

## Chapter 9

November 16, 2137

Zyhna's map room was nearly empty. The plans have been made, the routes laid down. Now they had to wait for the signs to converge to put strategies into action. The quiet before the storm was oddly disquieting. Emory struggled with no job to keep him busy.

Zyhna poured them both a cup of tea. "You're pacing, please sit and have tea with me."

"I feel like I should be doing something."

"Things are no longer in our hands, it is up to Gaia now. The animals have started new migration paths. The plants and trees are not seeding, going dormant. The preparations for them are in full swing. We have done our work. The information is out there for those that will listen. We'll know when the time is right, so this is a time to prepare your mind and soul for what is to come."

"How do I prepare my mind for the end of the world?"

"It is not the end that you're facing but the new beginning, that's what we've been preparing for, that's what Gaia is sharing with us. Hold tight to the things that matter, they'll carry you to the birth of the fifth world and beyond."

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Maddy tapped absently on the tablet. "So it's done, I moved Joha nearer to the Leask family so Greer can be near her 'gran'. Now is there any more room switching hijinks?"

Jimmi shouted in from the lounge on the balcony. "I got nothin'. Come out here and enjoy the weather. I wouldn't be upset if you brought a pitcher of margaritas with you."

“I have a mediation with Andrea and the frustrating Gen in an hour. It seems she was unaware four of our female llamas were pregnant, which has precipitated a copious amount of spitting. This is going to be painful.”

Jimmi lifted her glass, “A few of these would make it all easier.”

“Save some for me I’ll be back.”

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Andrea occupied herself scrolling through her tablet, effectively avoiding any interaction with Gen, who sat arms folded staring straight ahead. She was locked and loaded, ready for the next person through that door. But it wasn’t who she was expecting.

Jedda looked surprised to not find Maddy in the conference room. “Sorry, I must have the wrong room.”

Andrea stopped her from leaving. “No, I think you’re in the right place, Maddy’s on her way. She was delayed handling some problem or other. Come in and have a seat.”

Gen started in on Jedda. “Did you check on those nasty beasts? That big black one spit in the face of one of my men today. He still reeks from that vile stuff. This can’t go on.”

The door popped open and Maddy rushed in. “It’ll go on as long as you insist on sending your men in there. My people have developed a relationship with the llamas, built up the trust needed in dealing with nervous moms to be. This is a huge thing for these girls to go through and they are doing an amazing job coping. We’ll keep them and your people safe so long as we all understand Jedda here is in complete charge of their care.”

Gen jumped up stationing herself directly in Maddy’s path. “You’re not in charge and this little girl’s not in charge. I’m responsible for every item brought aboard this ship. I decide how it will be handled. Those animals are dangerous.”

Andrea, still looking at her tablet began to mete out her arbiter wisdom. "So, the problem is we have animals difficult to handle, yes?"

All three agreed, "Yes."

"They don't like any of the military personnel entering their quarters, yes?"

Again the three agreed by nodding.

"We have Jedda, and I understand Joha, who the animals like and respond well to, yes?"

Gen was escalating, "Yes, yes, yes, we've been over this."

"Then you should see the solution is simple. Jedda and Joha take care of the llamas and keep your people out of there. If you need reports on their condition every four hours, then Maddy's people will provide that. We're done here."

Maddy grabbed Jedda by the arm and pulled her from the room quickly, leaving Andrea to deal with the Gen fallout. "I have another problem I'm dealing with. I need you to get Joha and stay with the animals. I don't think Gen would try anything, but let's not risk it."

Maddy made her way to the cargo hold where a sergeant was occupied with her staff. "So please explain the message you sent. We can't have any of the supplies we had shipped here. What exactly does that mean?"

Sergeant Anna Prasana was presiding over the organization of equipment. A medium height, strong, well-built woman with an air of command, she was also a true participant in the work being done. "The majority of the supplies you have coming in are not in appropriate containers. I can't allow them on board till that is rectified. Regs are very specific on that. You can either send them back or have your people transfer everything."

"Are you serious? That's thousands of pounds of material."

“Those are the rules, ma’am.”

Maddy just turned and walked away. Another problem was waiting for her back at the hotel. She was trying to make her way there when she met Faxon in the hall.

He seemed happy to see her. “How great to run into you. I have a few issues I need to talk to you about.”

Maddy stopped dead in her tracks. “Not you too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing, just tell me what else is wrong.”

“It’s not really something wrong, just different. I’m used to having several backup systems in place for ship operations. But we’ve spent so much time, and space for that matter, reconfiguring the ship for transporting people that some of the low-level redundant systems had to be omitted. None of the primary systems, but some of the secondary ones.”

Maddy’s breathing was strained, her posture tense. “So, are you telling me we can’t go, or do you want me and my people to somehow construct these systems? What are you telling me?”

“Maddy, are you alright, you don’t look well.”

