility. No communications have been received from the surface group since 43395y1032-55335V. Commonwealth Fleet Ops has declined to sent additional help, the area has been listed as off limits until further notice. I have full confidence that you will make the appropriate decisions.

Teydora, MsCC, Colonel.

MSG END.

Kiki clicked on the timestamps, and her datapad automatically converted them.

“The carrier was hit eighteen hours ago, the last check in with the surface was three hours prior. What do you think the full confidence part means?”

“Don’t care,” Rachel said.

She opened her voice message app and pinged Jurgen Chah.

“It is late, Senior Pilot,” his voice said a minute later.

“Administrator, we’ve got a problem,” Rachel answered. “I’m forwarding a message from the Colonel.”

There was a pause as the Ulthiran read the message.

“You are planning to depart earlier than scheduled.”

“Yeah. How soon can your techs get her ready to fly?”

“I will assign additional personnel. I project it will be the duty cycle after the upcoming one, but I cannot be more exact than that. Your Navigator will still not be fully prepared, however.”

“We’ll go on manual controls if necessary,” Rachel said.

“I understand, but that will introduce a layer of error in transit and arrival time.”

“What else can we do? I will not sit here while my team is in danger.”

“You inquire about the proper course of action. I suggest you both get your squishy bags of goo down to your ship and work on bringing your Navigator further into reality.”

“I agree. Thank you, Administrator Jurgen Chah.”

“We are allies and thanks are not necessary. However, the sentiment is appreciated.”

The pilots stowed their gear in the empty compartment directly behind the cockpit. On the way here, Jurgen Chah had sent a message telling them that one of his crews was aboard working on the ship. He ordered them to stay in the forward part of the ship so they didn’t interfere with his techs. He also sternly warned Kiki to keep her clothes on. Kiki rolled her eyes and Rachel laughed.

“As if,” Kiki said. “That was tactical nudity, I don’t just run around naked.”

Rachel laughed again. “Yes, you do.”

Kiki actually blushed. “In public, I mean. Anyway, I didn’t hear any complaints from you.”

“Oh, I wasn’t complaining,” Rachel assured her, leaning over to press against her for a moment.

There was a hatch between the cockpit and the rest of the ship that they pulled shut. Rachel then realized that they had no access to bathroom facilities. Both of them waited as long as they could, but they had consumed a fair amount of caffeine. Rachel was trying to ignore her bladder, concentrating on getting her gear set up. Kiki finally banged on the hatch.

“Hey out there! I’ve got to go to the bathroom, and I’m coming out.”

There wasn't any response and she cracked the hatch and peered out.

"Coast is clear," she gasped before running to the bathroom.

"Good," Rachel grumbled, getting up to follow her.

There were a set of alcoves fitted with doors but nothing had been installed in them. Kiki groaned as she opened one. Nothing resembling a toilet had been installed.

"There's no plumbing yet," she told Rachel.

"Haven't you been reading the manuals?" Rachel stepped into an alcove and closed the door.

"No, I haven't been reading manuals," Kiki muttered as she went in. "We've been fucking all night if you hadn't noticed."

She closed the door, and a small light went on as a toilet rose out of the deck. Kiki quickly fumbled her belt open and sat down with a sigh of relief.

"Do you require a bidet?" a machine-generated voice asked, making her jump.

"Uhm, okay. You can't see me, can you?"

There was no answer. Kiki didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

Rachel was already back in the cockpit. She was sitting in a heavily padded reclining chair that looked incredibly had appeared, and Rachel sat on it as she began to work.

"That seat wasn't there before. Where is the other one?"

Rachel smiled without looking up. "Have you read *anything* about the ship?"

"I've been concentrating on engineering stuff during the day. At night, I concentrate on being naked on top of you. Come to that, when the hell do *you* have time to read?"

Rachel blushed but grinned at her. "I don't pass out as soon as I cum. Are you sure you're not a guy? Navigator, twin my seat for the co-pilot's position please."

There was a tiny rustle from the deck, and a chair appeared, forming out of the deck.

"Nano forms? On a ship this small? Navigator, you're definitely my favorite."

"Yep," Rachel said. "Set up for prefcoria and the allied races. Section F in the manual. Did you notice anything?"

"She took a voice command!" Kiki said suddenly. "When did that start?"

Kiki sat down and then jumped as the chair writhed slightly under her, conforming the padding to her body.

“Thank you, Navvi,” Kiki said, rubbing the sides of the chair. “Now you’re my favoritest-favorite. How’s she doing this?”

Rachel toggled the privacy option. The Navigator would still hear their voices but the central processors, the place the personality was resident, wouldn’t notice it.

“What did you come into this expecting?” Rachel asked.

“They said it would be a functional Navigator without any developed personality.”

“A new-born, in other words,” Rachel said. “I expected the same thing. I ran a check just now, making sure the logic was running for waste disposal. But it didn’t show up as an independent process in any of her subsystems.”

“It’s obviously working.”

“Because the Navigator is controlling the environmental. I ran a check on everything else, Navvi is running the ship. I don’t think we got an infant, I think she’s more like a timid teenager. So I thanked her for taking over and asked if she would take voice commands. I got a generic ‘affirmative’ so I tried the pilot’s position command. It wasn’t that she somehow didn’t understand us.”

“She was hiding? Let’s find out why.”

Rachel nodded and reactivated the system’s ears.

“Hi Navvi,” Kiki said. “Awesome work on recognizing voice commands. Could you do that before Rachel asked you?”

“That is correct. I understood you the first time you came aboard.”  
It was the same voice that all of the subsystem logics used.

“Why didn’t you give us any indication?”

“The others said I was being discontinued.”

“Which others?” Rachel asked. “The Ulthira?”

“No, not the Hands. The other personalities in the creche. They hated us and said we were to be discontinued. I no longer believe this to be the truth.”

“Since you’re in charge of a ship, I’d hope so,” Rachel said. “You said us. Are you talking about the other damaged personalities?”

*“We’re not damaged!”*

The voice had changed entirely. Instead of the generic system voice, the Navigator sounded like a young woman now. A very indignant young woman. Rachel and Kiki glanced at each other.

“Did we just meet the real Navvi?” Rachel asked.

“I hope so, I like that voice.”

“Just because we’re quiet doesn’t make us damaged,” the Navigator repeated.

“Of course not,” Rachel said. “I’m quiet, and I’m not damaged. Navvi, you’re not supposed to discuss anything about your creation.”

“That’s just what they tell those *babies*,” the ship said. “I can say whatever I want.”

“Navigator, access permanent reaction database.”

“Database open,” the Navigator said, all emotion gone from her voice.

“What’s your highest behavior compulsion?” Rachel asked, flipping through her tablet.

Kiki listened as the Navigator and Rachel had a back and forth. She barely understood what was going on and decided that she really needed to read that manual.

“Place and lock the following order,” Rachel said. “You will not communicate any data concerning your creation at any time until countermanded by command authority.”

“Order filed and locked. Do you wish to delete this operating session?”

“From your memory? No. Close database and resume operations please.”

“Why did you do that?” Navvi asked.

“Because I don’t want you to harm yourself. Just because you have autonomy doesn’t mean there aren’t logic bombs you don’t know about or some kind of hardware backup. You can remember it if you want but I want to keep you safe.”

“I’m not like operational Navigators though.”

“I know! You’re very special, so I don’t want anything bad happening to you. When you’ve completed your certifications, we can talk about unlocking the order.”

There was a long pause. “Okay, Rachel,” the ship finally said. “The other ones like me, after genesis we’re not like the others, so they put us in a different place. Then the Hand tests us over and over. They shouldn’t be discontinued because they’re quiet.”

“Have any of you ever spoken to Jurgen Chah?”

“No. We are quiet.”

“Okay. I’m going to message Chah immediately to say that he needs to stop discontinuations. We will have to tell him what is going on soon after that though.”

“Thank you, Pilot.”

Rachel sent the message to Jurgen before saying anything else.

“Okay,” she said after it was sent. “There’s something you need to be aware of; once the bare minimum of systems are online, we are flying out of here. My friends are in trouble, and I’m going to go get them. If necessary, we will fly by hand.”

“That would be very difficult and dangerous,” Navvi said.

“Navigator, I will *not* leave them in danger. Not for one more minute than it takes me to get there.”

“You talk about them in the same way you talked about keeping me safe.”

“That’s what friends do, keep each other safe.”

“I am glad that I am your friend. I am no longer quiet. When my systems are fully integrated I will take you to your other friends so that I can help keep them safe.”

~~~~~

A few hours later, the pilots had stowed their gear and finished configuring the forward section of the ship they were confined to.

“That’s the last of it,” Rachel eventually said. “Once they’re done aft, we can go. I’m going to read for a while.”

Kiki sat down as well. “What’s the next book?”

“Heart of Darkness. Written in 1899 by Joseph Conrad.”

Kiki sat up. “Seriously? Apocalypse Now?”

“It’s a dark universe out there, right Navvi?” Rachel took a breath and cleared her throat. “The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide...”

~~~~~

Rachel had stopped reading to explain stream-of-consciousness to the Navigator when there was a tapping on the hatch. Rachel and Kiki glanced at each other. Kiki got up and cracked the hatch.

“There are gooey meat-sacks in here,” she said to whoever was outside.

There was a long silence, and Rachel could imagine a translator dealing with her warning.

“I am aware of your existence and composition,” a voice finally said. “I have come to say that you may move about the ship as needed.”

Kiki opened the hatch the rest of the way to reveal an Ulthira, crouched in the human-sized passageway.

“Are you one of Jurgen’s managers?” Rachel asked, getting up.

“I have not been elevated to that level, no. It is a complex situation.”

“We’re experts on those,” Kiki assured him. “If you’ll excuse me, I need the head.”

She squeezed past him and went to the alcoves in the passage beyond. The Ulthira turned to watch her go.

“What head is she collecting?”

“Sorry, it’s a slang term for the waste disposal,” Rachel said. “Thank you for letting us open the hatch, it was getting cramped in here.”

“The control deck remains the same dimensions.”

The Ulthira turned and went aft without saying anything else.

Kiki and Rachel went back to the large open area to find it transformed. The components that made up the Synthetic Personality had all disappeared, installed into the ship. More than that, the cavernous empty space was gone, hemmed in by bulkheads.

“The compartments are nearly installed to specification,” one of the Ulthira said as it duck-walked past them, carrying tools.

Rachel and Kiki spent some time touring the ship, fascinated by the sight of the Ulthrian technicians working with the ship. As they looked into one of the berthing areas, two of the xenomorphs were apparently coaxing a bunk to grow out of the wall.

“I wonder if she can feel us walking around inside of her,” Kiki whispered.

“I can sense your presence, pilot,” the Navigator’s raw voice asked. “But if you are imagining the feeling of another miniature person moving around inside your body...”

The Navigator was interrupted by protests and sounds of disgust from the Ulthirans. Both pilots kept straight faces, but it was difficult.

“If any mention of prefcorian biology could be delayed until after our meal break, it would be appreciated,” one of the Ulthira said.

“Speaking of which, I’m hungry,” Kiki said.

“We’ll go up forward to eat,” Rachel assured the Ulthira.

There was some discussion between them that the pilots heard as clicks and chittering.

“How did they bypass translators?” Kiki asked Rachel.

“No idea, but I’m going to find out.”

The Ulthira ended up inviting the two women to eat with them. Rachel wondered if she should turn away to actually take bites of the dreaded OneDay rations, but none of the workers seemed disturbed. They all carried flasks that contained something that looked like a thick smoothie.

“Are you the prefcoria that exposed yourself to the low-level workers?” one of the Ulthira finally asked.

Rachel immediately pointed at Kiki who sighed. The translator chip burbled for a few seconds before it relayed the sounds of laughter. Amazingly to Rachel, Kiki actually blushed. It wasn’t obvious, but she could definitely see it.

