Chapter 13

01/27/2022

As Mikiu kept watch, or attempted to, he found it difficult not to watch as Jerimy slowly allowed his back to rest against the black bar crossing the back of the couch. He watched as the man’s eyes snapped open, his body go tense, and his head tilt back, mouth open drawing in a great breathes of air. Then, as suddenly as the fit happened, it ceased. Jerimy’s body went limp and his eyes drooped until they closed.

Mikiu, checking the corridor, kept his silence. Having experienced the feeling of helplessness before with Josh he didn’t want to interrupt whatever communication the engineer might be engaged in. He switched his eyes back and forth from Jerimy to the corridor as rapidly as possible. Fortunately he didn’t have to keep that up for long. After just a few minutes Jerimy sat fully upright, his arms stretched straight down behind him to keep his body clear of the black strip and took a long slow breath. His eyes open as they focused on Mikiu.

“Okay then.”

“That didn’t last very long.”

The engineer ruefully shook his head side to side. “Doesn’t take long to be shown the door.”

“What?”

“You were right, and you were wrong. This place is controlled by artificial minds, but notice that’s minds, plural. I didn’t get a count but there were more than a few.”

Mikiu could only repeat, “what.”

“I could sense them. It was like sticking your head into a room full of people. They notice you but instead of saying anything one of them just slams the door shut on you.”

“They knew you were there?”

“Most definitely,” said Jerimy.

“And they threw you out?”

“Something like that.”

“Maybe you caught them by surprise,” said Mikiu, looking for an explanation.

“They’re computer-based minds. Even surprised they shouldn’t react like that. It wasn’t like a security lock out or any kind of automatic procedure. I could feel the surprise. They just didn’t want to deal with me.”

Mikiu finally got over his initial surprise. “Another difference in technology. That almost sounds like an emotional response.”

“Doesn’t really matter. What we have to do is figure out how to get them to respond to us.” Jerimy paused briefly, lost in thought, and then reluctantly continued. “If they won’t let me in, maybe they’ll be more open to Josh. He’s more experienced with this, mostly by accident, than I am, and the fact that he’s been in communication with the whale creature may be an advantage.”

“You think that’ll make a difference.”

“It might, they had to have been privy to that connection too. I can’t think of anything else.”

Mikiu got to his feet, brushed imaginary dirt off his suit and started towards the elevator room. “I don’t have anything else either. Let’s get back to the others and see if the doc can wake Josh up.”

“She won’t like it.”

“I don’t like it. I don’t think we have any choice. But first, maybe we should try checking in with Deidre and Patty.”

Jerimy could agree with that. “Yea, that makes sense. Patty’s probably starting to feel abandoned by now.”

“Always the chance she found out something too.”

When they reached the control console in the elevator Mikiu glanced at the open doorway to the newly discovered mind-link room. “I wonder if that’ll reopen when we come back down.”

“Probably not. Topside first. We need to find out what Deidre knows.”

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Mike Halerin, in an attempt to kill time, was engaged in his favorite busy bridge work – recalibrating the backup control systems. Yelaa used to laughingly tell him that the Deidre’s backup systems received better care than most ships primary systems. She eventually figured out why he did it and often did the same herself, except she was into keeping the bridge spotless. Cleaning details seldom bothered with the Deidre’s bridge.

Wally interrupted them both. “Yelaa, incoming.”

The tall woman quickly returned to her station. Halerin, leaving maintenance screens open on the engineering console, followed her.

She spoke before her backside hit the seat. “It’s Jerimy.”

Halerin spoke over her shoulder. “Put him on.”

Yelaa toggled the call to speaker and informed Jerimy. “We hear you. You’re on speaker.” She glanced upwards to Halerin. “And the boss is leaning over my back, again.”

Halerin ignored her, “Go ahead Jerimy, report.” He listened as Jerimy gave a filtered list of events that had occurred. He knew that what he was hearing wasn’t quite the truth. Exactly what were communication rooms and why was Josh under the influences of a sedative. Who had he been communicating with? He was at least comforted by the fact that Jerimy indicated Josh was okay and he didn’t use any of the distress phrases for topics. He was somewhat chagrined to report to the engineer that they had no contact with the colony for some time.”

