Part 12

01/14/2022

Halerin conducted the move to a lower orbit himself. Not that the move required much action, the navigation computer handled that. As always, he had to squelch the urge to handle the controls manually. Starships the size of Deidre weren’t built for actual human control. They were too big for a human pilot to have a feel for, so seat of the pants flying couldn’t be exercised, and anyway, the ship didn’t have manual flight controls. It was never intended for any maneuvering other than avoiding other objects in space, and even that was handled automatically, except in rare situations. Halerin, logged out of the navigation console where he had issued one command, for a lower orbit.

He walked back to his command chair and sat down. “That was exhausting. Any other touch screens need my attention?”

The other crew members on the bridge, with the exception of Yelaa, ignored him. The communications officer, who knew him as well as anyone on the crew, rolled her eyes back briefly and shook her head. “Feeling useless again sir?”

“A feeling that’s getting stronger every day we’re in orbit here. Wally, rerun every scan. Maybe we’re close enough to see something new.”

The lanky first officer was already engrossed in his work, sporting virtual reality googles over his face to enhance his interface with the ship’s senses. They allowed someone to become immersed in the texture of the ship’s world. It was the fastest way to find out what was going on. Halerin hated relying on them but didn’t dissuade his crew from using them. They had their place. He waited patiently for the man to answer knowing that asking again wouldn’t result in a quicker response. Wally was known for his thoroughness, it made him and idea first officer, but would most likely preclude him from ever seeking captain’s status for himself. Wally was a good aide, but he wasn’t a leader, had never wanted the responsibility.

Finally, “Taking longer than I figured boss. There’s a lot of active energy flows in the upper atmosphere, more than there should be. I’m guessing it has something to do with whatever forces the alien tech is using to control the weather, and the deception fields that hide the lake. And before you ask, I still have no clue how it’s being done. Give me some time, there’s a whole lot of new data to ruminate over.”

“Take your time,” said Halerin, “just be quick about it,” He turned his attention to Yelaa, eye glued to here displays. “Yelaa, please tell me we’re better hidden.”

“Not from anything deep inside the system we’re not, but from outside, no one should see us. Maybe a war ship could see us, but I think they’d have to study on it.”

“They wouldn’t bother,” said the captain dryly. “They’d just come in and look. That way they wouldn’t have to work to hard to burn us.”

“That’s a cheerful thought. Do you really think the Clarigton’s would just shoot?” the girl asked, apprehension tightening her usual smile.

Halerin regretted scaring her. “No, at least I hope not. But out here with no witnesses would be a convenient spot for them. Don’t worry, I don’t think any captain is going to shoulder the weight of that without direct orders.” He wasn’t sure if that was true. He really didn’t trust his old friend Bud Clare, the leader of the Clarigton Group.

She didn’t look relieved and Halerin felt another layer of regret looking and them stopped his thoughts from going in that direction. It might be a good idea to give the crew something else to worry about. The status quo thinking wasn’t getting them anywhere.

He hit the intercom plate on his chair arm. “Sally Merriam, this is Halerin, meet me in the shuttle bay.” After getting a response he left his seat. He ignored Yelaa’s questioning look as he left the bridge.

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Josh helped as much as he could, but by the time they reached the corridor outside the lounge-room his strength level was below his knees and sinking. Susan was guarding the door and he reacted quickly when she saw them supporting Josh, readying the beam rifle she had gotten from Jerimy and glancing wildly past their shoulders for pursuers.

Mikiu quickly said, “relax. No one’s chasing us. At the pace we’re going they would have caught us by now.”

She lowered the weapon fractionally. “Is he wounded?”  
 Mikiu shook his head, “just exhausted, I think. Another tussle with the mind-link rods. This time with a whale.”  
 They left the girl speechless as they entered the lounge-room, where Dr. Lovis led them to an open spot on the couch. Susan was torn between hearing the story and standing guard. She finally decided that the story would sound just as good second hand and moved back to her self-appointed post. She would be able to hear parts of it anyway.

As soon as they had Josh stretched out Dr. Lovis shoved them aside and went to work. She checked his breathing and heartrate quickly the old-fashioned way, with her hands, before turning on her scanner. After a minute her shoulders relaxed, and she turned to ask questions.

Jerimy and Mikiu, who had both collapsed on another part of the couch held up their hands to ward off questions. Jerimy, glanced at Mikiu’s tired face and decided he had just enough energy left to tell the story. Rising to his feet he walked to the door and called Susan in. “Watch from the inside the door. I’m too tired to tell this story more than once. Glancing around everyone but Josh and Jameson were awake. Even Wendy had her eyes open and it looked to Jerimy like she was feeling better. The doctor’s ministrations were beginning to work.

He asked the doctor a question. “Any chance of waking Jameson?”

Seeing Dr. Lovis shake her head he turned to the others. “Okay, here is the story. It’s a short one since the only one who really knows what happened is Josh, and it looks like he’ll be out for a few hours.”

