

Chapter 16

January 30, 2138

It took Maddy two days to escape the vigilant eye of Dr. De Palo. She could finally supervise the restoration of her quarters, and as the soldiers brought in her possessions, she directed their placement. Gen was in charge of the men. For the most part she kept her distance from Maddy. When everything had been returned, Gen approached her. "Bear's Heart, I hope there are no hard feelings."

Maddy smiled. "I can assure you that all my feelings for you are easy, nothing hard about it."

Gen couldn't let that one go. "You certainly played the part of traitor perfectly."

Maddy took a deep breath, ready to counter Gen's verbal punch, when Corporal Thompson stepped in. "I'm sorry to interrupt, ma'am, but I have to talk to Ms. Bear's Heart."

Gen turned and walked away, satisfied with getting the last word.

Maddy looked at Thompson, "That was suspiciously well-timed, corporal."

"Sam, ma'am, my name is Sam. I want to apologize for how I treated you. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Yes, you did, Sam, and you were right to do so at the time. I was a threat to you, the safety of your crew and your ship. You were doing your job."

"Thank you for saying that, but looking back I don't think I was. My job is always to protect the innocent, not let my feelings take over or make judgments without knowing what's happening. I'm sorry, ma'am."

"I appreciate that, Sam. You're a good guy. It may not have been the best way to be introduced, but I'm glad I got to know you."

"Likewise."

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Sergeant Prasana was finishing her report to Faxon. "We found several more fire systems that were not connected. The diagnostics on the computer systems are going slowly. There is what my techs are calling, a wild goose program. It identifies a problem, we go in to fix it, it disappears and then moves somewhere else. It's driving them all crazy."

Faxon was not pleased with this news. He has slowed the ship to a crawl trying to find whatever trap Miller left. "How are you doing with the landing systems?"

"I've got four teams on them. I could assign more but that would mean using people less familiar with those areas. They may be looking right at a problem and not see it."

"You're right stay with those four. I want updates whenever you're able. Tell me, sergeant, if you were trying to sabotage the ship how would you do it?"

"Do you really want me to answer that, sir?"

"I do."

"There are so many ways. It depends how villainous you are. You could use tiny almost imperceptible explosive devices in the thruster systems. It really wouldn't take much. That would effectively destroy the ship as it's trying to land, ending in a fiery explosion. Then there's the life support system. There are hundreds of ways to sabotage that so we would all die a slow horrible death."

"This is a side of you I have never seen before, should I be worried?"

"Sir, when you told me what I was searching for I had to use the mindset of someone, what should I say, someone not very nice."

"Understood, sergeant."

"Anything else you can think of?"

"Absolutely the best way would be to access the tertiary command program."

"Tertiary command?"

"Yes, sir. You can access it in the engine room."

"I've never heard of that. How do you know about this and I don't?"

"Very few people do. This is the first ship we put it on. I worked on the design. It's intended as a backup for the backup. But it can be used to take over other systems. If you don't know what you're looking for it's all but impossible to find, so they didn't put much security on it."

"How would you use it to sabotage the ship?"

"Tell it to turn off the engines, the gravity control, the life support, pretty much anything you want."

“You could just use the primary or secondary to get back control.”

“Not possible, once you activate the tertiary system, the primary and secondary won’t respond.”

“Well, that’ll keep you up nights.”

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Sophia found Dr. De Palo in his office in the med bay. “Doctor, do you have a minute?”

“Sure, Dr. Bentham, come in come in.”

“Please call me Sophia.”

“You can call me Ethan. What can I do for you?”

“I think you know. There are not many people that witness what you did without asking any questions.”

“I would imagine that’s true. I, however, have seen it before, many times.”

“You’re going to have to explain that Ethan.”

“My grandmother was a healer. She took care of the people in her town. I loved helping her.”

“It sounds like there is more to the story Ethan.”