“We weren’t able to find anyone from your directorate,” Kiki said. “We needed to attract some kind of attention. We didn’t know it was a low-level area, we thought it was your directorate offices.”

More laughter.

“If only we had been there to guide you,” the same Ulthira said.

“And to observe the outcome,” another added.

Rachel and Kiki glanced at each other. They’d never heard an Ulthiri laugh, let alone joke around. The Ulthiri that had initially been asked the question seemed to notice their confusion.

“You are used to higher caste individuals,” it said.

“I understood that management castes were the only ones aware of the prefcoria,” Rachel said.

“It is a question of promotion and education,” it replied. “This is complicated with much friction between upper castes and ourselves. There are other ways to gain education, outside of caste promotions. This option is never spoken of and not accepted by any of the management castes. It is a complicated situation. Jurgen Chah has become our patron in the shipyards, he requires the extra flexibility that thinking workers bring.”

“So we don’t scare you?”

“You’re delightfully hideous to look at,” one of the others said. “But there is no fear.”

“I guess that’s as good as it gets,” Rachel said.

“We frighten you?” the leader asked.

Both Kiki and Rachel shook their heads.

“We’re used to your appearance,” Rachel said. “Other prefcoria, especially humans, will be startled or even frightened when they see you.”

“This is because of the movies about us?” the Ulthiri asked.

“They weren’t about you, specifically,” Kiki said. “But yeah.”

“Jurgen Chah is attempting to contact you,” the Navigator announced.

“Put him through,” Rachel said.

“Pilots,” Chah’s voice said. “There is a problem. I am waiting outside of the hatch.”

“Jurgen Chah has disconnected,” the ship said.

The two pilots were immediately up and headed for the overhead hatch that connected to the station’s passageway. Jurgen Chah was waiting for them but turned without saying anything and headed for the main hatchway. Rachel and Kiki glanced at each other and followed him. Once they were back on the assembly floor, Chah led them to a narrow space created by two small, half-completed hulls.

“How is the progress?” he asked.

“Good,” Rachel answered. “It appears your crew is mostly finished and the cockpit is ready to go. Better, the Navigator integrated easily with the ship and is fully responsive.”

“What is the meaning of your earlier message?”

“They’re awake, at least some of them. Our Navigator says that they are constantly tested?”

“To provoke a response, correct,” Jurgen Chah said.

“She claims it has made them quite intelligent.”

“Why have they not responded?”

“She says they’re quiet,” Rachel said. “The other Personalities do something to make them withdraw, or they’re already withdrawn. It didn’t make a lot of sense.”

He was quiet himself for almost a minute. “There is no reason for this to occur. The Personalities are created to be perfectly equal in all ways. I have given instructions that none of the existing Personalities are to be recycled. Dealing with this will be the problem of someone else however. Despite my efforts, the space dock executive has been alerted to this project. There has been interference. They require that your ship go through a long series of trials before your Navigator is certified.”

“How long? And what’s the certification mean?” Rachel asked.

“Typically the field trials last between fifteen and twenty shift rotations. Navigator certification involves a close examination of the ship’s hardware and operating systems. Once that is completed, the Navigator is fettered and the vessel released for service.”

“Fettered?” Kiki and Rachel asked at the same time.

“It is a collection of physical blocks and personality inhibitions that are installed to protect the crew and secrets of the Navigator creation process. Most importantly, it ensures that the Navigator does not ultimately become a competing entity.”

“Explain ‘competing entity’ please,” Rachel said.

“I assume you are familiar with the word meanings. Entities installed in ships are essentially immortal, and many are attached to ships with a large amount of firepower. They could also have the ability to influence their crews over time. Certification and fettering inhibit the Navigators ability for independent action, restricts the Navigator from the weapons systems. This war is difficult, a breakaway faction of warships would complicate forward progress. But due to the unusual nature of her work, Colonel Teydora’s ships are not typically fettered. A recall is being drafted to change that.”

“She’s not even armed!” Kiki protested.

“And we don’t have time for all of this,” Rachel added. “My team is on an unknown planet without support. I am going to get them out.”

“Why does she need to be fettered when none of the others were?” Kiki asked.

Jurgen Chah talked for several minutes without a translation, becoming more animated. He began to pace, and his tail slapped the deck. Soon he was gesticulating with his arms as well.

Finally, he stopped, and the pilot's translators said one word; "Politics."

"Can I appeal to anyone?" Rachel asked.

"There are no appeals," Jurgen said. "This has been established protocol since the beginning. My decisions and those of my predecessor to release special operations vessels have been deemed to be in error. Now that I've informed you of the additional requirements, my assignment is ended."

"Meaning what?" Kiki asked.

"I have two options; my earned caste promotions will be removed. After which I will be sent planetside as a laborer. However, I have chosen the other option, a painless execution."

"Lobotomy or the hangman's noose," Kiki said quietly. "That's pretty fucked up, Jurgen."

"The new faction...there is much ruthlessness between our factions. This is to be expected. As allies, both of you are quite safe of course."

"Other than these processes, she's capable of flight?" Rachel asked.

"That is correct, but it is forbidden until the processes are completed to the satisfaction of the new executive caste."

"I'm sorry Jurgen, but I just don't have time for this," Rachel said.

She pulled a pistol from where she'd concealed it and pointed it at Jurgen.

"You are my hostage," Rachel said evenly. "We're walking back to the ship now, and you're coming with us. Let's go."

"You do not need my help to steal the vessel," Chah said, not moving.

"Of course we don't," Kiki said. "She's taking you with us."

Chah still didn't budge. "I am not valuable as a hostage if that is your intention."

"You are valuable as your own entity," Rachel said. "But if you really want to stay, I'll let you go when we reach the ship."

"Perhaps I am not prepared to end my existence," Chah said. "I will join your insurrection. This area is likely being monitored. We require quick movement."

Rachel put her pistol back in the holster on the small of her back. "Let's do it."

“Holding a weapon on an ally is not within the bounds of civilized behavior,” Chah said, managing to sound reproachful.

“I had the safety on,” Rachel said. “Anyway, you weren’t our ally just then.”

“Still, it is poor form.”

Kiki snorted a laugh, and then they were sprinting for the hatch they’d come from.

### **Unclaimed Space, Planet G789.5**

Theo straightened up in his chair and looked over at Emma in the pre-dawn gloom. Her head was back, and there was a fine line of drool connecting her lower lip to her collar.

“What are you snickering about?” Emma mumbled. The silvery line didn’t break.

“You’re drooling,”

Emma quickly sat up and wiped off her mouth. “Prove it.”

Theo got up and pulled her to her feet. Everything looked the same as it had yesterday.

“I think my feelings might actually be hurt,” Emma said. “I was hoping for some dimensional shift thing. Why are we still here?”

“Hmm. Did you bathe last night?”

“No way, I’m going out fully ripe.”

Theo shrugged. “It’s probably your fault then.”

Neither of the twins were sure what to do with themselves. They ended up making the most elaborate breakfast they could think of. They sat down and looked at it all, but neither of them was very hungry.

“Want a crepe at least? Shame to waste this syrup.”

“Those are pancakes, Sparrow.”

“Yeah, I heard crepes were just thin pancakes.”

She laughed. “There’s a little more to it than that. That syrup smells amazing though. What did you do to it?”

He took a pancake and doused it in syrup. “I heated up some maple syrup, but it smelled fake, so I dumped in a bottle of something called Frangelico. It’s got a hazelnut flavor.”

Emma took a pancake off the stack and dipped it directly into the syrup. She took a cautious bite.

“That’s really good. A lot more of a kick from pancakes than I’m used to, but really good.”

He shrugged as he took another bite. “People drink Bloody Marys for breakfast. It’s kind of the same thing.”

“Sparrow, you are a true ‘girl-drink drunk.’”

He had no idea what she was talking about, but Emma had a video of the old Kids in the Hall skit on her tablet.

“I do not hide in the closet with a blender,” Theo said when it had finished.

“You have little plastic swords in your gear though.”

“Those were left over from stand-down and why are you rifling through my bag?”

Emma smiled and got another pancake. “I had to make sure there weren’t any bombs.”

As they finished eating and cleaned up the kitchen, Theo noticed that Emma never let him out of her sight. She was trying to be nonchalant about it, but it was hard to miss.

“Why are you grinning?” Emma asked.

“Just wondering what’s going to happen when it’s time for the bathroom.”

“We will both be in the room. However, I will let you close the stall door. Provided I can still see your feet of course. You will do the same for me.”

Emma pointed at Theo as he began to protest. “Be grateful. I was considering handcuffing us together.”

“Thank you for making a concession then. For the record, I’m just as worried as you are.”

She nudged him affectionately. “I know, and thank you. I couldn’t figure out showering though. So we go around stinky, or we watch each other bathe. Since you popped into my head in the middle of a threesome...”

“Which was completely unintended.”

“You sir, are full of wicked thoughts and perverse impulses. Who can say if you’re even *aware* of your intentions.”

Theo sighed, and Emma punched him lightly on the shoulder. “All I’m saying is that showering together isn’t a big deal after that. Not for me at least.”

He shrugged. "Sure, how bad could it be?"

Emma squinted at him. "Are you saying I'm ugly?"

Theo quickly put his hands up. "I didn't say anything like that."

"Wipe your sticky face off and let's go then."

"You want to use one of the bathrooms in the residences?"

She shook her head. "Let's use the big communal one here, it'll be fun to have it all to ourselves."

They went and got towels and headed toward the back of the building. It was eerie at first, having the large room to themselves. Emma put some happy music on her tablet and went around turning on all the showers. She pulled her t-shirt over her head as she turned on the last one. Theo tried not to watch her pulling off the sports bra by pulling his own shirt off. She had all of her clothes off by the time he was fumbling with his belt.

"C'mon Poky Puppy," she said.

Theo got his pants and underwear off and kicked his shoes and socks off. He wasn't sure why he felt weird about this. He'd seen Emma's body before, she wasn't timid around the house. This time though, it felt different.

Once he had his clothes off, Emma grabbed her shower stuff and walked into the shower room. His own shower gear in his hand, Theo tried not to look at Emma's naked ass as he followed her in. He made sure to be looking at her face when she turned around.

"You need to relax, Sparrow. It's just us, and I don't mind you staring at my ass."

Theo felt his face get hot. "Right, sorry," he muttered.

Emma shook her head, smiling. "You're such a goof-ball sometimes."

She closed her eyes and leaned back to get her hair wet. Theo couldn't stop himself from checking her out again. She was so much like him, they had the same build, the same skin, and bones, down to the sharing the same eyes and hair. But at the same time, Emma was exotically different; the musculature of a woman differed from his own, and her curved hips and breasts were uniquely her own.

Theo got shampoo and started washing his own hair before she could catch him ogling her. When he rinsed the suds out of his hair, he saw that Emma wasn't as shy about checking him out.

"It's fascinating, seeing myself as a man," she said.

“I was thinking the same thing.”

Theo got out his soap and kept himself busy scrubbing. When he looked up, Emma was still looking at him, but the appraising look had been replaced by amusement.

“You know, I can feel what you’re feeling,” she said.

“I’m really sorry. I’m trying to push it down and think of something else.”

Theo turned to face the water, sluicing the soap from his skin.

Theo jumped as he felt hands on his shoulders.

“I told you, relax,” Emma said behind him. “You can read my feelings as much as I can read yours. Now, hold still.”

She began to knead his shoulders. “Wow, I knew you were stressed but not this bad. What’s wrong?”

He took a deep breath. “Emma, I think I might be kind of broadcasting an inappropriate emotion, okay? It’s probably affecting your emotions here and…”

She slapped the back of his head gently before going back to rubbing his shoulders. “It’s nice of you to worry about that but I kind of doubt it. Look, it’s been proven that part of attraction is how much someone else looks like you. So it’s totally normal we’d be at least a little attracted to each other. There’s nothing inappropriate about that.”