Dr. Lovis, who was still studying her sensors studying Josh said. “More than a few hours. His body is a physical wreck, all his systems are out of whack. I’m giving him a time limited tranquilizer shot to keep him from waking up for at least twelve-hours.”

Wendy, her voice steady but still weak, asked. “You can still wake him in an emergency though, right?”

The dark-haired woman held up a silver injector. “I’m leaving the counter agent here beside him. Ten seconds after injection this stuff will have him ready to fight, or run. Which ever the case may be.”

Jerimy nodded and proceeded to tell the story of the mind-link room. Like he had said it wasn’t a long story and consisted mainly of he and Mikiu watching Josh pantomime a variety of things, none of which they had understood. He shrugged his shoulders when he finished and took his seat while motioning Susan back into the hall.

Wendy sighed and glanced at Josh, a worried look on her face. “He shouldn’t have done that, not by himself. It’s bad enough with someone you know. I can’t imagine linking with a stranger and one of a different species at that.”

Jerimy nodded agreement. “We should have stopped him but both of us were busy staring at the whale. Is that what we should call it?” He directed the question to Mikiu who sat slumped back on the couch but with his eye’s stubbornly open.

“Good a name as any. At least until Josh wakes up and tells what to call it. I assume it gave a name of some sort. Course we don’t have any idea what level of communication took place, if any.”

Wendy was sure that it had. “I don’t know how much was said, so to speak, but having experienced it I can tell you that some thoughts were interchanged. At least that’s how it worked with me and Josh. There was no need for words.”

“The system is obviously setup for diverse species, hence minds, to communicate,” said Mikiu. “Anyway, something took all the starch out of the boy.”

Jerimy was ready to move on. “Okay, we agree that he talked, or something to our new friend the whale. We’ll find out what the topic of discussion was in twelve hours. In the meantime we need do something.”

Mikiu raised a tired eyebrow. “You want to find where those mind-link rods come down?”

“Yes. I think they must come down to this level. I would imagine there’s a mind-link room you haven’t found yet.”

Mikiu let the layout of the lower-level swirl in his thoughts and tried to overlay the fifth level diagram on top of it. It was difficult with nothing but personal observation to rely on. “The elevator shaft isn’t that wide. If those rods come straight down, they have to be right off of the elevator room itself. None of the rooms we’ve found so far have opened off a main corridor.”

“Additional doors off the elevator room?” asked Jerimy.

“That would be my guess. We never tried to open any doors there. Just followed the open corridors. Never thought to look for others.” Mikiu was slowly recovering his strength. He knew that Jerimy intended to keep exploring and he wasn’t going to be left out. “Mind if we eat first?”

The engineer thought that was a good idea. Getting Josh back here had taken a toll on him too. He had planned on perhaps taking Susan but if Mikiu was up to it he welcomed the science officers’ company and expertise. “Wasn’t planning it any other way. I’m out of fuel too.”

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Now that the decision had been made Jarwan saw no reason to keep it secret. The warehouse room was large, but no so large that he couldn’t be heard throughout if he raised his voice. He stood on one of the ubiquitous cargo containers, near the center of the room, gestured for quiet, and in as loud a voice as he could manage without shouting explained why they were moving, where they were moving too, and when they were doing so. After waiting for the expected chatter of consternation he spoke again. “I know trudging through a howling storm appeals to no one, especially me. But the fact is that we either do this, or we quite possibly start carving a gravestone because this will be our burial site.

Another wave of noise occurred as everyone conferred with their neighbor. When he sensed that a consensus of acceptance had been reached, at least for the time being, he wore out the rest of his voice assigning people to be in charge of various tasks. Dunzin was in charge of the mechanics involved. Denise was given the task of making sure they carried necessary medical supplies and equipment. Michael Tosition, handicapped by his injury, was assigned to keep track of what they were taking and how they were going to carry it. That raised a problem to be addressed and after finishing handing out assignments, Jarwan, Micael, Dunzin, and the doctor met over yet more coffee.

Micael was as appalled at the idea of the move as anyone. However, he welcomed the chance to be a part of it, to contribute once again. “Keeping a running inventory of what’s going with us is easy. I just write down everything the rest of you tell me. But I need to know, and know now, what we have to haul stuff in. Otherwise I’m going to veto anything that can’t be carried by the three carry-bots we have down here.”

“Meaning I have to dig a big enough tunnel to get them out of here,” said Dunzin. It was something he had already accepted as necessary.

“Sorry, but in any case, we’re going to need those three, even if the cargo-haulers are working.”

Denise asked the question that Jarwan didn’t want to answer. “How soon can we find out the condition of the haulers. Can we just dig enough to let one man through?”

Dunzin had been considering that. “If this stuff weren’t so wet that might be an option. As it is we have to move enough sludge to make a wide enough path for everyone and everything to fit. I’m not even sure how to do it yet. It would be really helpful to know how things look from the top.”