After Yelaa broke the connection he apologized to the girl for looking over her shoulder, again. She hated that, but sometimes he felt the need to be in the forefront of the action, even if that meant just being closer to the comm console. Moving to his command chair he considered his options. They were limited and nothing struck him being a good idea. That left waiting, and he was getting really tired of doing that.

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Jarwan jerked his head back in surprise, saw the same emotion on the faces of the others. “What do you mean she said no?”

Dunzin ignored him. “Polly, I don’t think I heard you right. You need to come in.” He waited. He heard only silence. Glancing at his wrist monitor he turned to the others. “She turned off her radio.”

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She had turned the radio off because she knew that if she heard her mother’s voice she would not be able to do what she needed to do. Rescue the sheep. She didn’t feel any real danger. So far the weather hadn’t been a problem at all. The wind was strong but not strong enough to make walking difficult and she had been in much harder rains every spring.

She didn’t have a plan, just a mission. Take care of the sheep. It only occurred to her after she turned off the radio that there was no way to bring the sheep down the air shaft. She thought about it while she undid the tether line harness. She finished just in time as the belt was jerked away from her fingers. It quickly gouged a path along the muddy ground as the line pulled it. It scared her for a second but didn’t really change anything. She would still be able to go back down the maintenance shaft. With her mind made up, aided by anger at the pulling of the tether line, she started towards the admin building, intent no saving the sheep.

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Sammy stopped cranking the handle of the tether line spindle. It was obvious from the rate the line was respooling that there was no weight on the other end. His sister had freed herself of the restraint.

The others realized it too. Jarwan, reacted by instinct put an arm around Denise, she leaned into it. “Damm it, I told you she wasn’t old enough to handle this.” The tone of her voice wasn’t angry, just fearful.

He tried to keep emotion out of his. “The weathers not bad. She can handle the wind. Let her catch the sheep. She can’t bring it back here. She’ll realize that soon enough and find a place to put it.” His eyes focused on Dunzin. “Can she find food and water for it?”

“Water isn’t a problem. It’s everywhere. Food I don’t know about. I think we grabbed everything from the pens. Sammy, you help with the sheep. Where else can she find food?”

The expression on the boy’s face lightened. “The garage. That’s where we put most of it at the beginning of the year. It’s easier than having to dig through the warehouse every time we need some. It’s in an old drop container at the back.”

Jarwan felt his own face relax. All the girl had to do was get the sheep inside the garage and block it into the work area, simple enough the internal doors were intact. He asked Sammy, “Will she have any trouble catching it.”

The boy didn’t even think about it. “Hell no, those things love her. She’s the one who feeds them most of the time. If it’s hungry it’ll follow her right to the garage.”

He turned his eyes back to the girls mother. “She’ll be okay. She’s a smart girl. She’ll figure out what to do quickly an then be back down the shaft.”

Dunzin abruptly stood up straight, squared his shoulders and a slight grin appeared on his face.

Jarwan noticing the transformation asked, “Something you want to tell us?”

The engineer titled his head, still thinking. “Maybe. I mean I’ll tell you I just don’t want anyone to get their hopes up.”

By this time he had the entire groups attention. He spoke his thoughts. “Denise, your daughter may have just done us a big favor.”

“How’s that,” asked the worried mother.

“If she’s in the garage she has access to the cargo-hauler radios. They’ve got satellite uplink capability. She should be ablet to reach the Deidre. Something we can’t do from down here with the antenna array down.”

Jarwan immediately saw the possibilities. “Can she setup up a relay to us?”

“Don’t know why not. I’ll have to figure out what she’s got to work with in the garage. How much does your girl know about comm tech?”

The doctor shrugged, “She’s more interested in being a farmer than anything else but she’s tech savvy. Probably more so than me with anything not related to medicine.”

“Just one problem,” pointed out Jarwan. She has to turn her radio.” He turned to Dunzin. “Turn the radio over to Sammy. He can stand first watch. We’ll figure out some kind of schedule to listen.”  
 “No,” said Sammy. She’s my sister. I’ll listen. Besides, the rest of you have work to do. You have to get us out of here.”