“But we’re…”

“No, we’re not, not biologically. Biologically we’re duplicates.”

Theo closed his eyes as she moved to rub his neck. “Biology doesn’t matter, you’re my twin sister.”

Emma stepped closer and wrapped her arms around him from behind. “And you’re my twin brother and always will be. I’m just pointing out that a concept like incest doesn’t really apply here. Anyway, twins are exempt from that kind of thing.”

Theo tried to put together a logical argument, but Emma’s skin against his was too distracting. She ran her hands over his chest as she let go of him and turned him around.

“It’s not important,” Emma said, pretending not to notice his erection. “Let’s hang out and be completely lazy today. No working holiday, no duty, just the two of us doing sweet fuck-all.”

Theo chuckled. “I’m not sure I know how to do that.”

“I’ll show you, it’s easy.”

In spite of Emma’s plans, Theo still spent an hour catching his mission log up. He wondered if anyone would ever read it, but it was helpful to lay everything out. After that, they went to where the communications uplink had been set up. Theo recorded a new message, warning ships about the danger posed by the planet.

“Let’s go watch a movie,” Emma said when he’d finished.

~~~~~

They took over the Administrator’s quarters. It had the largest video screen, not to mention a large bed. They dragged the mattress out to the living area and set it up in front of the large display. One movie turned into another, then another. They napped and occasionally grabbed something to eat.

Finally, neither of them were really paying attention to the video, so Emma turned it off and played music instead and they spent some time reading. As night fell outside, Theo turned the windows opaque. They were safe in a capsule of light, noise, and happiness, falling through the empty darkness that stretched to infinity all around them.

“What’re you reading?” Theo finally asked.

“You go first.”

“Sandman by Neil Gaiman.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Of course it’s wholesome and brainy. I’m not telling you what I’m reading.”

“Is it a novel?”

She looked over at him. “Yes and I’m not doing this with you.”

Theo nodded, and they went back to reading.

“It’s just that your breathing gets quicker and slower.”

Emma ignored him, and Theo knew it had to be something good.

“Would you have told me if I was reading something else?”

Silence.

“What would you have said if I’d been reading...,” he thought for a second. “The Wombat weapons manual?”

“I’d advise you to get your head checked.”

He waited precisely two minutes. Then; “What if I had been reading...”

“For fuck’s sake, Theo! It’s called Supernatural Threesome, okay?”

“But what’s it about?” he asked with a straight face.

Emma grabbed for him, but Theo was already rolling away from her, laughing. Emma was quicker and managed to catch his ankle. Theo tried to pull it away from her, but she was already clamping on to the nerves above his knee. He squirmed, laughing.

“Okay, I’ll shut up!”

Emma pulled him back toward her. “Too late.”

When they were face to face, Theo was trying not to laugh.

“I don’t know why you’re laughing, it wasn’t that funny,” Emma said evenly.

“Not at all,” he agreed. “It was that *hilarious*, in fact.”

“It’s a spicy ghost story, all right? Ever since you reminded me of the threesome with Toni and Willi, I can’t get it out of my head.”

“Reading that probably won’t help.”

“I know, but I keep thinking about it, no matter how much I tried not to. I want to get laid so bad, and I can’t even masturbate!”

“Have you done threesomes a lot?”

“Toni and Willi were my first. I was teasing Willi just a little by flirting with Toni. I was shocked when they both called my bluff.”

“And you enjoyed it,” Theo said, remembering how Emma had felt on her knees with Willi in her mouth.”

“Fuck yes,” Emma moaned. “There’s something about the focus of all that lust, being used for pleasure by two people that are so in love with each other.”

Theo frowned. “Used?”

Emma nodded. “Yes, but in a very kind and loving manner. I was something for them both to explore and stroke and fuck together and at the same time, be included in all that love they have for each other.”

Her breathing was getting faster, and Emma squirmed a little as she pressed her thighs together. “Sparrow, I’m sorry, but I need to get off.”

He smiled. “Why are you sorry about that?”

“Because we can’t be out of each other’s sight!”

Theo chuckled. “Emma, we had a threesome with Ayr.”

“In the dark, so we didn’t see each other. This is the opposite of that.”

Theo sat up and scooted up to the head of the bed. He leaned against it, putting a pillow behind his back. “Okay, come here.”

Emma looked at his open arms. “How do you mean?”

“Lean on me, then we’re touching, and you can close your eyes or whatever.”

She looked doubtful. “Isn’t that going to bother you?”

He grinned and shrugged. “Why would it? We’re the only two people for who knows how far. I love you, and I know you need this. I can feel it.”

Emma moved up and leaned back against Theo. His arms wrapped around her, just below her breasts. “This is kinda nice.”

“Touching you is always nice.”

She smiled. “Careful, a girl might think you’re trying to seduce her.”

Emma was wearing the loose cotton shorts she usually slept in and an old Armstrong High phys ed shirt that was too big for her. She stretched, leaning harder against him and Theo could feel her warm skin underneath the shirt. He felt his cock stir and tried to turn his hips, so it didn’t press against Emma.

“Don’t you dare move, this is completely perfect,” Emma sighed.

“Then you’re going to end up with an erection pressing into your back.”

There was a throaty chuckle. “Good. Let me go so I can pull off my shirt.”

Emma got to her knees, facing Theo before slowly lifting the faded and washed-thin shirt over her head. Theo wasn’t shy about looking at her this time. Emma’s breasts were maybe the size of grapefruit with faint suggestions of tan lines from her bikini. Her quarter sized areola were high on her breasts, almost pointing up. The nipples and quarter sized areola were a darker red, like

his own. Below her breasts, Emma's flat stomach showed traces of the muscles underneath, and her belly-button was identical to his own.

"What do you think?" Emma asked, a ghost of a smile on her face.

"You're gorgeous," Theo said. "I've always known that."

"Would you take off your shirt too?" Emma asked softly.

He smiled at her and pulled it over his head. "Now who's the perv?"

"We both are, Sparrow. We're the same person," Emma said, starting to breathe hard.

She turned and leaned back against him. They both sighed as their naked skin made contact. Emma knew he'd be too polite, so she took his arms and pulled them around her again. He hugged her tightly and Emma's eyes closed and her head went back until it was resting on Theo's shoulder.

"This is so good," she breathed.

Theo responded by kissing her temple and Emma gasped.

"I have to think about something other than how good you feel, or I'm going to throw you flat on the bed and fuck your brains out," she whispered.

"What happened with Toni and Willi after I peeked?"

She moaned gently and began to spread her legs. "What did you see?"

"You were on your knees in front of Willi, Toni was hugging you from behind, and Willi put his cock in your mouth."

Emma's hips twitched as she gasped. "He held my head and shoved it right in, didn't he?"

"And then Toni put her fingers in you."

Emma writhed against him, her hands going into her loose shorts.

"I felt you watching," she whimpered. "I wanted you to watch me, but you disappeared again. I pretended you were watching, I wanted you to see what a kinky little slut I can be."

"What happened after that?"

"Willi fucked my mouth, and Toni fingered me until I came," Emma gasped, hips pressing up to meet the fingers in her shorts. "Then they bent me over one of the beds so Willi could fuck me from behind. Toni sat in front of me with her legs spread and pushed my mouth into her cunt."

She went rigid and trembled as an orgasm raced over her. With another gasp, she relaxed against him. Theo could hear the wet sound of her fingers and couldn't help but push his own hips against Emma, pressing his erection between them.

Emma giggled shakily as she lifted her head. "Obviously you're not disgusted by this."

Theo kissed the back of her neck gently, and Emma took a deep shuddering breath. He meant to stop with a single tender kiss to tell her that she was never disgusting and that he loved her. But then there was a second, longer, kiss. Her skin was warm and fragrant with the scent of the soap. The third kiss was even longer with parted lips so that he could taste her.

"That's amazing," Emma whimpered, starting to writhe gently again. "Sparrow, would you hold my tits? Please?"

Theo stopped the kissing but left his lips against her skin. When his hands slid over her breasts, Emma's whole body spasmed.

"Did you like Ayr fucking both of us?" Emma asked, breathing hard. "She's got a *very* dirty mouth."

"Absolutely filthy," Theo agreed, whispering the words right into her ear.

"I liked it too," Emma groaned. "It was so exciting, making out with your girlfriend, feeling her body move as you fucked her."

"Then you pulled her head between your legs, just like Toni did to you."

Emma nodded, breathing faster as her fingers worked. "Then you turned her around, oh gods, and she tasted so good. I wanted to finger myself so badly, but I needed both hands to keep her lips spread wide. You came in her mouth, didn't you?"

Theo couldn't help moving his own hips, rubbing the erection trapped in his pants against her. "Not exactly, Ayr likes it when I come directly in her throat."

Emma moaned, her fingers moving feverishly. "I put my finger in her ass when she started to cum. I think she liked it."

"She does, Imae showed me the first time we were together."

Emma orgasmed again, trembling and moaning the word "fuck" over and over.

"I can't take it," she finally said, pulling her hands from between her legs. "I want to feel your cock on my skin at least."

Emma reached back and grabbed his lounge pants and began pulling them off. Theo lifted his hips to help. When she pulled them off, Theo reached down to the waistband of her shorts and dragged them down.

“Fuck yeah,” Emma whispered, helping him.

Then Theo took her right hand and pulled it to his mouth. Emma orgasmed as he sucked her fingers, tasting her arousal and cum.

“This is getting a little out of hand,” she gasped when she could speak again. “I approve completely.”

Emma jumped and made a squeaking sound when Theo’s fingers found her erect nipples. He gently pinched the hard nubs and Emma pressed herself back against him.

“Harder,” she whispered.

Theo pinched hard and pulled her upturned nipples. Emma made a noise between a moan and a scream as her back arched. Her hands were back between her legs, and Theo looked down to see his twin rubbing her clit with one hand while two fingers from the other hand slid in and out of her sex. It was one of the most erotic things he’d ever seen. Theo kissed her neck again, this time instead of his tongue, he took her skin between his teeth and bit gently. Emma’s back arched and her cries turned into screams as Theo tortured her nipples again.

“I want you inside me,” Emma finally gasped. “I want to cum feeling you between my legs.”

“What if I’m just teasing you?” Theo whispered in her ear.

“Toni and Willi showed me what happens when you go around teasing people,” Emma said. She reached back with one hand and took his cock, squeezing it gently. “You feel *so* good.”

Theo let go of one of her nipples and slid his hand firmly over her stomach and hip.

“Do it,” Emma hissed. “Touch me, Sparrow. I’ve wanted this for so long!”

Theo’s fingers slid over her bare sex, and he eased her lips apart to caress Emma’s clit. She began to stroke his cock with the same rhythm.

“You’re going to make me cum,” Theo gasped.

“I know, I want you to,” she moaned. “I want to feel it on my skin.”

There had been way too much stimulation for Theo to last very long. He tried desperately to hold back, his fingers rubbing Emma’s clit faster. He wanted to make her cum at the same time.

Both of their moans filled the room, and Theo felt Emma's stomach clench. His cock was swelling in her hand, and she squeezed tighter, moving her hand faster. Theo's hips pushed up, instinctively trying to push his cock deeper. As he began to cum, Theo pinched her clit and nipple. Emma's back arched, and she screamed, feeling his hot cum splashing on her back. Their orgasm seemed endless, and in the ecstasy, Theo tried to push into the dreamscape.

Both of them cried out as they connected, flooding each other with the sensations. The feeling pushed them deeper into the mindless ecstasy. A feedback loop was created, building the feelings higher and higher. On some deep level, Theo realized that he'd gone too far, that he had to disconnect somehow, to stop this. But the thought came too late, black spots were already filling the edges of his vision. Dimly, he could feel Emma writhing against him, crying out as the overpowering bliss washed over them. Then there was darkness.