She looked confused, “but how are we going to do that if we can’t get someone through. I know we don’t have any cameras up there.”

“Another obvious oversight in our planning,” said Jarwan. He studied Dunzin’s face to see if he had arrived at the same answer he had. His second in command gave a slight nod, and then a slight bow telling him to go on.

Jarwan turned to face the doctor squarely. “There is a way to get someone to the surface.”

“How?” she had a wary look on her face. She could sense there was something they didn’t want say to her.”

Jarwan went on, “The only way to the surface, other than digging our way out, is through a ventilation shaft. We’ve got three of them and each one has maintenance access.”

“So what’s the problem, send someone.”

“That’s where it gets a little complicated,” said Dunzin. He decided to spare the strain on his friend’s relationship. “Once you get to the top of the maintenance access the only way to actually go the final few meters to the surface is through the air shaft itself.”  
 “What is it that you guys are afraid to tell me?” she asked, a sudden suspicion filling her.

Jarwan cut back in, “thanks Dunzin. But I’ll ask her. Denise, the access into the air shaft was never meant to accommodate a person. It’s not big enough for an adult to crawl through.”

The doctor’s hand went to her mouth as she realized where this was going. “You want to send Polly. She’s a child, how could you even consider it.”

“We don’t have a choice. She’s the oldest person we’ve got that can get into the shaft and reach the top. Look, we’ll do everything we can to keep her safe. We can keep a safety line on her and keep tension on it to help her get around. We need to know what it looks like up there. All she has to do is take some pictures.”

“What about the cargo haulers. She can’t reach them tethered to a line?”

“We can make a judgement on them by what the garage looks like.”

The doctor stared at him, hard, and then turned an equally intense gaze on Dunzin. Then she stalked away to the corner with the coffee machine. There she stood, staring into nothing.

Jarwan lowered his head and started after her, Dunzin’s hand stopped him. “Let her alone for a moment. Give her a chance to think this through.”

“I know. I just hate feeling useless. The colony leader part of me wants to convince her to put her child in danger for the greater good. The part of me that wants her, and her family, is having the same internal argument that she’s having. I don’t like sending people to do jobs that I wouldn’t want someone to send me to do. I especially don’t like it when I care about those people.”

Dunzin was quiet for a second before deciding to come from another direction. “Whether you like it is beside the question. Polly is the only one who can do the job. Don’t rob her of the chance to do what she can for the colony. She goes out of her way to be useful. This is a chance for her to be really useful.”

“Or a chance for her to get really dead.” Jarwan had a sudden image of Danny Clinger’s mud-covered torso. For a brief second the guilt return and slap him down. He felt his shoulders sag but recovered quickly. Now was not the time for a trip down that path. Maybe when the colony was safe somewhere he would allow himself the luxury to grieve fully.

Denise was back. Her face was frozen in an expression that Jarwan couldn’t read, and her voice was eerily restrained. “You’re both right. If she can fit she should be the one. But I’ll do the asking. I don’t need either of you making her feel guilty.”

Jarwan kept his own voice low key. “Of course. It’s her decision. Dunzin can get people working on digging us out of here. That’s going to have to be done anyway.”

Dunzin raised a hand and said, “And that’s the truth. Either way we have to dig. I’ll let you talk this over while I go figure out what pour slobs get to wade in the muck.” He strode away but stopped after a few feet and turned to look at them. “And just to be clear, everybody’s going make friends with a shovel handle before we see daylight. That includes you two. I’m declaring chivalry dead, at least for the time being.”

The two watched as he continued on to the ramp exit. Denise looked him in the face, and he could see her features soften, just a little. “What I just said, about telling Polly by myself. I guess it would … What I mean is … Oh hell. I would like it if you were with me, but I still think I should do the talking.”

Jarwan felt laughter escape his mouth and quickly tried to explain. “Sorry, don’t know where that came from. Yes. Yes, I want to be there, and I know what we’re asking her to do. It’s a lot of responsibility for a twelve-year old. But as Dunzin rightly pointed out, it’s her decision and we shouldn’t rob her of that. I think she’ll jump at the chance.”

“That’s what worries me. She and Sammy are both in the kitchen area doing some shoveling of their own, with food.”

Jarwan followed her gaze to the pair sitting at one of the few tables that had been set up. Most of the colonist were eating where they slept, it was easier. “Might as well get it over with. Sammy can be on the safety line crew.”

Her voice rose a little. “What if something does happen. I wouldn’t want him to feel responsible.”

“And how’s he going to feel if something happens, and he wasn’t involved. That’s a bad scenario either way you play it. But let’s not even think about something happening. If we’re scared, they’ll be scared, and that’s not going to help.”

She nodded, sighed, and took his hand and headed towards her children. She kept holding it during the entire explanation. She wanted them to know.