Jarwan laughed briefly and then turned serious. “Almost correct Sammy. Your Mother and Dunzin have work to do. I just need to do some planning now that the decision is made, and I can do that here. You and I’ll stand listening post duties together. Your Mom and Dunzin can get on with what they have to do. We’ll meet back here in two hours. Hopefully, it shouldn’t take her long to catch and feed a single, tame animal.’

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They weren’t surprised when they couldn’t raise the Albatross from the entrance to the space port tunnel. They’d tried it the day before. Trudging down the corridor at a normal walking pace they kept conversation to a minimum. They both agreed that the first thing they were going to do is get a comm repeater from the Albatross’s stores and set it just inside the space port side of the tunnel.

It took them two hours to cover the distance to the ship. Jerimy had checked in with Patty when they entered the cavern of the space port itself. He wanted to make sure they faced no dangers approaching the ship, and he felt it only polite to give her some warning.

She was waiting at the bottom of the ships ramp when they arrived. “I was beginning to think I was abandoned.”

They both chuckled. “We wouldn’t do that,” said Mikiu. You haven’t got to see the wonders of our little alien base below yet.”

“Anything happen?” asked Jerimy.

“No. This is undoubtedly the dullest port I’ve ever been stuck in. Not even other ships to gossip with like a normal port. And before you ask, haven’t seen hide nor hair of our robot friends. I think they abandoned me too.”

Jerimy nodded to Mikiu. “You fill her in on what she’s missed. I’m going to dig out a comm relay.”

While the engineer was gone he filled the woman in on Josh and Jerimy’s dissimilar communication attempts with the mind-link rods.

Jerimy, returning from the ship’s interior caught the last part of the story. “That pretty much covers it Patty. The alien over-lords don’t like me.”

“I’m sure they just haven’t gotten to know you yet.”

“Yea, well they had their chance. We’re going to see if Josh can do any better. You got any projects lined up?”

She indicated a small, as compared to the Deidre, starship in the berth behind the Albatross. It a squat bug like vehicle with sitting on it’s own landing gear, obviously a ship intended for planetary landing. It also sported several projecting tubes and what were clearly weapon racks perpendicular to all three of it’s axis’s. “I’ve been admiring it from afar. I’m guessing it’s some kind of patrol vessel, or maybe a heavy close support ship.”

Jerimy allowed his eyes to take it in. “I’m guessing support ship. With all those thrust jets it’s made to maneuver quickly, and all those weapon systems aren’t for show. That ship is built to kick-ass and take names. You planning on stealing it?”

The woman laughed at the thought. “Stealing it, no, that thought hadn’t occurred to me. But if we have to shoot our way out of here I’m in favor of borrowing it. The captain can and get his boat if he wants it back.”

That produced a chuckle from both men. Jerimy said, “I think he would consider that one an acceptable replacement. But be careful about yearning for other people’s property. Remember, some of the robots down here shoot, they’re not all admin types.”  
 When they reached the corridor leading out of the port Jerimy stopped and placed the comm relay unit he’d gotten from the Albatross. He pointed an antenna towards the elevator room and another towards the cavern ceiling. There was no line-of-sight available with all the billeted ships. A quick test verified the relay worked. Another test when they reached the elevator room was also successful. Jerimy was satisfied. They would no longer waste part of a day to check in with Patty. He and Mikiu headed back to the lounge room.

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The sheep on the loose turned out to be number three. The colonist had simply named the creatures by number since they were clones and had no physical differences. Each one had been given a banded collar and ear tattoo labeled with their number. Polly had attempted to give them induvial names once but had given up when she realized that it didn’t help. She could only tell them apart by their numbers. She considered that a failure on her part because even cloned animals have their own personalities. She just couldn’t rapidly identify them by that alone, not always anyway. She had decided to stick with just the numbers. Sheep number three had always been a trouble maker, and Polly wasn’t surprised that she had been the one to evade being corralled and moved into the warehouse. The only person the recalcitrant beast liked was Polly, and she was pretty sure that’s because she fed her.