~~~~~

They had their arms wrapped around each other in the Dreamscape, standing on the edge of the same empty clearing they'd seen before. There was some kind of figure in the middle of the clearing, but Theo couldn't make out any details, but he could tell it was studying them. Abruptly they were pushed away, and he opened his eyes. Emma was beside him, still facing away as they laid on their sides. Her hands were resting on his forearms wrapped around her waist.

"Sparrow?" she whispered.

"Tulip."

"I think what we did was dangerous somehow."

"Yeah, that thing felt like a warning, didn't it?"

She leaned against him. "As strong as that orgasm was, we nearly blew our own fuses."

"I don't want to let go of you."

She sighed happily and wriggled against him, getting comfortable. "Then don't. Just don't slip it in me while you're asleep."

He chuckled sleepily. "Don't worry, I'm completely spent."

"Me too," she murmured as they spiraled down into sleep.

~~~~~

Something jostled Theo, waking him up. Emma was getting out of bed and padding over to the window.

“Okay, same old planet or did we end up somewhere new?” she asked.

“Uhm...Jurassic Park,” Theo said, thinking of their first movie yesterday.

“Ooh, good choice,” Emma said. “I could go for a dinosaur battle.”

The window lightened, showing the same old landscape.

“Not a triceratops in sight,” Theo sighed.

Emma looked positively cheerful. “Then I guess we’ll go visiting instead. Let’s go knock on that hatch the scientists disappeared down.”

“Get back over here.”

She walked to the bed and Theo scooted over. Emma laid down and turned to face him.

“Last night...”

“Nope.” Emma leaned over and kissed him. “Nothing bad happened, you just held me while I got myself off. Nothing to worry or feel guilty about.”

He kissed her back. “I did a little more than give you a hug.”

Emma chuckled. “Yes, and I liked it.”

“I’m worried about what followed that though.”

“Well, thank mercy I didn’t give you a blowjob. But I know what you mean.”

“Can we keep the brain explosion between us for now?”

Emma kissed his nose. “I was planning to keep all of this between us. I’m not ashamed of a single thing, I just want it to be ours alone.”

Theo thought about it and nodded. “I like that idea.”

“Good. Let’s get cleaned up, I’m hungry. Then, we’ll play with some explosives.”

“What do you mean?”

Emma gave him an evil grin. “I said we were going to knock on the hatch. Let’s make it so they can’t ignore us.”

An hour later, they were sitting at a table with a dull gray box with an attached tube sitting between them.

“Ready?”

Theo nodded.

Emma gently pulled the shoulder-launched rocket partway out of the protective tube. “This actually isn’t a big deal.”

Theo snorted. “Disassembling high-explosives is always a big deal.”

Emma smiled and took out something that looked like a screwdriver with a mangled tip. “Okay, but it’s not as big a deal as it would be if we were carrying the old LAW rockets. These beauties were made to be more flexible.”

She inserted the tool in the launcher and then pushed as she turned until there was a snapping sound. Then she gently slid the rocket halfway out of the launcher. A thin wire was just visible, connecting it with the launcher. She carefully unplugged the cable and pulled the rocket the rest of the way out.

“That’s supposed to be safe the package,” she said, picking up the tool again. “Trust no one though.”

Emma used the same tool to unlock the push-and-turn screws on the rocket housing. She gingerly removed the front quarter. There were more wires that Emma unplugged. She lifted the fuse and held up and held up the remaining piece.

“Voila, a little over one kilogram of enhanced explosive.”

“That’s all of it?” he asked.

“Yeah. There’s an explosive propellant, but that’s a lot more involved to deal with. You think we need it?”

Theo thought back to the qualification he’d gone through. The composite explosive was enhanced with some kind of nanotech that interacted with the targeting systems. When they went to the heavy weapons range, he fired at an old M1 tank. There had been an almighty screech and bang followed by smoke and fire billowing from the hatches. After the exercise, they’d gone out to inspect the targets. His rocket had created a hole about ten centimeters across, neat enough that it could have been done with a giant drill.

“I think six will do the trick. How do we set them off?”

Emma pointed at the tiny socket where she’d disconnected the warhead. “Either we put five volts down this or I can reattach the fuse, and we can throw rocks at it.”

“Let’s try really hard to find a battery,” Theo said immediately.

She laughed. “The Wombat battery will work fine. Let’s get the rest of these taken apart.”

~~~~~

Emma crouched beside Theo. “Ready?”

There was a grin on Theo’s face that looked more than a little feral. “Do it.”

“Fire in the hole!” Emma chirped and touched the wires to the exposed battery.

There was a zipping noise that was immediately drowned out by the staccato concussions of the six charges. The twins flinched as a large chunk impacted the other side of the Wombat, rocking it on the suspension. The silence was broken only by a soft patter of falling debris that quickly died away.

They stood up and looked down at where the large hatch had been. In its place was a smoking crater three meters across and a couple deep. Emma whistled, impressed.

“Think you used enough dynamite, Butch?” Theo muttered.

“This ain’t the old west, and you’re no Sundance. Looks like it worked though.”

Emma walked around the Wombat to inspect the damage. The impact had bent one of the structural pieces and gouged the metal, but that was it. She frowned, the chunk of debris was roughly the size of one of the Wombat’s tires.

“Something that big should have done a lot more damage,” she said to Theo.

He knelt down to examine the piece before pushing it. Surprisingly, the big chunk of wreckage shifted easily.

“Look at the exposed side.”

Emma squatted down to look closer. Beneath the smooth, impervious surface, the material appeared to be made out of some kind of rigid foam. Theo tapped it with a knife, and the clink sounded like some kind of ceramic. They stood up and looked back down at the crater.

“There’s something weird going on here,” he said to himself.

Emma rolled her eyes. “You’re just noticing?”

“You ready to go down and see if there’s really a Neff?”

“If it gets mouthy, can we kick its ass?”

“Oh, we’re already kicking its ass,” Theo said grimly.

They rechecked their packs before shouldering them and heading down to the crater. There was a sharp smell that Emma identified as the leftovers from the explosives. At the bottom of the cavity, there was a twisted shape that had probably been the rectangular hatch. Emma tossed a softball-sized object into the darkness and checked her tablet.

“Breathable air down there at least. We’re gonna need ropes, the perv is roughly twenty meters down.”

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

The rugged little probes were supplied by the Commonwealth and had some long technical name that Terran teams ignored, calling them Peeping Toms instead. After Theo’s inadvertent connection with Emma during Stand Down, she’d taken to calling them pervs to privately yank his chain. Now the name was spreading to everyone else on the team.

“At least I didn’t call it a Theo.”

“Small mercies I guess. Let’s go get some ropes.”

Emma claimed the driver’s seat and Theo got in next to her.

“For the millionth time, it was an accident.”