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Three hours later they were standing by the base of ventilator shaft number one. Jarwan would have liked more time to prepare but they needed to get the girl outside in daylight. No one was sure how much visibility she would have with the storm, but Jarwan wasn’t going to handicap her further with darkness. Waiting until tomorrow was also not an option. They were at the point where every second they stayed underground became another potential nail in coffin. That was what Jarwan had mentally began classifying the warehouse as.

Jarwan would have liked to have put the girl in one of the heavy-duty environmental suits they kept for working in harsh conditions. Her size, which made her the right person for the job, also made the use of the heavier suit impossible. They didn’t have one in a child’s size. Again, he thought, poor planning.

That left them with few options. They couldn’t add a second layer, like a coat, because it would prevent her from sliding through the narrow opening between the maintenance shaft and the air shaft. The best they could do was attach a pack to the tether line she was trailing. Dunzin had opted for the lightest line possible that he felt strong enough for the purpose. By keeping tension on the line they hoped to make it easier for the girl to keep her feet in the severe winds. Once clear of the airshaft the idea was, she could remove the wind parka from the pack for additional protection. The pack also included a powerful flashlight and a high-powered handheld radio if the service communicator on her wrist was insufficient for the conditions.

He thought about kneeling, but the physical exertions of the past days made that a painful thought. Instead he sat on a cargo container so he could look Polly Bitterlly in the eyes. Eyes that were wide open in a face that exhibited excitement and fear in equal measure.

“Dunzin has explained everything to you. Is there anything that you don’t understand, anything at all?”

The girl’s voice was strong and carried both the excitement and fear. “I go up the maintenance shaft. Slid my way through to the air shaft and climb to the top. I have to open the access panel there and climb out. I have to make sure and close that again whenever I come back. He made me repeat that a lot.”

Jarwan laughed. “That is sort of important. If it’s open the air shaft will simply fill up with dirt. Okay, next?”

“Make sure the radio works. If it doesn’t don’t go very far. Take pictures of the ramp entrance and the garage. Three tugs on the rope if I want you to pull.”

“And three more if you want us to stop. That’s important if you just need a little help backing up for something.”

The girl smiled nervously. “I think I’ve remember everything.”

“Good. Now, the most important thing. Do not take any chances. The most important thing is for you to be safe.” He glanced around. The others were waiting. He changed his voice to a whisper. “I don’t want your mother mad at me. So you make sure you keep safe.”

The tension on her face gave way to a smile. “I know. You like my mom. She likes you too.”

“Hey, I like you too. Just be careful. Okay?”

“Got it”

He got up and looked at the others. “Let’s get this dog and pony show started. Everything ready?"

“I’ve got a hundred meters of cable spooled. Thirty of that she’s going to use up getting outside. That leaves her seventy meters, way more than she needs,” said Dunzin flatly. The man was too tired to be excited or scared.

Her mother simply said. “We all double checked her equipment. She knows I love her. Let’s get this over with so I can have a good cry.”

Her brother just nodded. He’d already had someone die because of the weather. He wasn’t going to show any misgivings. He didn’t want to break down in front of others.

The entrance to the maintenance shaft was unimpressive. Like many things in the barely nascent colony form followed function. The opening to the maintenance shaft was a simple hinged door about a meter square. In truth it was a cargo divider form a shipping crate. The colony reused what it could.

There was no light in the maintenance shaft. People using it were expected to carry their own illumination while climbing the ladder rungs bolted directly into the wall. These were strong enough to support a grown man so Polly’s weight, even dragging her equipment duffle, was of no consequence. Using a tightly cinched visor to provide light she started up, her brother feeding slack into the safety tether as she progressed.

After a few minutes of tense silence her voice muffled voice came. “I’ve reached the top access panel to the air shaft.”

Dunzin used his radio instead of shouting to her. “Use your radio Polly, switch your mic on.”

A brief silence and then here voice was in their own headsets. “Sorry, I didn’t want you to hear me panting on the way up.”

“That’s okay,” said Dunzin. “But leave your radio on. From now on when we don’t hear you panting, we’ll panic.”

“Got it. Opening the panel now.” A few seconds of silence followed by a word that made her mother grimace. “There, got it open. Someone should oil these things.”

“I’ll take it up with the maintenance manager.”

The girl snickered. “Isn’t that you?”

“Yes, and I’m going to yell at myself”

The sound of the girl giggling came over the radio. They heard the sound of metal no metal a few second later. “Got it open, I can see light at the top, not very bright.”

“That’s alright, it shouldn’t be. Those intake vents are steeply slanted down. Can you see the external door and the drag line?”

“I think so. Damm, it’s going to be a tight fit, even for me.”

Dunzin glanced at Denise who was grimacing again. “You can do it. Just take your time. Just press you back side against the pipe to rest. You should fit like a cork when you do that.”

“Going now, tell Sammy to give me some extra slack.”