“Let’s see, first I’m late for a meeting with the joyful Gen because I have to break up a fight between your people and mine in the hotel bar. Then I get the fun of Gen. From there one of your sergeants tells me she won’t let any of my supplies onboard. Now you, Major Navarro, tell me the ship is broken. I have every right to not look well. What do you expect of.....?”

Maddy dropped her files and fell to the ground. Faxon attempted to catch her, but he was too far away. When he reached her he could see she was bleeding from a gash on her forehead, hitting the door frame hard as she went down.

Faxon attempted to contact medical personnel, but none were aboard. He knew not to move her but must keep her warm, so he searched nearby quarters for blankets. When he returned, he saw Tam and another woman running toward Maddison.

Tam maintained a calm voice, disguising her worry. "What happened?"

Both of the women took positions kneeling on either side of their fallen friend.

Faxon took a deep breath, "She and I were talking, she was very upset. She was taking short breaths and her hands were shaking. Then she just went down. I tried to get to her, but I was too slow, and she hit her head. I couldn't get hold of anyone. How did you know to come?"

Tam had to think for a minute, "We were expecting her back, when she was late, we came looking. This is Sophia, she's a heal... I mean a doctor."

Sophia was intent on examining Maddy. Her hands were deft and intensely compelling, She was unaware of anything but her patient. When she finally looked up, she told Tam to get help so they could get Maddy back to the hotel.

Faxon jumped up, "You can't move her till you stabilize her neck in case there is a break. You could paralyze her."

Sophia still not taking her eyes from Maddy, "I appreciate your concern, but I have checked, and it is quite safe to move her. Please stay out of my way."

Faxon didn't waiver, his voice shaking, "I'm not going to let you hurt her."

Tam put her hand on his shoulder making him jump, "It's alright we care for her too. She's safe with us. Just relax, take some deep breaths. You can help us get her back to the hotel."

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Jimmi was waiting with a young man, Izumi Ito. She paced frantically as he sat quietly with intense concentration. Standing, he said, "They have come."

Jimmi ran to open the door. "Through here, I have the bed ready and the things you asked for."

Sophia directed the men carrying the stretcher to ease the still unconscious Maddison on to the bed. She herded all but Izumi out of the room and shut the door. Tam sat Faxon down and pressed a cup of tea into his trembling hands.

An obviously worried Jimmi pulled Tam aside. "What happened? Is she going to be alright? What's going on with this guy?"

Tam poured some tea and sat herself down before she collapsed. "I don't know, she fainted while talking to Faxon over there. She hit her head and there was a lot of blood. He tried to help as best he could. In his desire to protect her he went after Sophia and me. I was right, he is nice."

Jimmi was still pacing back and forth when Uki appeared on the room's screen. "Is Maddy back yet? We want to tell her how sorry we are to back out so late, but it is really the best for us all. Panuk and I can fly supplies to people or people to supplies. Our planes are vital here. We need to stay."

Tam tried to get up but her legs wouldn't cooperate. "I'm sorry Maddy won't be available tonight. If you could try again tomorrow, I know she would like to talk to you herself. I'll be sure to tell her you called."

Uki thanked her and the screen went dark. Jimmi admired her partner's composure. "Well done, no need to worry anyone until we know what's happened."

Jimmi refilled Faxon's tea and encouraged him to eat something. She did the same for her partner as they waited. Tam was exhausted but tried to keep her focus. "How did you get Izumi here?"

"He arrived on his own. I was trying to find what room he was in, turned around and there he was. He came in, sat down and waited."

Just then the door to the bedroom opened. Izumi emerged, simply kept walking and left. The three just stared at each other wondering if Sophia would come out or they should go in. They didn't have to wait long for an answer as Sophia appeared.

She headed straight for the tea and poured herself a cup. As she cradled the warm mug, she saw Faxon. "Has anyone seen to you? You're very pale. Jimmi do you have any blankets? Why don't you lie down? Here let me help."

As Sophia gently pushed Faxon back on the couch, he realized how tired he was. Sophia put her hand on his forehead, he could no longer stay awake, his muscles eased and he was away.

Tam realized Sophia wanted to be able to speak freely so she soothed Faxon into unconsciousness. "Please tell us how she is."

"She should be fine. She has a concussion and a brain bleed, but Izumi and I were able to deal with that. The fall was likely caused by the fact that she was very dehydrated and probably hadn't eaten anything. With the added stresses it was too much. This can't happen again. We have to do better. We failed her. Caring for our own issues is important but we have to be more open to all. To each other.

"She'll sleep through the night, but you'll have to keep her in that bed for as long as you can. She will be weak and in pain. She'll need time to recover. I'll stop by first thing to get the major on his way and look in on Maddy. Daniel got us a room just down the hall. If anything happens, I'll know."

Tam was able to get up and show Sophia out. "I don't know how to thank you."

"I think we both know it was Gaia. She told me to come, like she told us both Maddy was in trouble. I have the honor of being her instrument, as we all do."