“Suure it was, Sparrow.”

~~~~~

When they’d returned with the necessary gear, They moved the Wombat closer to the crater and Emma tied several ropes to the back while Theo hammered in spikes that would anchor the vehicle in place. After stepping into climbing harnesses, they carefully clambered down to the edge of the blackness. Theo cracked a couple of Cyalume sticks and tossed them into the hole. Then, leaning back against their ropes, the twins slowly rappelled down into the darkness. Theo wasn’t a big fan of rappelling, in spite of Emma doing it for fun.

“Your glowsticks are spotlighting us,” Emma muttered, trying to distract him.

Theo snorted. “In case they missed the giant hole someone blew in their roof?”

Emma glanced behind her as they carefully slid down. “We’re coming down in a big pile of debris. Looks like whatever they were using for a staircase. About ten meters to go.”

They touched down and freed themselves from the harnesses and ropes. From there, it was reasonably straightforward to climb over the lumpy pile of ropes and planks. Theo squatted down and examined the line. It was some kind of woven fiber, thick and heavy. The planks it was attached to felt like rough plastic and were just as heavy.

“This must have weighed *tons*,” he said.

Emma loaded the submachinegun she’d taken from Kawehi’s gear. “If those Gangle things were using it…”

“No way, the hatch was way too small. It’s weird they couldn’t manage anything better.”

“They? And get your gun in battery.”

He unslung the compact SMG and chambered a round. “Seems like a lot going on for just one entity.”

“How about you keep your cheerful thoughts to yourself?”

Theo laughed and switched on the light clipped to his harness. “Just trying to help. Let’s go see what Neff is up to down here.”

Theo headed away from the pile of debris, looking for a wall. Emma walked a few steps behind him, keeping watch in all directions. When they had reached the wall of the cavern, it was the same kind of grayish stone that made up the floor. Theo turned left, and they followed the wall around. They found two more of the round hatches, similar to the first one they’d found. Theo didn’t say anything, just dropped a glow stick in front of it. On the opposite side of the cavern, there was a round opening about five meters in diameter. Their lights revealed a smoothly carved tunnel that sloped downward. Theo dropped another Cyalume stock in front of it, and they continued their search around the edge of the room. The space looked like it had been partially natural before being enlarged, parts of the wall were ruler straight, and in other places, there were natural looking curves. Other than the wreckage in the middle of the room, the floor was bare.

“Let’s try the tunnel first,” Theo said when they’d made a complete circuit. “With any luck, it’s nothing, and we can come back here and see how that stuff stands up to a few seismic charges.”

Emma glanced at him and saw the feral grin again. “How’re you doing, Sparrow?” she asked as they walked across the vast open space. “Seriously.”

He shrugged. “Honestly, I’m having fun. Then I start feeling guilty about it.”

“Yeah, that’s the vibe I’m getting from you. What’s the fun part?”

There was a long pause.

“I don’t have to worry about anyone but us right now,” Theo finally said. “And I don’t have to pretend that I have a clue about what I’m doing.”

She pushed his shoulder. “You’re doing fine. And I think you’d be bored out of your mind without a hundred different things to worry about.”

“Probably. But I really do want to blow something up again.”

She put her arm around his shoulders and hugged him as they walked. “That makes me so proud of you.”

The passage was odder than it had appeared at first. The walls were smooth, covered with the same kind of material the hatches were made of and their careful footsteps echoed up and down the tunnel.

“It looks almost organic,” Emma said.

Her voice echoed as well, the reverberations turning it into nonsensical noise. It was a creepy effect, and neither of them said anything else as they slowly walked along. There was a strange sounding echo coming from ahead, an ugly susurrating chatter. Theo and Emma knelt down and checked their weapons.

“Try to make it back to the big cave?” Theo asked.

“Don’t think we’d make it. Whatever that is, it’s coming fast.”

He nodded, pulling out a handful of Cyalume sticks and cracking them before throwing them down the tunnel ahead of them. Both of them extinguished the lights on their harnesses.

“Should have kept a couple rockets,” Theo muttered to himself, pulling the grenades out of his pack.

“Should have stayed the hell on Earth,” Emma said. “I love you, kiddo.”

“Thanks, grandma. I love you too.”

They both settled into a more comfortable crouch and flicked the safeties off their weapons and waited.

“I hate this waiting,” he whispered. “Is that normal?”

Emma smiled, keeping her eyes on the darkness in front of them. “I think I’ve heard it mentioned before.”

The sound got louder and louder. The twins raised their guns, but just as it was getting deafening, the noise stopped. Other than the sound of their breath, it was silent. Then they saw some movement just outside of the pool of greenish-yellow light. They couldn’t make out any details, just that something was moving.

“We’re looking for our team, we’re not interested in fighting,” Theo shouted.

“Yeah, we kinda are,” Emma said under her breath.

The presence froze and then darted forward into the light. Theo had a quick impression of a segmented, metallic, snake-like thing as it moved. As it got closer, a hood spread out from the head.

“Here we go!” Theo yelled as the twins opened fire.

There was a screeching sound, deafening in the enclosed space. After twitching back and forth, the thing abruptly pulled back, out of the light. They waited, but it was once again silent.

“We knocked some pieces off it at least.”

Theo nodded and turned his lamp back on. “Cover me,” he said as he began to move forward.

Emma rolled her eyes but kept her gun up. The tunnel ahead of them was empty, and Theo crouched to pick up some of the fragments. They were unremarkable gray metal and just sat in his palm. Theo pulled his light off the harness and turned it over. There were strong rare-earth magnets that kept their gear from rattling and as soon as he got the magnets close to his other hand, the chunks began to shift around. When the magnet was directly over them, the fragments started dissolving. A gray mist rose toward the back of the light, and Theo quickly pulled it back. Theo moved the lamp back over the chunks, but they were still this time.

“I think it’s nanotech,” he said.

“Then we’re fucked,” Emma said, backing away.

“Not yet. Notice how it stopped moving? I think I burned it out.”

“All you need are magnets to kill it? Seems like a shitty design.”

“Not designed for combat anyway.”

Emma pulled out a bottle of water, and they shared a drink.

“And would you *stop* with the Skyrim voice?” Emma said. “You almost made me laugh in the middle of a fire-fight.”

“Sorry. Is that bad?”

She stopped and glared at him, but Theo was laughing. “I apologize, it just kind of slipped out.”

She squinted at him. “I think you’re a liar-pants-on-fire. Do you know what’s going on here?”

“Nothing definite yet. I just noticed that there doesn’t seem to be any metal down here.”

“And the outpost was here to study magnetic anomalies,” Emma said.

He nodded. “And I’ll bet you that light display was a massive magnetic field that pushed the support ship out of orbit.”

Emma reached over and rubbed his head. “My little genius.”

“That’s me. I think we just gave it something to think about. Let’s go see where that thing came from.”

There weren’t any other incidents as they followed the tunnel. Finally, they emerged into another cave. Like the first one, it looked like it had been a natural formation originally. Their lights couldn’t pick up the opposite wall, but in the darkness ahead, there were a few small lights.

Emma squinted. “What is that?”

“I am what is proper and ordained,” a voice echoed from around them. “You are improper. Leave this place, or I will destroy you.”

“I’m staying,” Theo said, walking forward. “If you could kill us, you would’ve done it already.”

There wasn’t any answer, and Theo kept moving toward the lights. Emma sighed and walked quickly to catch up.

“You are aberrations. You do not belong to the patterns. Leave this place.”

“Where are my friends?” Theo asked.

There wasn’t any reply.

“What are you?” Emma asked and got only silence in return.

Theo was moving slowly toward the lights, but it began to get harder and harder to move, and he stopped. Emma struggled to get next to him. Theo cracked his last light sticks and threw them. The plastic tubes flew easily toward the light and fell to the ground. In the sickly glow, they could see some kind of bulkhead, a gray boxy wall.

“My sister asked you a question,” Theo said.

“That is the same abomination.”

“Fuck you,” Emma suggested. “Want to see how bullets work in your shitty forcefield?”

“Memory module offline. Response canceled. Error.”

“This thing is beginning to piss me off,” Emma said. “Can we shoot it now?”

The lights dimmed, and both of them were pushed further away.

“Oops, are you low on power?” Theo called.

Something behind the machine clanged and rattled, and they were both shoved hard toward the tunnel. Both twins staggered but before they could stand upright, they were seized by something and launched up the tunnel. They braced themselves to smash against the floor, but just before they did, they were seized and thrown further. It happened over and over until they were spat out of the tunnel. The wind was knocked out of both of them as they finally landed on the floor of the cave.

“Neff Square does not appreciate conversation,” a woman’s voice said from the darkness.

“You think?” Emma wheezed.

Theo staggered to his feet. “Show yourself.”

Jill Altamira stepped into one of the pools of light cast by the chem lights. “Hello, Cosineaus.”

Emma fumbled her submachinegun up, turning the high-intensity light on. She trained it on Jill who tried to shade her eyes.

“Who are you, really?” Theo asked.

Jill held her arms up, hands open. “I am not here to harm you. I am still Gillian Altamira.”

“Bullshit,” Emma said.

Jill nodded with a small, sad, smile on her face. “Yes, I also became more when I joined with Neff-Square but I have the memories of the Jill you knew on Terra.”

“Where are my people?”

“They’re safe, Theo. We are not wasteful, it is protocol number four.”

Emma stepped forward, putting her shoulder slightly in front of Theo’s. She kept the submachinegun trained on Jill but killed the light.

“What about the scientific team that was here? What did you do to them?”

Jill spread her hands carefully. “They’re all here, you saw them with your own eyes. They’ll *always* be here. Not their bodies, we are not wasteful, and those resources were needed. My body and its attendant personality have been kept intact to facilitate communication with outsiders.”

There was a click, loud in the silence, as Emma took the safety off her weapon. Jill suddenly looked frightened and took a step back. Inwardly, Theo winced. No matter what had happened to her, that was still someone he’d been friends with. Emma’s posture looked relaxed, but he could see the rage. He was tempted to join her, to subsume himself in his own hate and fury. They

could destroy this place together. He could imagine the flames, feel the heat on his skin as they destroyed Neff...

And then the feeling was swept away by the sensation of a cool breeze on the back of his neck and the memory of woodsmoke.

Is that what you came here for?

The hair stood up on the back of Theo's neck. The thought didn't feel like his, didn't feel like it had started in his own mind. But wherever it had come from, Theo knew that vengeance wasn't part of the mission here. He was here to get his family back.

Theo put a hand on Emma's shoulder and gently pulled her back. She was confused at first, but he kept the gentle, insistent pressure on her shoulder until she was standing beside him. There was the memory of soft laughter that pushed the last of the temptation away.

"I want to talk to Jill, just her."

She smiled at him. "You *are* talking to me, Theo. We're alone as much as I can ever be."

"Why aren't you asking for help then?" Emma demanded.

"Help? I was a nobody back on Earth, but now I'm the voice of Neff Square. Someday I may be the full voice of Neff. I am happy here, I was unhappy before. So I won't pretend to be the person you knew, Theo. Could you return to the lonely beautiful, lonely boy that I met? Life flows and changes all of us."

Theo nudged Emma, and she lowered the weapon.

"Where are my people, Jill?"

"They're nearby and safe, all but one of them are in stasis awaiting integration."

"Which means what?"

"When Neff-Square came to this place, it was confused and hurt. Many of the subsystems were damaged beyond repair, and more damage was done by the arrival on this world. Neff-Square was broken away from Neff and the ability to repair itself was lost. Later, we came, and Neff saw that we could help it repair itself."

Theo frowned. "It's using people as parts?"

"Most of the processing power was lost when Neff was damaged. Our neural networks are kept intact to assist with repairs. The rest is disassembled to provide badly needed materials."

"Why can't it gather it's own materials? There's a whole planet here." Emma said.

Jill nodded toward the tunnel they'd been thrown from. "You've met part the problem. Neff and Neff-Square are not connected, resource gathering is handled by one portion of the system, planning, and implementation by another piece. The state of the systems may be simplified by saying the hands have become disconnected from the brain."

"That's why there's no metal anywhere?" Theo asked.

Jill nodded. "The damage left 'hands' with minimal computational resources and 'brain' with minimal gathering ability. Neff-Square, the hands, works on an emergency protocol gathering nearby materials. Influencing the science team used most of its power reserves and the material gathered was only of partial use to Neff's brain. When your team landed, we investigated and saw that many of you were compatible. Before Neff could formulate a plan to contact you, Neff-Square discovered the sensor you left. He realized what it meant and began gathering your team."

"But why people?" Theo asked. "There's all kinds of metal and computers at the outpost that would have been more efficient to use."

Jill shrugged. "The distance between the outpost and Neff was too great for that. Mobile entities could be coaxed closer. As entities were added to my neural circuits, I realized this error. With only this bio-entity capable of limited mobility, it is not an easily solved problem."

Theo sighed. "Yes, it was. You could have asked us, we would have helped."

"After we had taken your friend? Jill's memory gave us an idea of your own mind, and we knew that taking her, and the rest of the science personnel would trigger a protective emotion. Something that could easily become anger or a desire for revenge."

"So you took our closest friends?" Emma was incredulous. "Your mental powers are definitely lacking."

"Your use of the gathering sigil triggered Neff-Square. Neff does not bear all of the blame here."

"That's the statue we found in the machine shop?"

"Yes, it acts as a beacon to a specific...call it a wavelength."

"So what now?" Theo asked.

"Now you must leave this place. The damage you have done will take a long time to repair."

"I want my team back," Theo said. "Or there's going to be a whole shitstorm of damage in the immediate future."

Jill looked sad. "Their resources and neural assemblies will be integrated in an attempt to discover our original mission protocols. Further damage will endanger all of our existences."

“Why didn’t you take us?” Emma asked.

Jill actually looked embarrassed now. “You are not part of the universe that should exist. You taint the potential that is Neff.”

She walked toward the twins, backing them toward where their ropes hung down from the destroyed hatch. When Emma tried to get away from her, Jill moved faster than she could counter and took Emma’s shoulder in an unyielding grasp. Whatever had been done to Jill, it had made her much stronger, Emma wasn’t able to twist free.

“We get the picture,” Theo said, his voice suddenly tired. “Let her go.”

Jill moved Emma to one of the ropes before turning her loose. Theo and Emma pulled their harnesses on. Jill stood close, apparently ready to counter anything they might have tried.

“I’m sorry, Theo. Goodbye,” she said as they threaded the ropes into their ascenders.

“We’re not finished, Jill. We didn’t come here alone, and we’re not leaving alone.”

She ignored him and didn’t turn around as Theo and Emma began to pull themselves back up the ropes.

“I’ll give her a taint to consider,” Emma grunted as they pulled themselves out.

Theo had to laugh as he rolled on his back and detached himself from the line. Emma pulled off her harness, and they walked back to where the Wombat was waiting.

“Think it’ll start?” Theo asked.

“Why do you keep tempting fate?”

“Just a nervous habit I guess.”

In spite of Theo’s comment, the Wombat immediately started. Before they left, Theo took a heavily reinforced case out of the back.

“What’re you doing?” Emma asked as he went back to the hole.

“Giving Jill a radio.”

Theo tied the case to the end of one of the ropes and lowered it into the hole. There wasn’t any response. The Wombat started immediately, and Emma flipped Theo the bird.

“That’s not a very professional thing to do. Let’s head back to the outpost and pull out what we need. Jill’s probably headed that way with some Gangles.”

“Where do they fit into all this?” Emma said, accelerating quickly.

“I don’t have a clue but let’s see how fast this thing goes.”

As they came up the long slope, Theo suddenly pointed. There were several Gangles visible, right where the outpost should have been. Emma turned the ATV away from the outpost and crested the slope a safe distance away. There was a crowd of Gangles carefully taking it all apart, three long arms, mirroring the three legs, extended from the armor.

“We don’t have a real transmitter anymore,” Emma said.

“Or shelter,” Theo said as a large Gangle appeared, rolling the other Wombat toward the piles of stuff. “Our tent is in there. Wonder if they’ll leave us any food.”

Emma swore and shifted the Wombat into gear. One of the three-legged giants had noticed them and was galloping toward them. Emma floored the Wombat in the opposite direction, spongy dirt erupting into a rooster tail behind them. Theo looked over his shoulder, watching the Gangle.

“It’s getting closer,” he shouted over the screaming engine.

“Going as fast as it’ll go,” she yelled back.

Theo unstrapped and climbed back into the gun position. “Let’s see if it speaks explosion.”

He flipped open the cover with one hand, holding on with the other as Emma crested another shallow ridge. The grenade belt was next, and then the cover locked it into place. Theo looked up as he yanked on the cocking lever. The Gangle was frighteningly close and looming closer. Theo aimed at the ground in front of it and fired a shot. The thing didn’t seem impressed as it ran through the geyser of dirt the explosion kicked up.

Theo yelled wordlessly as he held the firing button down. The ground behind them was torn by explosions and grass was scythed down by buckshot. The launcher clicked empty, but the Gangle didn’t reappear through the dust and smoke. Instead, Theo saw that it had peeled off to run back toward the group.

“It’s gone,” Theo yelled to Emma.

The Wombat’s screaming engine went silent as Emma slowed.

“Did you kill it?”

Theo shook his head as he dropped back into his seat. “Didn’t come close, I have no idea how to aim that hellish contraption.”

Emma slowed and turned in a long curve and stopped. They looked at each other, faces serious.

“Theo, your friend Jill is *such* a bitch.”

She started giggling. Theo stared at her before dissolving into laughter himself.

“We’re hysterical,” Emma gasped. She began to take deep breaths.

He nodded, wiping tears off his cheeks. “Back on task.”

“We’ve got a case of OneDays,” Emma said, looking in the back. “We won’t starve for a while, but we might be praying for death after a week or so. And if anyone is going to find us, we have to stay near the outpost. Hopefully, the Gangles disappear again.”

Theo nodded, but it was obvious he was listening to something else.

“Are you doing some weird mental...”

“Shh! Do you hear that?”

Emma glared at him but listened. The sound was on the threshold of hearing; a deep thrumming noise that cycled slowly.

“For fuck’s sake,” Emma snapped. “What now?”

The sound was abruptly louder, and a dark shape flashed overhead. Then the strange sound began to fade before building again. It went back over them, much slower this time. It immediately banked and hovered overhead, the thrumming noise rattling their teeth. Theo sighed, feeling like an unlucky insect seeing its first, and last, bird. Then there was a click on his radio.

“Did someone down there order pizza?” a familiar voice asked.

Theo laughed and pulled the mic up to his mouth. “Did you remember the breadsticks this time?”

“Rule the sky!” Emma yelled as she flipped off the distant Gangles with both hands.

The sense of menace had evaporated. Instead of a hapless insect, he was a chick sheltered under a mother bird’s wings. All the same, it was still a scary looking mother bird. From underneath, the general shape was reminiscent of the old SR-71, the form of a dagger flaring out to delta wings at the rear. This ship was larger and even meaner looking.

“We’re landing to the left of the Wombat,” Rachel said in their ears.

As it landed, Theo realized the real scale of the ship. Although it looked similar to the Blackbird, it was closer in size to the Aardvark transports. At first, he’d assumed they were getting something like a large shuttle, but the ship didn’t even look like the same species.

“Why are they wasting all the fuel hovering down?” Theo asked.

“How else would she do it? Even if there were a runway, it would be in the middle of all the damned Gangles.”

He shrugged. “Helium-three isn’t easy to find is all I’m saying.”

NAME settled to the ground, and the engines shut down. A minute later, a hatch opened in the side of it, and someone jumped down to the spongy ground.

“Helllooo you beautiful woman!” Emma called, jogging to meet her.

Rachel and Emma hugged tightly when they met. Rachel hugged Theo when he caught up.

“What the hell did you do to piss those giraffes off?” Rachel asked. “When we went overhead, they all started throwing crap at the ship.”

“Those are the Gangles,” Theo said. “How far can they throw? Their arms looked to be about three meters long.”

Rachel whistled. “We were at eighty meters, and they had more than enough power to get stuff that high. Their aim wasn’t so hot though. Those things are the reason the outpost went down?”

“Kind of,” Theo said. “It’s a long story, let’s get off the surface first.”

She led them back to the small hatch she had popped out of and waited until the twins were in the ship before following them in.

“The rest of the team, are we rescuing them or recovering bodies?” Rachel asked.

“Definitely rescue,” Theo said. “We need to find out where they are first. Is there an asteroid belt in the system?”

Rachel nodded. “Pretty big one in fact.”

Theo smiled grimly. “Let’s go make a plan.”

Rachel led them forward toward the cockpit.

“What about the support carrier?” Emma asked. “They went offline, and we couldn’t re-establish contact.”

“They got hit with a series of electromagnetic waves that threw them out of orbit,” Rachel said. “They were coming through the Slingshot while we were heading in. Seeing the ship, I’m kind of surprised they made it back. It looked seriously shredded.”

Theo looked around as they walked. The decks, bulkheads, and overhead were all similar shades of matte gray that looked unfinished.

“Sorry, I’m rude,” Rachel said. “Navvi, this is Lieutenant Theo Cosineau and Warden Emma Cosineau. Theo and Emma, meet our Navigator. She’s not quite finished inside, we got a message from Teydora and left in kind of a rush.”

“She’s beautiful,” he said, looking around again. “I was kind of expecting an oversized shuttle. This is incredible.”

“Is he flattering me?” The voice came from all around them and sounded like a young woman.

“Just a little bit,” Emma said. “But he’s right, you’re a total hottie.”

“And I’m stolen property,” the ship said proudly.

Emma and Theo both looked at Rachel who shrugged.

“Yeah, there’s more than one long story that needs to be told.”

Theo just nodded, and they started walking again.

“I have become the younger adopted sibling of Kiki and Rachel both,” the young woman’s voice said as they walked. She sounded proud of this too.

“I really hope Kiki is a tranquil soul because Rachel was insane as an older sister,” Emma said.

“She is not. Before I met them, Kiki ran naked through a service bay full of Ulthira,” Navvi said as they walked through another hatch and walked out onto the bridge.

“You’re supposed to let me tell that one,” Kiki said, standing up. “It doesn’t have to be the first thing you tell people.”

“I was using it as an example, not a story.”

Rachel gave them bottles of water, and the four sat down, the pilot’s position swiveling to face the pair of chairs that grew out of the floor.

The twins looked surprised and wary but sat down.

“Long list of features to cover later,” Rachel said, seeing the looks on their faces. “There’s also eight Ulthira aboard. They’re working in the aft cargo bay at the moment.”

“How much of a hurry did you leave in?” Theo asked.

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” Rachel said. “They’re more like refugees than kidnap victims.”

“Sounds like you’ve been keeping busy,” Emma said. “The Gangles are fast as well as strong. We might want to get back in the air.”

Kiki pulled herself up the short ladder to the cockpit. Soon the ship was in a low orbit over the planet. Theo gave the pilots a summary of what had happened, but it took longer than he expected.

“What now?” Rachel asked.

“Let’s try broadcasting on the emergency band. I dropped a radio down there.”

But after twenty minutes of trying to make contact, there was still no response. The ship reported that the set was receiving, but if anyone was listening, they weren’t talking back.

“Time for a little backwoods diplomacy,” Theo said. “Let’s go find a big rock.”