Jarwan watched silently. He was nervous, both for the girl and her mother. Her brother Sammy didn’t look that happy either. He wished again that this hadn’t been there only option. But now that it was in progress he didn’t bother with feeling guilty. It wouldn’t help anyway.

After listening to her breath get harsher and louder, she reached the door to the outside.

“The latches on this one work much easier.”

“It’s get inspected more often. Are you ready to open it? Remember to put you goggles on.”

Her voice came back proudly. “Already got them on, and my gloves.”

“Good girl,” said Jarwan. Which immediately got him reproving look from Dunzin. He shrugged and mouthed ‘sorry’.

The girl’s voice came back. “Okay, opening the door.”

Everyone below was silent, listening.

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To Jerimy’s surprise finding where the mind-link rods came down was pretty straight forward. Mikiu, having some experience with the underground base, simply leaned on his hands against the elevator control console and thought intently about the black rods on the fifth level, picturing them in his mind.

His eyes were closed, and it took a surprised exclamation from Jerimy for him to turn and see the newly opened corridor. It was evenly space between two of the original five and matched them in size and shape.

Jerimy walked over to the new passage. The walls resembled the others but he could see it extended only short distance before opening into a well-lighted room.

Mikiu was beside him, staring into the same room. “I’m guessing this would be it.”  
 “I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Mikiu briefly turned his attention back to the elevator room. “You suppose there’s four more doors?”

“These people seem to like their symmetry, so my guess would be yet. How did you open this one?”

“Took a clue from Josh. Just pictured the room upstairs and what the rods looked going into the floor. Threw in a desire to see where they went. That was it.”

“So to open the other doors we’ll need to know what’s on the other side?”

Mikiu shrugged, something he’d done more times than he liked, when questioned about there surroundings. “Maybe, maybe not. Josh has opened some without having any idea what was behind them. He seems to be more attuned to the mental aspects.”

“That makes sense. I’ve always told his dad that he’s a mental case.”

Mikiu looked up sharply, wondering if Jerimy was joking. The engineer and Josh had a relationship that varied from year to year. Sometimes they got on each other’s nerves. This was one of those years.

Jerimy caught sight of his expression. “Sorry, sarcasm. That’s also something else Josh is attuned too.”

Mikiu let his attention turn back down the newly discovered corridor. “Shall we go have a look?”

The two figures walked slowly down the corridor. They half expected it to snap shut behind them but it didn’t. It was shaped like the others, same width and height, same gray colors. In length it wasn’t very long, ten meters Jerimy guessed. At the end it opened into a large room, the only thing in sight a far wall of the same gray. The rest the room spread out to their left and was filled by a long bench like couch with the familiar black rods running down from the ceiling into each end. The gray of the low back was interrupted midway by a black bar running the length of the couch.

Mikiu said, “the black bar runs from either end, like an extension of the mind-link rods. Is it just one very long rod that loops here and goes back up to the other side?”

Jerimy, kneeling at the foot of the couch, chuckled. “I don’t think so. The rods from above run straight through and into the floor. Notice the center of the couch. The black doesn’t quite meet in the middle. I think there are two extension rods branching off from either side, not quite meeting in the middle.”

“Sort of like above, only instead of having to grab the rods you just sit down and lean back. Why the difference?”

The engineer wasn’t sure. “Could just be a design difference. Could be that the communications above aren’t usually that long. No reason to make it comfortable. This appears to be different, more for a long talk and involving more people.”

“And maybe they weren’t talking to the whale creatures.”

“You think another species,” Jerimy looked around the room, no windows, no other sitting arraignments, not even a marked area for someone else. “Doesn’t appear to be room here for anyone else.”

“I was thinking,” said Mikiu, a thoughtful expression on his face. “That since everything that’s happened to us so far has been run by some type of machine intelligence, or at least that’s what we think. What if this place was always been run by an AI, an independent one that you can communicate with?”

“You mean by mental connection with the rods.” Jerimy’s head tilted back slightly as he pondered the implications. “Now that’s a thought. We’ve experimented with mentally controlling machines in the past. Never got it to work particularly well. How would you even do that, exchange thoughts with a machine?”

Mikiu said, “you wouldn’t, not with the type of computers we build. Our AIs don’t work like a mind. What if the alien’s computers worked differently, actually thought in some form?”

“That would fit the very definition of being alien.” The man grinned, “And that would also mean that we’re actually encountering aliens, just not flesh and blood ones.”

“I think Josh already met one that is flesh and blood. You forget our friend from the fifth level.”

“We don’t know for sure that Moby is intelligent?”

“Moby?”

“Wasn’t that the name of a whale in an old earth book, or maybe it was Willy.”

“I think those were different creatures. Josh would know. He’s a big fan of old stuff.”

Jerimy nodded, Josh was indeed a history buff. He limited his own interest in the past to engineering matters, knowledge that might impact his work. “He might at that. What do you suppose you talk to an AI about?”  
 “I have no idea. Maybe how to control the weather.”