“There is. You, of course, are aware that even a healer has limitations. A corrupt minister heard about my grandmother’s abilities. He brought her in to cure his lung cancer. When she couldn’t, he put her in prison where she died of pneumonia.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you, she was a good woman.”

“Now I understand your ease with what I do.”

“I want to thank you for trusting me. That was a bit of a risk.”

“It was a chance I had to take. I’m glad I did, but as you know not everyone would be as accepting of what I do.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

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Maddy knocked on the door. The response was a bit of a surprise, an extremely energetic chorus of barking. When the door finally opened, the noisy creature scampered down the hall.

Jimmi just watched the beast disappear around a corner. "Looks like the dog got out."

"Since when do you have a dog?"

"Just a visitor, she belongs to Ethan De Palo. The doctor brought her when he checked on Tam and now we get daily, drop-ins. Come on in, nearly everyone is here."

"How is Tam?"

"Get in and see for yourself."

The room was quite crowded. Jedda and Nikau were conversing with Joha. Idal and Zico were pouring drinks. Andrea was talking with Tam. Jimmi ran to answer the door. Sophia was the last to arrive.

Tam addressed the room. "I want to thank you all for coming. The last few days have been challenging for us all. I hoped gathering together we could help revitalize each other. Now that we're here, I can feel the power filling this room. When we started this journey, I have to admit I was frightened, seriously scared --- leaving everything we know and love behind."

Jimmi cleared her throat.

"Sorry, *nearly* everything we love behind. The belief life is fleeting and fragile was a force driving me to go and at the same time making me terrified to leave. When we lost Isa, I was shaken. My fears were unchecked, and they began choking me. Then, I thought by chance, Zyhna called and we talked. And she called again, and we talked. And again. It was not by chance. She knew I was struggling. With what seemed like casual conversation she helped me see life isn't fragile. It's a hard ass fight every day, a truly great battle that we get to be a part of. It's not a burden but an honor. How amazing is that?"

"When she put herself in harm's way, she felt no fear. When I lost her, it was like a great clap of thunder. I sensed it in every part of my being. She released her power to me, her joy, her hope, her strength. And tonight, I get to share that with all of you."

Tam raised her one good hand in the air and called out Zyhna's name. The rest of the room followed suit. A powerful light enveloped the room, rising in intensity till it seemed to explode like fireworks, raining color down on those present. As hands were lowered the smiles, tears and hugs revealed the emotional enormity of the event.

Maddison's comm showed Faxon was calling. "Maddy, what's going on down there?"

"What do you mean?"

"I thought you were at a wake."

"I am. Why?"

"Sensors showed something like an explosion in that cabin."

Maddy hesitated. "A wake for my people is a little different. Yeah, that's it."

"How so, what did you do?"

Maddy offered an explanation rather sheepishly. "Fireworks?"

"Are you serious? You know we are on a ship, a ship in space. You are aware of that, right?"

"Sorry, I'll ask them to rein it in. Will I see you later?"

"Yes, I have your box, I'd like to get that back to you."

"Thanks, I'd like to have it with me again. Why don't you stop by in a couple of hours? I should be there by then."

"I'll see you, no more explosions please."

"Not any big ones."

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Sergeant Anna Prasana opened the door, revealing the pacing and grimacing Major Faxon Navarro.

"Major? Is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I just had a thought, and I wanted your opinion."

"Sir, you're aware that it's four o'clock in the morning."

"Wow, sorry, I didn't realize. I couldn't sleep I had this nagging thought. Go back to bed. I'll see you later."

“No, come in, sir. You can make some coffee while I get dressed.”

Entering the cabin Faxon ran into the sergeant’s surly teenage daughter Alexis. “What the hell, mom, it’s four o’clock!”

Anna turned to Faxon, “Sir, do you want to handle that?”

Upon seeing the ruggedly handsome major, Alexis' attitude changed. “Major Navarro, I didn’t see you. Is there an emergency?”

The look of infatuation on the young girl's face was not new for Faxon. He had become quite adept at portraying the aloof major character. “You must be Alexis. The sergeant has told me about you. Perhaps you could assist us. We have some ship’s business to discuss. We will need a place to work and perhaps some coffee.”