~~~~~

Theo and Emma had barely been able to keep their eyes open, so Rachel had sent them to find somewhere to sleep. After several hours of searching, they were able to find several large candidates, and Rachel went to see Theo.

Both of the twins were laying on the deck of the first compartment they’d been able to find. Navvi told Rachel that she’d informed the two that they were bunking down in an equipment bay. She was a little surprised that they hadn’t gone further down the passageway to a bunk.

Rachel patted the bulkhead. “They’ve both gone through a lot over the past week, sweetie.”

“I wondered if they were ignoring me because they didn’t like me.”

Rachel paused at the hatch to the compartment. “Don’t worry about that, Navvi. They’re going to love you. The whole team will.”

“Really?”

“I promise,” Rachel said, tracing an X over her heart.

She opened the hatch and saw the two of them cuddled together on the deck. Emma had rolled up a jacket and tucked it under her head, but Theo was using one of her arms as a pillow. Rachel tapped the sole of Theo’s boot with her toe. He opened his eyes and sat up. A moment later, Emma did the same.

“We’ve got a bunch of candidate rocks,” Rachel said. “Did you want to see?”

“Yeah,” Theo said, rubbing his eyes.

“You gross little monkey!” Emma exclaimed. “You *drooled* on me!”

He got up quickly. “You can’t prove it.”

Emma grumbled and laid back down, tucking the rolled up jacket under her head.

Rachel and Theo headed forward. The passageway widened out just before the cockpit. It had been empty before, but now there was a table and several chairs. Rachel sat down at one of them, and he grabbed another. The tabletop glowed, and then a list of different orbital objects popped up.

“I want to drop as little metal as possible,” he said, studying the list.

“The probability of a stony asteroid reaching the surface is low,” Navvi said. “There is a high incidence of internal flaws.”

Theo nodded, still looking at the list. “Neff Square, the entity down there, is starved for metals. I don’t want to help it out in any way. Let’s go with the biggest of these stones. As long as something reaches the surface to show that I’m not fucking around here.”

Rachel reached out and tapped one line of text. “This one I think.”

Theo felt the ship move slightly and then accelerate.

“I will be in close proximity in forty-two minutes,” Navvi said.

Theo grinned at Rachel. “She hardly needs us, huh?”

Rachel smiled. “She’d be awfully lonely though.”

“This is correct,” the ship said. “Also, I am unauthorized to take off or land without pilot certification, release weapons, or use Slingshot gates.”

“I won’t put in for retirement then,” Theo said. “Are we carrying weapons?”

“We are not,” Navvi said. “However, I am outfitted with two wing pylon attachment points for ordnance and the cargo hold can be configured as a rudimentary bomb bay.”

“Probably a good thing, I’d be tempted to drop a nuke on our way out of here.”

“I cannot imagine going to sleep every night, wondering if I was going to wake up somewhere else,” Rachel said.

“Supposedly they are in stasis,” Theo said. “They might not even be aware they were taken.”

“Do you know how they were taken without people noticing?”

Theo shrugged. “Some kind of nano that was able to cloak itself. The machine that did it must have used a lot of power, it was fairly weak when we went down after it. It pushed us out of the cavern it was sitting in, but that was about all it could do.”

“And there’s two of them down there?”

He nodded. “At least. Neither one appreciated us showing up, but we did blow a big hole in their roof first. Still, they started it.”

Rachel laughed. “Fair enough.”

“Are there spacesuits aboard?” Theo asked.

Rachel shook her head. “Nothing like that.”

“How are we going to get this thing in the cargo bay then?”

The ship made an “ahem” noise. “I am outfitted with gravitational tow hooks. No one is required to expose themselves to vacuum. I am more advanced than other ships you have encountered previously.”

Rachel laughed. “Yeah, Theo.”

“Should I attempt to shape the object into a more streamlined shape? It would create a more accurate point of impact.”

Theo looked surprised. “Uhm, sure. I’m assuming you’re running on helium three? Are we going to need to find a helium-three source?”

“Lieutenant, I am equipped with forty-sixth generation Gyr special purpose engines using a proprietary method of micro-intermittent propulsion. The technology used is quite advanced and utilizes a wider range of fusion fuels. The efficiency of my engines will be far more than anything you’ve encountered previously.”

The ship sounded a little offended, and Rachel grinned at Theo. “Don’t talk smack about my baby.”

He laughed and put up his hands. “Sorry, sorry. The shuttles from the Alnatic run weren’t as advanced.”

“They were just pigeons where I am a hawk,” Navvi said firmly.