“There’s an idea,” the engineer moved to the center of the couch.

Mikiu didn’t like the expression on his face. “What’s an idea. Are you thinking of trying the couch?”

“Why not? Josh connected to a whale and lived. I work with machines all day, every day. I understand them. Maybe I can get the weather turned off. Besides, when Josh and Wendy touched the rods before they didn’t find any Ais on the line.”

“There might be a protocol to follow.”

“Some kind of here I am message. I don’t think we’re dealing with a packet network here. Josh and Wendy managed to exchange information, although Josh wasn’t really very forthcoming on the nature of that information.”

“Didn’t tell us a lot about it either. I gather it’s personal.”

“Granted. Ideally, he should be the one to try this. He has something we don’t have, an idea of what to expect. Unfortunately we don’t have the time for him to recover. The colony is trouble. We need to figure this out.”

Mikiu sighed, stepped back and took a seat on the floor. “You’re right, we don’t have time. There’s a big difference this situation and what happened above.”

“No whale?”

“No one to help me get you back to the lounge room. I might have to literally drag your ass.”

Jerimy’s face broke into a wry smile. “I’ve been dragged out of worse places than this. At least no one’s throwing punches or shooting.”

“Yet,” chuckled Mikiu. “We still don’t know if there are any more cowboy robots around.”

“True enough,” said Jerimy eyeing the doorway. “Maybe you should twist around and keep an eye on me and the doorway.”

Mikiu rotated himself forty-five degrees and drew his weapon. He watched as Jerimy slowly took a seat on the couch and slowly settled backwards. He had to straighten his legs and drag them onto the couch to sit with his back straight against the short back. He looked like a small child struggling to sit like an adult. When he was in position, he allowed his body to slowly make contact.

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Sally was waiting for him when he got to the shuttle bay. The Deidre had two of them, on either side of her midline. Unlike newer ships that limited shuttle docking to the ships exterior exoskeleton in order to free up valuable life supported space the Deidre was old school and had to large interior hangers. It was a clue to her history as a large luxury passenger ship. Rich people were uncomfortable with the normal trappings of space flight, like open gird construction and temporary flexible docking tubes.

Halerin didn’t waste any time. The trip from the bridge had given his thoughts time to hatch. Normally he would have taken this up with Jerimy or son but that was out for now.

“Sally, I’m going to ask you some something that you might find curious. I would appreciate it if you didn’t talk to the rest of the crew or passengers about it.”

The girls bald head bobbed as she nodded. “Yes sir.” She was former military, which kept her responses shorts and explained her absence of hair. Even though he she no longer needed a clean scalp for sensor pads she maintained the service instilled habit.

He took a long look at the two shuttles. They also had previous lives, as military landing vessels. They were built stronger than shuttles built for normal civilian use. Because of their heritage they had cabling and mounting points built in that civilian use shuttles didn’t posess.

“You flew Vickors like this before, in the military I mean?”  
 Her eyebrows raised, the captain certainly had her attention. “Exact same models, just with missile racks and various beams weapons. Why do you ask?”

The place we got these from stripped all the military hardware. That was, and still is the law on Sartagius, and a good many other worlds in the Union.”

“We got these before my time with the Deidre sir. But that is one of the reasons I signed, familiarity with the ships I’d be flying.”  
 “I know that and I’m what I’m about to tell you is a ship’s secret, a serious secret.”

“You have my curiosity now sir.”

The company they paid to repurpose the military parts of the ships did just that. They repurposed them to a parts reseller that we created and ran. In other words, all the shuttles military hardware is up in warehouse section G, labeled trade goods.”

Her eyebrows threatened to crawl over her forehead. “Trade goods, we aren’t a trade ship sir.”

“Our story is that we thought about it once but have never had the time. So far, no port has questioned it. No one’s really interested in things you don’t intend to unload or sell in their jurisdiction.”

The girl laughed, “When I worked for the Union Patrol service, before the big companies started running their own escorts, we had a reg about that type of cargo. But no one ever worried about it unless pirate activity shot up.”

“Well that’s why we bought it. Not engage in piracy of course. Just in case piracy became a problem we wanted something to put up a fight with. My question for you is, with a couple of good engineers how long to refit these things for a fight.”

“A fight, with the Clarigton group?”

“They’re the only one’s making noise about everything. They don’t like us.”

“Aware of that sir.” The girl turned a thoughtful eye to the shuttles parked across the hanger. “If it’s just a matter of reattaching things, a few days. Sir, having missile racks doesn’t mean much without missiles.”

“Four complete Class 7 load outs.”

“There’s the matter of the software.”

It’s always been there. Jerimy reinstalled it as soon as we got them aboard. It’s just turned off.”

“Sir, even with fully capable ships, provided we have enough trained ex-military crew aboard, we’re not going to put up much of a fight against a cruiser – maybe a small one.”