“Yes, sir, I can do that.”

Anna smiled at Faxon as the sergeant disappeared into her room.

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Alexis was busy making a third pot of coffee. Anna scrolled through page after page of ship schematics. “So you think that the wild goose program and the suppression systems are all to keep us from seeing the big problem.”

“That’s how I’d do it.”

“Now you’re thinking like a villain. Okay here’s the section you’re talking about.”

Anna isolated a portion of the diagram, threw it up on the big screen and enlarged it. She got up and stood staring at it, arms folded, hand on her chin, not moving. Several minutes passed.

Alexis whispered to Faxon. “This could take a while, her record is 34 minutes.”

Faxon stood up looking majorly. “Could I impose on you, Alexis, to go to the mess hall and bring back some food?”

“Sir, yes sir.”

Faxon sat back down, very pleased with himself, when Anna broke her silence. “This is unbelievably bad. Very, very bad. If what you said about this junction is correct, the tertiary system will fail. Activating it will be catastrophic.”

“So, not good then.”

"I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean it to come out that way."

"If we're right, there's no other way to say it. We're in serious trouble."

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Joha took inventory of the rations for the llamas. He was very concerned. They should have arrived at the planet by now. Food and bedding supplies were running thin. There was no way to short the moms on nutrition as they were nursing their crias.

The supplies for the beasties were not the only concern aboard ship. There was a generous amount of food brought aboard, but there was still the return trip to consider. The selections in the mess hall have dwindled significantly.

Jedda arrived to check on the newest addition to the herd. "How is everyone doing?"

Joha did not conceal his concern. "I'm doing my best to gather any of the food they spill. The males are really getting shorted to make sure the moms have what they need."

Jedda shared his concern. "Not knowing is making it even harder. We just have to keep things tight till they tell us how long it will be. I've been keeping a close eye on their body condition, and we are not in trouble yet. But landing and releasing them on a new planet will be stressful. We can't have them in a weakened condition. I wish there was more we could do for them."

"You're doing more than anyone could ever expect. I think you are taking better care of them than yourself. You look exhausted."

"I am feeling a bit tired. Do you think you could give me a hand examining the new little girl?"

"Happy to. I'll get mom under control while you move the little one into the small enclosure."

As they walked into the pen Jedda's knees seemed to give way. She grabbed for the gate but caught her hand on the latch, ripping a large gash on her palm. Joha snagged a towel to stop the bleeding as he called Sophia."

Jedda protested. "I'm fine, it's not that bad. I don't need to bother Sophia."

Joha was having none of it. "You're not fine, you were going down, you look horrible and you are bleeding through the towel. You will sit there and do as you are told, young lady."

Sophia was there in a matter of minutes. She set her bag down, opened the gate, sat on the floor next to Jedda and looked at the blood-soaked towel. "How did this happen?"

“Just clumsy, I guess.”

Joha corrected that. “No, her knees gave way, she reached out to catch herself and sliced her hand. She’s been exhausted for days.”

This information caused Sophia concern. She reached out to take Jedda's hand. As she touched the young woman, Sophia visibly relaxed as a smile spread across her face. “How long have you been so tired?”

“The last few weeks, but it’s been so crazy. It’s nothing.”

“Did you have breakfast?”

“I always do the llamas before I eat.”

“Joha, would you go to the mess hall and get some juice? That would be a big help.”

“Be right back.”

As Sophia held Jedda’s hand the bleeding slowed, and she was able to bandage the now minor cut. “You’re going to have to change your ways. Get proper nutrition and plenty of sleep, your needs come first. And I’m taking you to see Dr. De Palo right away.”

“Why, I’m fine.”

“You’re also pregnant.”

It took several moments for the words to sink in. Then her eyes filled with tears and she embraced Sophia. “I have to call Nikau.”

“Have daddy meet us at the med bay.”