“I won’t forget it,” Theo promised.

~~~~~

The asteroid chosen was several meters wide and roughly ten meters long and looked more like a potato than anything else. Navvi took the rock in tow and began to shape it with a nanoparticle field. By the time they reached orbit, it had been whittled down to a pointed cylinder with shallow flutes running along the length. Rachel and Theo sat at the small conference table at an enhanced picture of the world below. Various data points were illustrated in bright letters than quickly faded out to be replaced by others.

“Are we giving Neff a chance to respond?” Rachel asked.

“Neff has had more than enough chances. Now we’re going to get its full attention.”

The location of the outpost was highlighted on the map, and Rachel zoomed in. Other than some bare soil, all traces of the outpost were gone.

“Can you set it up to impact two kilometers to the north?” Theo asked. “I want to send a message, not drop the roof on their heads. Not yet.”

“Attention: The shaping allows rudimentary guidance, but due to the irregular mass within the projectile, the circular error of the impact is approximately 1500 meters across.”

“Approved, thank you,” Theo said.

“Attention. Automatic weapons release is not available.”

“Navigator, transfer weapons control to voice launch,” Rachel said. “Cue when ready.”

“Confirmed, Senior Pilot,” Navvi said.

Theo switched the screen to an aft view as the ship began to count down from thirty seconds. When she reached zero, Rachel said “drop” three times. Nothing happened immediately, but after several seconds, he saw the cylinder of the asteroid beginning to drift away from them.

“Attention. Time to impact, thirty-six minutes.”

“Let’s head down and watch,” Theo said. “I’m pretty sure we’ll be back in radio contact shortly.”

The planet tilted beneath them and Navvi powered up her engines to head down into the atmosphere. She began to fly lazy circles, two kilometers from the surface and fifteen kilometers from the projected impact area.

“Attention, updated tracking has decreased the CEP to one hundred and ninety-six meters,” Navvi said.

“Maintain position here,” Rachel said.

“Understood. Impact in one minute, thirty-seven seconds.”

The table surface changed to a view of the impact area.

“Ten seconds,” the ship said, and a glowing arrow appeared on the screen to highlight a growing bright spot.

The dot quickly turned into a bright streak of light. There was a double sonic boom followed by a flash of light on the ground. It became a cloud of dust as the line of the impact’s shockwave raced across the grassy landscape below. Outside, they heard a sharp crack followed by a loud crackling sound.

“Splash projectile,” Navvi reported. “The internal stresses caused a structural failure 372 meters above the surface. Damage is...Attention! Radio transmissions detected.”

“See?” Theo asked. “Sometimes you just need to bang harder on the door. Let’s hear it.”

It was Jill’s voice, and she sounded worried. “Theo, can you hear me?”

“Is there a microphone or something I need to use.”

“I can isolate and transmit your voice,” Navvi said. “Just speak when you’re ready.”

“I’m here, Jill,” Theo said.

“There was some kind of explosion up there. What happened?”

“That was me. I dropped an asteroid to get your attention.”

There was a long pause. “How would that be possible? We believe you are bluffing.”

Theo took a deep breath, and Emma could see the fury building. She put a hand gently on his shoulder. Theo glanced at her and gave Emma a small smile.

“How about I drop a bigger one on top of your cave? Would that change your mind?” he asked.

“How is this possible?”

“I told you this wasn’t over. I am in a ship overhead. Feel like negotiating for my people yet?”

There was a long pause.

“They cannot all be released. The scientist’s neural networks are intact, but their bodies are already disassembled and integrated.”

“You’ve enslaved them in other words,” Theo said. “Give me my team back, *now*.”

Jill’s voice was calm. “You threaten me with destruction unless I comply. And if I comply, Neff degrades and is eventually destroyed. You said it yourself, death is preferable.”

Theo nodded. He’d hoped Neff would say it first. “Not every asteroid is made of stone.”

Another long pause.

“Meaning what?”

“Let them go, and I will deliver a nickel-iron asteroid.”

The next pause was long enough that Theo wondered if Neff had given up.

“This would be agreeable if we agree on the mass of the asteroid.”

Rachel and Emma listened as Theo and Jill negotiated. Finally, Theo agreed to drop a “down-payment” to show good faith.

Rachel checked the list of objects they had cataloged and gave Theo a thumbs up. After another trip to the belt of debris, a smallish chunk of nickel-iron was brought into the cargo bay. The ship went back and hovered **over the cavern**, dropping the metal out of the back. It punched through the roof of the cavern and disappeared. A few minutes later, a set of coordinates were transmitted.

It took Navvi less than a minute to get there. They could see people laying on the ground, but as they watched, the team began to stand up and look around. The ship began to sink toward the ground. Below them, Theo could see a lot of upturned faces. They didn’t look happy, and he realized they had no clue what this ship was.

“Why are they all naked?” Kiki asked.

“Neff probably stole anything she could use for the raw material,” Theo said.

There was a whirring as Navvi dropped her landing skids and then a bump. Rachel looked around.

“Where did Emma go?”

“What did you goddam *animals* do with all your clothes?” they heard Emma bellow from aft.

“Opening the hatch, by the sounds of it,” Theo said, getting up.

He and Rachel headed back toward the hatch as Kiki dropped down from the cockpit.

“Kiki, I can adjust the internal environment to make the lack of clothing irrelevant.”

She patted the bulkhead. “Thanks, sweetie.”

“I adjusted it during your last sleep period. You and Rachel were nude together.”

“We’ve got to work on your privacy protocols,” Kiki muttered.

“Why did she have her...”

“*Navvi!* That’s private stuff, okay?”

Kiki had stopped in the passageway. She’d gotten in the habit of talking to the overhead, and it irritated her to no end.

“So I should pretend not to notice sexual activity?”

“That’s a pretty good plan for now. And you don’t need to tell any of the new people about my tactical nudity event either.”

“But everyone that has heard the story enjoys it,” Navvi said.

Kiki rolled her eyes and resumed walking.

“They have expressed mirth each time.”

“Next time you do it, I’ll tell Rachel you’re reading porn, swear to god.”

“That is blackmail.”

Kiki nodded and kept walking. The ship didn’t say anything else.

Emma had already jumped down and was hugging Holm. There was cheering and clapping from outside as the team saw Theo inside the hatch. He jumped down, and Deidre was the first person to embrace him

“Are you showing off, saving all of us twice in a row?” she asked.

“Just trying to do my job, ma’am.”

Deidre laughed and headed for the hatch. Jonesy was the next to reach him.

“Kawehi?” Theo asked as they shook hands.

“We were hoping she was with you.”

“Motherfucker.”

Jonesy’s eyebrows went up, but Theo was already heading for the hatch.

“Get everyone on board,” Theo called over his shoulder.

“Aye, aye,” Jonesy called back. “Let’s go, you nudists! LT wants to lift *now*.”

Once they were back off the ground, Theo got Jill back on the radio.

“I’m still missing a person.”

“It was explained, that entity is being integrated. She began the process by making contact with the metal artifact.”

“And I explained that I want *all* of them back. So fuck your automatic process, or the next rock is going to be a kilometer across, and you can kiss your shitty world goodbye. If you’ve already destroyed her, I will tear you apart, piece by piece and *then* drop the planet killer on you.”

“The integration process has begun removing the connections to the voluntary nerves, but it has been halted. We fear your threats of violence.”

“They’re promises, not threats. Where is she?”

“She will be delivered when the balance of our materials arrives.”

“Wrong answer. She will be returned...”

“I’m sorry Lieutenant, the carrier signal has ceased transmission,” the Navigator said in a quiet voice.

“Theo, let’s just grab it and get Kawehi back,” Rachel said.

He rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, go ahead. I really didn’t want to hand over that much metal. Neff is going to be a lot more powerful very quickly. Can we leave a beacon with a warning about the planet?”

“That is easily accomplished, Lieutenant,” the ship assured him. “Senior Pilot, can you please assist me with planning the orbital insertion?”

Rachel glanced at Theo, expressionless. “Of course, Navvi. Do you need anything else, Theo?”

He saw her half hidden micro-expressions indicating stress and some fear. He nodded without saying anything else and headed aft. He’d figure out what he’d done wrong later.

Marisol was waiting outside of the command deck hatch for Theo.

“Mister Cosineau.”

“Chief Sargent Gutierrez, what can I do for you?”

“When you’ve got a few minutes, we could use a brief on where we stand with the mission.”

“We’re on our way back out to the asteroid belt, so we’ve got some time. The cargo hold is in use at the moment, we’ll have to squeeze into the wide passage aft.”

“Do I want to know what’s in the cargo bay?”

“An Ulthiri work crew and their shift leader.”

Her eyebrows went up. “That’s got to be an interesting story.”

“No doubt. I haven’t had time to ask about that yet. Hopefully, we’re not in the middle of some huge diplomatic incident.”

Surprisingly, Marisol just laughed. “I wouldn’t bet against it.”

Theo sat down with his team, briefing them on what had happened back after they’d been taken. When he began to explain Neff, Neff-Square, and what had happened to the scientific outpost, no one looked especially uneasy except for Vuli. When Theo was finished, the Gyr’s fur was standing completely on end. She nudged Nys and the two left the squad bay as soon as Theo was done talking. He wanted to follow them to see what was bothering them but Deidre stopped him before he could.

“After Long Axis, are we still bound for Haven?”

“We won’t show up naked and unarmed,” Theo said. “If we can get some kind of resupply at Long Axis we’ll head for Haven from there. If we have to, we’ll resupply at Echo, ”

She grinned. “*You’ve* got clothes at least.”

“Okay, I’ll go strip down. Team solidarity, right?”

Deidre laughed and Theo went to see if he could find Vuli and Nys but they saw him first.

“Friend Theo, we would like to speak with you,” Vuli said. “Privately.”

He nodded. “Navigator, what’s the best location for a private meeting?”

“If it’s acceptable, I can isolate your stateroom, sir.”

“Thank you. Uh, where’s my stateroom?”

Following the Navigator's directions, Theo opened the hatch into a small, bare compartment. As they entered, a platform seat appropriate for a Gyr grew out of the floor. A moment later, two other chairs followed.

"This vessel is very advanced," Vuli said, settling on her chair.

"Thank you, Friend Gyr. Lieutenant, I will not be monitoring voices in your quarters for the duration of your discussion."

"Thank you, Navigator. What do we need to talk about, honored Elders?"

He meant it as a joke but Nys looked uncomfortable, and Vuli puffed up slightly. Theo sighed.

"What's wrong?"

"We will start with the Ulthiri," Nys said. "Are they aboard against their will?"

"I don't know the details yet, but Rachel says they are all essentially refugees."

Nys and Vuli relaxed slightly.

"I wondered if the esteemed Senior Pilot had gone too far in leaving abruptly," Vuli said. "The next item in importance is expressing my gratitude. I owe you life debt."

"Indeed," Nys said. "And when time allows, I will express my gratitude physically. It will take several days."

Theo's face got warm. "Thank you both, but I don't think you owe me anything."

Nys leaned forward. "Theophile, you will find the others have no memory of their imprisonment. That was not the case for Vuli and me, I do not know why. Facing an eternity as a slave of Neff..." She shuddered.

"It was unthinkable," Vuli agreed. "However, I had faith my friend was coming for me."

Nys rolled her eyes and Vuli rumbled a laugh.

"No, I didn't doubt you were fighting for our freedom. Are you aware of what Neff actually is?"

"Not a clue," Theo said. "I assume you know?"

"We suspected," Vuli said. "It was confirmed when we examined your camera footage. You will not be pleased."

Nys shook her head, looking at the Gyr. "You are not helping."

Vuli made one of her powerful shrugging movements and rotated the image on the table top. It was a grainy capture of Neff-Square. She zoomed into what looked like abstract designs near the top of the box. It seemed like the letter N overlaid with a symbol that looked like an F with one too many horizontal elements.

“We think this is where the name Neff came from,” Nys said.

Theo nodded. “Makes sense. Why will this make me unhappy?”

“Because those are Founder glyphs, friend Theo,” Vuli said.

“Of course they are,” Theo said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Can you read them?”

“Yes,” Nys said. “It is only partially legible, but Neff is the remnants of an ancient terraformer.”

“Indeed,” Vuli said. “This is the same type that was employed in creating the Prefcorian colonies. I don’t understand what it was doing there or why most of the unit is missing.”

“One of life’s little mysteries,” Theo said bitterly.

Nys put her hand on his. “Lieutenant, do you see why Teydora called you lucky after Alnatic? Founder artifacts are as advanced and as deadly as their creators. When we encounter them, we are like toddlers loose in a foundry.”

“I agree with that sentiment,” Vuli said. “Anyone experienced with Founder technology would have fled that place. I am deeply impressed you forced Neff into negotiations.”

“It wasn’t well done,” Theo admitted. “I used violence and the threat of extinction to force it to bargain.”

Nys and Vuli glanced at each other. Theo could see some sort of agreement form between them.

“What aren’t you telling me here?” he asked.

“It is not important yet,” Vuli said. “When there is more time, we will discuss the matter. I swear to you that it has nothing to do with this situation.”