“That’s not really what I was thinking. You could take out inquisitor drones though, right.”

“Sure, but wouldn’t that cause someone to come looking?”

“We can always be gone by then. But anyway, that’s not really the use of arms I had in mind. You know about the weather problem on the planet below?”

“Yes sir, it’s all everyone has been working on, trying to figure it out”

“We think that some ancient left over alien tech is responsible. Josh, Mikiu, Jerimy and others are on the surface trying to figure out how to shut it down. If they can’t, but they find what’s causing it …”

“You’re thinking as a last resort we can destroy it.”

“If it’s possible. There’s a lot of things to consider before that. I’d just like to have some options besides ducking when the shit hits the fan. Pardon my choice of words.”

“Okay sir. I can make that happen. Just give me some hands that know what they’re doing and point me to the hardware. Oh, and someone will have to tell me how to turn the shuttle’s shooting software on.”

“Good. I’ll get you the people and I have Jerimy’s documentation for you to work with. We can’t reach him at the moment, the weather. One last thing, work on one at a time. I don’t want both of the shuttles out of commission.” Halerin motioned for the woman to follow him and stared for warehouse country.

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The outside wasn’t as bad as she feared, and that increased her fear level to a height she wouldn’t have thought possible. She was briefly sidetracked by the idea that she could handle being this scared. Then she felt a trickle running down the inside of her thigh. Apparently, her body didn’t share her view. She forced herself to remain quiet. The others didn’t need to know she had wet herself. Sammy would never let her hear the end of it. That thought reminded her that she hadn’t tried her radio yet, and that the others hadn’t talked to her.

Then Dunzin’s voice came over the radio. “A little description please.”

Forcing herself back to reality she realized that she wasn’t even properly outside yet, only her right foot was planted on the muddy ground. The wind was buffeting her, but not that badly and she could only sense a light rain hitting her face. She had expected much worse, as had the others. “The weathers not that bad. It’s not even a hard rain and the wind … I can stand it.”

“You can stand up in it?”

She kept hold of both sides of the access opening and carefully extended her other leg. With both of them firmly planted she slowly released one hand, then the other. “Yea, I’m doing it now, not holding on to anything. I have to lean into it a little.”

“How’s the visibility?”

She pivoted her head slowly from left to right as far as she could without upsetting her balance.” Like what you can see when it starts getting dark. I can see but things in the distance are muddied.”

“Give us a tour,” came Dunzin’s voice, a hint of impatience in it.

“Sure, but I think what you want to know about is the garage. It looks okay. There’s a lot of dirt and junk leaning against it. The doors are still closed, no wait, the people door is open but the big doors are closed.

She moved her head back to the left. “Good thing we moved. The new warehouse is a pile. What’s left of it.”

Silence for a second. “Keep going, what about the housing units?”

She starred intently over the garage. She could just make out the three structures where the colonist usually lived. “I can see them, not very well. I dunno. They don’t look right but I can’t tell anything. I can’t see well enough.”

“That’s fine, what about the entrance of the ramp?”

“It looks like someone filled in a hole and didn’t get it covered. You can still see the outline.”

“Okay, you hang tight for a moment.”

The girl said “Roger.” She felt older using that response she’d heard so many times on videos.

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In the dim light of the warehouse the four looked at each other, each thinking their own thoughts.

Dunzin hit the mute for radio transmission. “I don’t like that the door to the office area of the garage is open but that shouldn’t be a problem. The haulers should be okay.” He nodded to Jarwan. “Looks like your hunch to abandon the other warehouse was right on the money. I’d like to know why it failed. Maybe we can tell something form the pictures.”

Jarwan’s chin snapped up an inch. “Pictures, I forgot she’s wearing a camera. Can we see her feed?”  
 “No feed. We went with narrow band radios to punch voice through the weather. Maybe should have used a spread radio. I set it to send high quality still.” He pulled a tablet form his belt.

The others gathered around to view the images. They were washed of color but contained enough detail to verify Polly’s verbal account.

“Let’s get her back inside,” said Denise, worry still evident on her face. “You found out what you needed to know.”

“What about the carry-bots?” asked Sammy.

Jarwan felt sorry for the boy after the look his mother shot him.

“It would be nice to find out if they’re okay?” said Dunzin. All she has to do is move far enough to see over by the admin office.” He looked at Jarwan for an answer.

Jarwan walked over to the maintenance shaft entrance. “The weathers good, she won’t have to go very far. Have her go take a look.”

Dunzin flipped his radio back on. “Polly, one last job if you’re up for it. Could you check the status of the carry-bots at the admin building? Same as the others, all we need is a visual check. Whatever you can see is fine.”