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Tam burst out of the bedroom and shouted to Jimmi, "It's clear that calm reasonable arguments are of no use with her. She's infuriating, more headstrong and willful than I imagined. Jimmi, you're up. See if your methods are any more successful."

Jimmi headed toward the room. "It is kind of fun to see you get this upset with someone other than me. I'll see what I can do."

She found Maddy dressed, sitting on the edge of the bed and cradling her head in her hands. "Don't you look ready to face the world."

"Don't start with me. I have work to do. From what I remember I didn't solve any of the issues I was working on, and likely jeopardized some important relationships. I've got to get back out there and do my job."

"And what exactly do you think your job is?"

"To save everyone and everything. To be responsible for lives more valuable than my own. To screw it up so badly I can never make it right. God, Jimmi, I don't know what I'm doing here. I'm making a mess of everything."

Jimmi sat on the bed, wrapped her arms around Maddy swaddling her in security and tenderness. "You're safe here, we all love you. Please stop trying to run faster than the demons hunting you child. You have to face them, fear, doubt, failure, they'll chase you forever if you let them."

Maddy let herself melt into Jimmi's arms, and the tears were set free. She surrendered to the overwhelming emotions and terror she had been denying for the last few months. As the hopelessness rushed out, she found she could breathe more deeply. She could see the possibilities again and her connection to Gaia was intensified. Hope re-emerged.

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Bog questioned Killian Hart, "What're you saying, Maddison Bear's Heart is ill? Is it serious? Is this going to affect the mission? Who's taken over for her? What more do you know?"

"Sir, I can't tell you anything more. I wanted to bring you this news as soon as I heard so you could take action. I just know that she's no longer the contact for the military. That's someone named Idal Machado, some Brazilian national eco nut."



“Get me Andrea Knight. She should have a handle on what’s happening. Find out where Bear’s Heart is holed up and get me everything you have on this Machado twit.”

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“I told you I’m fine, what I want is to know how Maddison is. But you and the rest of your coven have put up a wall so high and dense a missile couldn’t get through.” Faxon continued fiddling with the circuit board in the panel as he yelled at Sophia.

The doctor used a tranquil soothing voice in hopes of calming the major. “I can assure you Maddy is getting the care and rest she needs, she was the one that sent me here to check on you. In fact, she’d like to see you if you are willing to come for a visit.”

That took Faxon by surprise, “Yeah, yes, I would like that.”

“Come for supper at 6:00. I should warn you the coven will be dining with you.”

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Tam looked at Maddy, “You changed clothes.”

“So?”

“It’s the second time. Are you feeling okay?”

“Stop it, I haven’t seen anyone but the three of you in days. My attire in that time has been nothing but sweats. I kind of forgot how to dress, maybe it’s the head injury.”

Jimmi laughed as she ran to answer the knock on the door. “I wonder if it’s our gentleman caller? Major Navarro, please come in, you’re right on time.”

The major was wearing a beautifully embroidered black waist coat with a blindingly white shirt. His attire accentuated his mocha-colored skin, along with his broad chest and narrow hips. It was safe to assume he may have changed his clothes several times as well."

Sophia was first to welcome him. "Please join us Major Navarro. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Call me Zon and, actually, I brought a few bottles of wine. I didn't know what you ladies preferred so I got white, red and sparkling."

Jimmi quickly took the bottles from Zon. "Wonderful, that should help get this party started."

"Where's Maddy?"

A voice from the doorway, "I'm right here. It's good of you to come."

"I had to, I've been so worried about you."

"I'm fine, I hear thanks to you."

"I didn't do anything. I felt like a helpless klutz. Then these two showed up out of nowhere and saved the day. I'm so sorry."

Maddy approached the major, "You're sorry. If I remember right, I was verbally assaulting you at the time."

"I'm sure I deserved it. You were just..."

Jimmi cut the major short. "OK, we get it, you're both sorry, you're both nervous about seeing the other, and you are both happy the other is fine. Now I've made a wonderful meal that's getting cold. Let's eat!"

Jimmi knew how to get the issues out of the way so the two could stop dancing around each other and get back to the relationship they had before the incident. It would be important for the mission as well as the welfare of the duo.

Zon poured the wine. "Will you be coming back to work?"

"I will, when Sophia clears me."

Sophia finished chewing, "You'll have a part of that Zon. Our Maddison is not good at taking it easy. If she goes back in, we will be more attentive, but we'll need someone on your side to keep an eye on how she's doing."

Maddy was surprised by this. "Wait, wait, wait, I don't need a babysitter. I can take care of myself."

Zon looked directly at Jimmi and winked, "Stubborn thing, isn't she?"

Jimmi sounded put upon. "More than you'll ever know. She even got Tam to lose her temper, and all we were trying to do was take care of her."

Zon followed Jimmi's lead. "It's so challenging when they're ungrateful."

Maddy poured herself more wine. "I thought it was hard dealing with three bossy overprotective women. Now there are four of you."

Smiles and clinking glasses encircled the table.