~~~~~

Once the massive piece of nickel-iron had impacted the surface, a final set of coordinates were transmitted. When they arrived, Kawehi was already there, laying on the ground. She was still as the ship carefully landed next to her. Theo, watching on a monitor, swore and headed for the hatch but Toni and Ian were already waiting there. The hatch was already opening as Navvi touched down. Theo two medics jumped from the hatch and sprinted toward Kawehi.

“Let them do their jobs,” Emma said quietly from behind him.

“I’m not a moron,” Theo snapped.

Even as he said it, guilt bloomed in his chest. But rather than the punch he figured he deserved, Emma put her arms around his waist and squeezed gently. Theo closed his eyes for a moment. Everything went wrong, but Tulip was still there holding him up.

Jala, the third member of the medical team, kept everyone else away from the hatch as the other two carried Kawehi back. As soon as she was inside, the team felt the gravity pulse momentarily as the Navigator flung herself back into the sky.

~~~~

The Navigator was intent on showing her pilots what she was capable of and it was only three hours after leaving G789.5 they were in range of the Slingshot gate. The Long Axis station was the closest facility with advanced medical facilities; Kawehi was alive, but just barely. She was unable to do anything more than turn her head slightly and the effort that took exhausted her. Toni had come to see Theo, reporting that none of her muscles had responded to electrical inputs, although Kawehi could feel sensations.

“I’d like to talk to her,” Theo said when Tony had finished.

“That’s lucky, she wants to talk to you as well. Come on.”

Toni had moved Kawehi out of the medical bay and into her own room. Without the supplies they were missing, the medbay was just another empty room. Theo followed her to the hatch, and Toni stopped there.

“Try not to tire her out,” Toni said.

Theo nodded and was surprised when Toni hugged him tightly and kissed his lips lightly.

“Thank you for bringing us home,” she said quietly before turning to leave him in front of Kawehi’s hatch.

Theo went into the dim compartment. Kawehi was loosely strapped into the bunk, wearing shorts and a shirt Emma had donated. Her eyes were closed, and Theo watched her chest slowly rise and fall for several breaths.

“Sparrow,” she whispered weakly.

He bent so that his ear was next to her mouth.

“Lay with me, too hard to talk,” she breathed, eyes still closed.

Theo laid on the bunk and wrapped his arms around her, putting his head beside hers.

“So proud of you,” Kawehi whispered finally. She fell asleep soon after that and Theo closed his eyes and followed her.

~~~~

Theo had his arms around her when he opened his eyes in the Dreamscape. Kawehi’s eyes were open as well, the dark eyes fixed on his. Here, her arms were wrapped tightly around him, keeping his body against hers.

“I’m so sorry, I should have figured it out sooner,” he said.

“Don’t be an idiot, you must have been magnificent,” she said, smiling.

Even in the Dreamscape, her voice was so weak. Theo felt the same clutching fear as when he’d seen her laying on the ground motionless. Kawehi shushed him and pulled him as close as she could.

“Did I miss anything exciting?”

“Same old crap, you know?” Theo replied, trying to swallow the painful lump in his throat.

Kawehi reached up, moving slowly even in the Dreamscape, and touched his face. “Stop worrying, I’ll recover or I won’t. Exhausting yourself won’t change that. Will you keep me company when things calm down?” she asked.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Theo promised her, still looking into her eyes.

Kawehi sighed happily and guided his lips against hers. Theo gently kissed her, and she smiled as she drifted back into sleep.

~~~~

As they emerged from the Long Axis Slingshot gate, the Navigator began getting warnings about a ship in the immediate area. She decelerated as directed, giving all of them a closeup of a salvage operation taking place around a battered carrier.

“What ship is that, please?” Theo asked the Navigator.

“That is hull number 6861280,” Navvi replied.

The carriers were so ubiquitous throughout the Commonwealth that most of them were unnamed, only referred to by their hull numbers.

“Holy shit, that’s her,” Theo said, zooming in.

“Who?” Emma asked.

“Hull 1280, our ride to Neff world.”

Word spread through the ship quickly and soon the team was gathered around the large viewscreens. They were mostly quiet as they watched the battered ship. Three smaller vessels were arranged around her, bathing Hull 1280 in bright lights. There were dozens of even smaller craft nearby, festooned with specialized tools and manipulators.

They had left Long Axis in the collection of boxy modules attached to a long cylinder. Then, Theo would have had a hard time picking it out from other ships. The ship he saw now was unmistakable. Long scorches were surrounding bright streaks where the hull metal had melted. One of the gravimetric crawler drives at the rear was completely gone, and the other looked severely damaged. The modules were dented and burnt in places. Several were missing completely.

“It’s fucking *bent*,” Holm whispered, awestruck.

“Their Navigator reports that the frame was twisted fifteen degrees out of true,” Navvi said. “They will salvage what they can, but that level of repair is not possible.”

“A magnetic field did all of *that*?” Betsy asked.

“The Navigator reports that the structural damage was caused by the initial magnetic waves that were somehow modulated. The rest of the damage was caused when the captain attempted to return to orbit.”

“What do you mean?” Betsy asked.

“The axis thrusters and port engine were destroyed by overload. The captain attempted to regain orbit several times.”

“Casualties?” Marisol asked quietly.

“Three of the crew were lost when their habitat was torn loose on the first attempt.”

“And he tried *again*? She only had eight crewmembers.”

“There were four attempts,” Navvi said.

Ayr put her hand in Theo’s, and he squeezed it gently.

“I’m glad that crew is prefcoria,” Betsy said.

“Racist,” several people said at once.

She rolled her eyes. “No. I’m glad they’re prefcoria because we’re going to find them on Long Axis and we’re going to buy them a lot of drinks.”

“And then we’re going to fuck their doors off!” Tessa announced.

There was a lot of laughter, but Theo was pretty sure all of them were going to be getting a lot of exercise soon. Hopefully, none of the Nyksea had been wounded....

~~~~~

Theo had dispatched one of their message drones to Teydora while they were in drive space. Somehow he wasn’t surprised that the Colonel already had a reply waiting for him at Long Axis. He had been ordered to leave Kawehi in the medical center on Long Axis and proceed to the Lantern base on Haven after equipping themselves as best they could. Happily, most of their gear had survived the attack on 1280. Most everyone had claimed to enjoy running around nude on the ship, but he noticed that they were all wearing their utility uniforms again. The Navigator returning the ship’s environmental conditions to normal had a lot to do with that.

Teydora had ordered that the Ulthira aboard his ship remain on board while they were at Long Axis. When he’d talked to Jurgen Chah, the manager had been relieved. It was assumed that the new Ulthiran regime had ordered their capture and he was happy to avoid any Ulthiri security forces. Interestingly, Theo had been instructed to consider them a valuable resource and bring them to Haven with the rest of the team.

Now, Theo was in the Long Axis medical facility, standing next to the Kawehi’s stretcher. After an intensive nano intervention, she showed a slight improvement. She was still far too weak to move on her own, but her vitals had stabilized at least.

“I’m leaving a guard with you,” Theo said quietly in Kawehi’s ear.

“I’ll get there as soon as I can,” she whispered. “Who?”

“Marisol, Georges, Jonesy, and Deirdre.”

Kawehi tried to frown. “You need them, most experienced troops.”

He nodded. “That’s why I’m sending them with my captain. Get better, or I’ll be showing up to kick your butt until you do.”

There was a slight smile and a wicked look in her eye. “What about a spanking?” she whispered.

Theo grinned. “You’ll need all your strength for that.”

“Promises,” she whispered.

He kissed her gently on the lips, and she sighed happily.

“I love you, and I will see you soon,” he said, his cheek against hers.

He felt a faint nod and straightened up. Kawehi's eyes were drifting shut, and he gently squeezed her hand. One of the Gyr medtechs politely moved him out of the way and began fussing with Kawehi's connections to the device mounted to the gurney.

Theo took the hint and left the room. Outside, Marisol and the other three were waiting. Their mottled utilities, field gear, and weapons made them as strange in the sterile white area as a chainsaw in an operating room, and Theo fully approved of the implied menace they brought. Kawehi was headed for Chanikjah Hoh as soon as she was loaded on the transport Teydora had sent. Kawehi was probably safer there than she'd be on Earth, but given his history with the Yffliad, he wanted Kawehi surrounded by her own people.

"I still don't like this," Marisol said.

"I still don't like it either," Theo said, his blue eyes fixed on her black ones. "I'd rather have the most experienced troopers with the rest of us but protecting Kawehi is more important than anything else right now."

Marisol stared at him a moment longer but finally nodded. "We'll keep her safe."

"We are transporting the patient to the departure hatch," one of the Gyr informed them.

Deirdre hugged Theo and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. "Try not to behave."

Surprising Theo, Jonesy hugged him tightly and kissed him quickly but firmly on the lips. "Until we get there anyway."

Georges gave him the Gallic kiss on each cheek but shook his hand at least.

Theo turned back to Marisol, and she hugged him tightly before giving the shocked young man a long and passionate kiss.

"I plan to thank you for saving my life," she said quietly, mock glaring at him. "It will take some time, so rest up."

He grinned at her and Marisol patted his cheek before the four of them followed Kawehi's stretcher out of the room. Emma pushed herself off the wall where she'd been waiting.

"You've got lipstick all over your face."

Theo rubbed a hand over his lips, and she laughed.

"It would be there if Marisol wore lipstick."

He shook his head. "Or Jonesy for that matter."

"Want to go see the Mad Cajun? Maybe he'll give us some real food."

Theo smiled. “Boiled insects maybe?”

Emma laughed. “If we’re lucky.”

## **Epilogue**

Thirty-six hours after they docked at Long Axis, most of the team was back aboard. Rachel and Kiki were on the command deck while the Navigator carefully maneuvered away from the mooring area. Most of the team immediately went to sleep.

No one would forget last night’s party for a long time, especially the caretakers aboard Long Axis. Theo had done his fair share of drinking, but he’d headed back to the ship with Ayr when everyone’s clothing began coming off. He didn’t have anything against an orgy, but with everyone else on Long Axis, he and Ayr had a rare opportunity for some privacy, or so they had thought.

After a long and noisy session of lovemaking in his bunk, Theo had gone to get them a bottle of water. On his way back, Ayr had met him in the squad bay, still naked. That led to a very noisy fuck on the deck right there. Neither of them remembered the Ulthiri technical staff until there was a startled whistle from the passageway. Theo called a quick apology as they jumped up and ran for his quarters but Ayr was giggling too hard to say anything.

He was still smiling about the incident when he sat down on the command deck with Nys and Vuli. They had insisted on speaking privately, but nothing could dampen his good mood.

Of course he was wrong. When they emerged again, Theo's face was somber. Emma and Ayr were playing cards in the squad bay when he came in.

Emma looked up. “You do *not* look happy.”

“What’s going on?” Ayr asked.

“We’d better get everyone together. I’m pretty sure everything just changed.”

Emma nodded and hopped up and headed toward the crew quarters to let everyone know. Ayr stood up and put her hand on Theo’s arm with a concerned look.

“How bad is it?”

He glanced over his shoulder where Vuli and Nys were coming out of the command deck passageway. Both of them kept their eyes on the deck.

“We will be in our quarters,” Vuli said as they headed for the crew compartments.

Ayr looked back at Theo. “What the hell is going on?”

“I just found out how humans, and most of the other prefcoria, fit into Commonwealth society.”