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Polly smiled as the instructions came over the radio. She had gotten over her fear and was now enjoying being outside and beyond that, she was enjoying the attention of doing something important. In the day-to-day life of the colony she didn’t get to do much besides grunt work, things no one else wanted to do. She welcomed the opportunity to do something for the colony. She had another agenda, she still wanted to check on the missing milk ewe. She knew that the missing sheep was likely dead, but she wanted, if possible to find out for herself. Taking care of the colonies small herd of sheep had been the principle grunt work that had fallen to her. She still blamed herself for losing track of number three when they had moved warehouses even though she hadn’t been the one moving them.

Taking her time she moved around the pillar of the air intake and step by step moved towards the center of the colony, the admin building. That’s where the carry-bots were kept when not in use. The back of the building had several charging stations and was where Dunzin had decided the bots could weather the storm.

As she cleared the second of the tall air intake cylinders the square block-built structure came into view. It was the only true two-story building in the colony. The warehouses had ample head space but had nothing that could be considered a second level.

The length of her tether line was not sufficient to cross all the way to the building. But with a little judicious maneuvering she was able to get to where she had a good angle on the rear section on the right-hand side. She could see three of the carry-bots, although diminishing amounts of each at this angle. Dunzin had inverted them to keep the storm from filling them wither water and preventing the wind from using them as sails. From what she could see of the three they appeared to be okay. At least they were still there. The left side of the building had taken some damage and she wasn’t certain about the bots on that end.

“I can see three of them, or at least parts of them. They look okay.”

“How about the admin center itself?”

“The other end looks like its jammed up, like it ran into something. Nothing’s collapsed or anything.”

“Okay, make sure you get good video, maybe take a couple of zooms with your still camara that we can look at later.”

“Sure thing.” She pulled the little camera from her front pocket. It was small enough that it hadn’t presented a problem crawling through the access panel door. It took only a few seconds to take a series of pictures of the admin building, for good measure she took a series of shots 360 degrees around her. Some places she was blocked by the rising air- intake shafts. She carefully reversed her path and moved back to the air shaft she had come from. Her tether line slowly withdrew as she moved. Apparently her brother was taking his job monitoring the line slack seriously. Before re-entering the access opening she took a last set of pictures showing the garage where the cargo-haulers were kept. She knew that was important to Jarwan and Dunzin.

She would have missed it if the spot of dirty white hadn’t been moving opposite of the everything else. It was moving against the wind, creeping out of the open door on the garage. She felt her heart move towards her throat for second before recognition set in. It was her missing Dolly, one of the cloned sheep.

Forgetting her open mike she shouted at the top of her voice. She heard a muffled exclamation of surprise and pain and the Dunzin’s voice asking what was going on and was she okay. The questions repeated three times before she remembered in her excitement that they were directed to her. “I’m okay. I just spotted Dolly four, she’s been hiding in the garage.”

“Great, can you call her. Will she come to you? Wait, key you mike off before you yell again."

"Sorry, I got excited when I saw her.”

“Understandable, key your mike off and try calling her,” said Dunzin.

She was now using the mini binoculars she had brought with her. The sheep was clearly visible after she forced hands to stop shaking, and it was clearly not right. It had a pronounced limp and was favoring it’s left side. She could see an injury along its back half traces of what looked like fresh blood.

She allowed the binoculars to hang by their neck strap, cupped her hands to her mouth, and called as loudly as she could. She did this several times. Pulling the glasses back up she could see that she had been heard, the sheep head was up looking. But the animal didn’t waver in its path along the front of the garage. She tried the entire thing again. The sheep could tell someone one was yelling, but apparently not who, and not where the sound was coming form. She tried several times until the creature disappeared around the corner of the garage. She realized that the creature was likely headed towards her corral in back of the garage. It seemed likely it was searching for food and Polly realized that this lull in the weather might be the first time it had been able to look for food. The thought filled her with sadness.

She keyed her mike back on. “It couldn’t tell where it was. I think it’s going to the corral, maybe looking for something to eat.”

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In the warehouse the four were staring at each other again. Dunzin keyed off his mike. “Probably the first time it could get out now that the weather’s dulled down some.”

Jarwan looked grim. “She’s not going to find any food in the pens. We brought everything there down here.”

“It’s probably starving. You didn’t leave any food there,” the doctor’s face reflected the grim expression of Jarwan.

Jarwan shook his head. “We just took it all. The storm would have ruined anything we would have left anyway. The only thing it might find is the salt block, if that hasn’t completely dissolved."

Dunzin threw up a hand. “Hold on.” He listened for a second. Keyed his mike on long enough to say, “okay, hold on”, before turning to the others. “She says it looks hurt, has a bleeding wound down the side and it’s limping.”

The doctors face twisted into a frown. “That doesn’t sound good. With no food and medical treatment it won’t last till we get out of here.”

Dunzin nodded and keyed his mike. “Sorry kid, nothing we can do but try to get out of here fast enough to help it. Come on back in.” He listened for a second and then surprise lifted his eyebrows” He turned to the others without keying his mike off. She said, “no.”