That fact made it easy to coax the sheep out of her hiding place between the carry-bots and the admin building. Polly quickly grabbed the always present retractable leash fastened to the sheep’s collar. It was short but sufficient for getting her to the garage building where the reserve food was kept.

The wind and muddy conditions made it a slower trip than the girl would have liked. She knew that every minute she didn’t turn her radio back on was another minute madder her mother was going to be. She was also surprised to find that she was also worried about disappointing Jarwan.

Reaching the garage she quickly realized that the small people door wasn’t damaged, someone had neglected to securely close it. She couldn’t close it because of the drifted mud and sand present. She didn’t worry about it. She had no intention of being here that long. Keeping the short leash taunt she led the way into the depths of the garages vehicle work bays. The buildings emergency light panel were on, which told her that the power from the power station was off.

She had an awkward moment getting to the food. Number three didn’t know there was food stored here but she quickly figured it out when Polly opened one of the storage barrels. The hungry animal didn’t wait for food to be ladled out into a dish and Polly ended up just dumping handfuls on the floor. The sheep didn’t care where the food was, it just cared that there was food.

Polly didn’t bother fastening the leash while she went to close the open door. A few minutes of work with a heavy broom and her bare hands cleared enough floor for the door to be closed. That and the food, she hoped, would be enough to keep the sheep inside the garage while the colonist dug their way out.

She quickly found that the garages built in water dispenser was almost full. That was a blessing, it meant she could put out enough water and food to last the ewe several days.

After doing so she examined the three cargo-haulers stored in the garage. One of them was obviously in a state of repair but the other two looked completely normal. She did a through inspection. She figured that detailed information on the haulers and the pictures she had taken of the carry-bots would go a long way towards making peace with the grownups, at least she hoped so.

She said goodbye to the ewe and started to head back to the air shaft when another way of turning down the shouting she was going to receive occurred to her. Since she was in the garage, there might be things here that Dunzin might need.

After a few moments consideration she took a seat at the garage managers workstation and turned her radio back on. With as bold a voice as she could muster she called to those below.

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They heard her. Both Jarwan and Sammy, who had tied their personal comms into the outside radio link, jumped and snapped their heads around to make sure the other had heard the call too.

Jarwan keyed his mike on while waving an arm to Sammy that he hoped the boy would understand. Apparently, he did, because he took off running to get the others.

“I can hear you, Polly. Are you okay?”

“Sure, why wouldn’t I be.”

“I’m guessing you’re in the garage with number three.”

“How did you know it’s number three”, and then she answered herself. “Oh, you checked the others, duh.”

Jarwan, trying to keep the anger he felt at the girl scaring him out of his voice, said. “I’m glad you’re okay, really glad. Your mother will be too, but I think she’s going to do a little yelling.”

“Kind of expected that. I just knew I had to do something and if I left the radio on she would talk me out of it.”

“We’ll talk about that later. You scared all of us. You scared me.”

The girls voice was contrite. “I know. I’m sorry. Anyway, I’m ready to head back. I figured you guys might want something from the garage.”

“Now that you mention it, yet. We want you to do something. Call the Deidre.”

“Huh. Oh, on the CH’s radio.”

“You know how to do that?” asked Jarwan. His eyes caught sight of Sammy leading his mother and Dunzin across the room.

“You’d better remind me. I’ve never called the Deidre before, but I have used the radios in the hauler before.” The contriteness in her voice had been replaced with excitement at being asked to do something new.

“I’ll let Dunzin lead you through that. But first you’re going to have to talk to your mom. She’s coming now. She looks more relieved than angry so I think you’re okay.”

“Yea, until I get back inside.”  
 “I’ll try to calm her down,” he said, although he had no idea if that was possible.

He barely heard the word ‘thanks’ before Denise plugged herself into the circuit.

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Yelaa glanced over her shoulder, willing the captain to remain seated. “Sir, I’ve got the colony. It’s the little girl, Polly.”

He frowned for a second as wild thoughts raced through his mind. Forcing them from his mind he toggled the comm on his chair. “Polly. I think that’s your name.”

