

Chapter 12

January 13, 2138

Maddy found Tam and Jimmi in the mess hall. Settling into a routine aboard ship was inevitable. There were few places to go and even fewer things to do. Gathering in the mess hall was often the highlight of the day.

Jimmi poured Maddy a cup of coffee. "So, what's new and exciting this morning?"

Maddy plopped down in the chair. "I'm planning on spending the rest of the day walking backwards everywhere I go."

"Great idea, falling down a flight of stairs would really shake things up."

"I'm that desperate for any excitement."

Just then Joha hurried in, grabbed a pot of coffee, and some cups and rushed out.

Tam sat up, "That looks like something to keep an eye on."

Raised voices came from the direction of the food line, followed by a tray sliding across the floor coming to rest at Maddy's feet. "Perhaps excitement is going to find me today."

Following the projectile's trajectory, she found the altercation from which the sounds and object originated. Bram was shielding young Greer from two military personnel. Greer usually all smiles appeared frightened. Maddy had to step in. "What's going on?"

The shorter of the two swung around to address Maddison. "You need to keep your people in line. They do nothing but sit around. By now they should be aware of shift changes and keep this food line clear for those of us doing all the work here."

Maddy took in the look of both men. The one speaking was clearly agitated. His uniform indicated he was a private and his name was Long. The other was taller and muscular, Corporal Thompson, plainly embarrassed by the situation. Dealing with the corporal would be the best approach.

“Corporal Thompson, what can I do to help here?”

Private Long stepped toward Maddy but Thompson blocked him. “Thank you, we need to get to our shift, and we were just trying to get through the line quickly is all. This man and his daughter were going rather slowly, and we tried to hurry them. It may have seemed aggressive.”

“You know what time shifts start. It is your job to get here in enough time to eat and be at your station. Is that clear?” Lieutenant Browns voice held more than authority. There was dignity and power --- she was a force on this ship.

The two men acknowledged their superior and continued to the service line, falling in behind Bram and Greer.

Maddy was grateful for the assist. “Thank you, Tempest, I appreciate the help.”

“I’m just looking after my men, see that you do the same with your people.” She was able to be helpful and hateful in the same breath.

Maddy returned to her table. Jimmi was ready to commiserate with her. “It’s getting harder and harder here. Every interaction with that woman is like having a load of bricks dumped on you.”

“You have no idea. Hey, where did Tam go?”

“She hasn’t been feeling well these last couple of days. She went back to our quarters. She’s so on edge. It’s not like her at all.”

“Maybe she should see Sophia.”

“I’ve already tried that. She’s sure it’s from being stuck in here and she’ll get used to it eventually. Maybe if you brought it up, she might listen.”

“Oh no, I’m not getting in the middle of that.”

“Chicken.”

Nikau bounded into the mess hall searching the faces for someone. Finding Maddy he jogged over to the table. Decidedly out of breath, he took a moment to fill his lungs. “Jedda sent me, you need to come right away.”

“Is she all right? Where is she?”

“It’s unbelievable, you have to see, hurry!”

Maddy chased the now running Nikau down the hall. As they followed the twists and turns, she realized where they were headed. Arriving at the llama enclosure she could see an exhausted Joha and Jedda kneeling in the hay near a shiny gangly lump of legs and neck.

Jedda motioned for Maddy to come in and take a place next to her. “Isn’t he beautiful? His mom has done a great job. It took a few hours, but she was a trooper. This little one is only a few minutes old, it’s amazing.”

Maddy watched as the new mom checked her baby and the other llamas came to inspect. The little one was kicking a leg here and shaking a head there, trying out all the new parts. Eventually he tried to get up. Failing many times but never giving in, he made it on his long lanky legs. His first steps were awkward but determined. He seemed to want to run even before he could walk. Once he had a little control over his movements, he made his way to nurse from his patient mom.

Maddy was oblivious to everything but the new life in front of her, she was startled back by a hand on her shoulder. Jedda was reaching down to help her up. “We should probably give them some time alone.”

Maddy stood up feeling the ache of having been in a kneeling position for far too long. "How long have I been watching?"

Jedda smiled, "About two hours."

Maddy was shocked. "It felt like a few minutes. This was unbelievable. I feel amazing. This is just what we need, life. Stuck in this metal can we're separated from life. Jedda, could we let the others come see the new one without stressing him or his mom?"

"I suppose we could schedule visits, supervised of course. I have three more girls that will be having their own crias soon. It could be possible to have a call list for people to come and even put it on screens for everyone to share."

"Brilliant, that's just what we all need. These beauties will let us have hope and joy back."

o o o o

Tempest entered Faxon's office. "Sir, do you have a moment?"

Without looking up he motioned the lieutenant in. "What can I do for you?"

"I just thought you should know we may have a problem."

"What kind of problem?"

"A personnel issue. I had to intervene in a verbal altercation in the mess hall between two of our men and some of the passengers. One of the men, Private Long, seemed to be far too agitated for the situation so I checked his record. It appears there is some bad blood between him and our passengers."

"What exactly do you mean by bad blood?"

“He was in charge of a unit guarding a mining operation, a sergeant at the time. The protesters were able to break in and took documents and photos that allowed them to file a lawsuit stopping the mining company from operating. The corporation demanded the military take action, Sergeant Long was the scapegoat, making him Private Long.”

“I agree that could be a problem. Any suggestions? It’s not like we can send him home.”

“I would like to meet with him and let him know I’m aware of the incident. Then I’d like to make sure his assignments minimize his passenger interactions.”

“A good plan. Please keep me in the loop. Document your contact with him. I think any disciplinary action would only exacerbate the problem.”

“Sir, yes, sir.”

“Well done lieutenant,”

o o o o

The screen showed irritation and frustration on Colonel Miller's face, betraying the calm tones he used to address Bog. “It’s been days and you’ve nothing new to tell me? How is that possible? You have the most sophisticated surveillance equipment on the planet, and all you know is they’re traveling.”

“Sir, I don’t know what else to say. They’re not in contact with anyone, not even each other as far as we can tell. We’ve been focusing on the Hopi woman. So much so that she is unfortunately aware of our scrutiny.”

“Then I think it’s time we take a more direct approach. Bring the woman in and question her. Contact me when you know something.”

The screen went dark as did Bog’s eyes. “Hart, get me that team watching the Hopi woman. I want her brought here by the end of the day. I will make her give me what I want.”