He relaxed as laugh filtered into the room. “Yea. That would be me Captain Halerin.”

“To what do I owe the pleasure. I gather from your laughter that nothing evil has happened.”

“I didn’t sat that. We lost a man, but I’ll get to that. I’m on a cargo-hauler radio. I’m the only one who could fit though a ventilator shaft to get outside.”  
 “You want to repeat that. I don’t think I heard you right.”

“It’s a long story sir. If you can give me a moment Dunzin’s going to tell me how to relay the CH’s radio to our local comm channel. He just wanted to make sure that you could hear me first.”

Halerin felt himself ease back into his seat. Things would be explained shortly, although he didn’t like that we lost a man statement. “Take your time girl. We’re not going anywhere.”

“Just give me a minute. I have to shut you off to talk to him.”

“Understood.”

He leaned even further back, waiting.

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The wait for the communication link tried Jarwan’s patience. It took longer than expected for Polly to complete the setup. He was mollified by Dunzin’s assurance that the longer initial setup would make future communications easier. It was during this time that Jarwan had an idea that he was sure his love interest wasn’t going to like. That would be okay he thought, he didn’t like it either.

Carefully not looking in Denise’s direction he directed a question to Dunzin. “What kind of supplies are there in the garage?”

Dunzin, who was waiting for Polly to complete a step, gave Jarwan a curious expression. “She already found the food for the … oh, you mean supplies for people.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the doctor put down the tablet she had been working on. The expression on her face was one of intense curiosity. “The dirt mover is behind the garage with the mobile crane, right.”

Comprehension entered Dunzin’s expression. ‘Ahh, I get it. You’re thinking that digging form both ends would clear the tunnel a lot faster.”

“Now wait dust a damm moment,” came Denise’s voice. “I know what you’re getting at. My girl is not a construction worker. She has no idea how to run a backhoe and she’s not going to learn, at least not now. She’s going to get her ass back down here before the weather cranks back up.”

Jarwan raised a hand in self-defense. “Hold your horses, please. I’m just exploring an idea."

“Explore it on your own time and leave my daughter out of it. I already let you send her out there by herself.”

Dunzin came to Jarwan’s defense. “Wait. She might be safer where she is, and she might just save some lives by being there. She’ll certainly save us some time.”

Jarwan couldn’t determine which of them received the brunt of the anger in the doctors expression but he wished that he wasn’t one of the recipients. “Dunzin, please explain that.” He noticed Sammy moving to his mom’s side in support.

“Okay,” said Dunzin. “Polly running the digger isn’t farfetched, and it wouldn’t be the first time.”

“What,” came from Jarwan and Denise.

Dunzin held up his hand to forestall questions. “When she wanted that patch of ground dug up to planet pumpkins for the sheep I let her control the bucket and dig it out herself.”

“That was over a year ago,” said Denise, her anger increased. “She was only nine then.”

Dunzin shrugged, “So, I was eight when I helped build a bunk house on the ranch. All she did was control the bucket. That’s the definition of simple. As far as digging on the ramp that would be a little dangerous, but not that much. She can hook up a winch line to something, probably the garage, and just start working down the entrance ramp.”

“Will the ramp support the weight. It’s got a lot of mud and water on it now,” said Jarwan.

The engineer nodded. There was never a question of the ramp’s strength. We built that out surplus structural stuff from a heavy g world. If we’d been as careful with the selection of materials for the top cover, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“But it’s still dangerous,” said Denise.

The engineer was blunt. “I didn’t say that it wasn’t, but we can do it as safely as possible. It’s a question of an accident topside trying to help or sitting down here and waiting for the death by starvation or drowning in gook.”

Denise started to yell something but changed her mind. She, as a doctor, wasn’t fond of death of any kind, but she was familiar with it. “She’ll be alone,” she said quietly, the urge to yell gone, already accepting what was going to happen.

Dunzin felt awkward but answered Jarwan’s original question. “As far as human food, there’s plenty in the haulers. You know we keep a handful of no-time-for-lunch stuff in the cab box. That stuff never goes bad, and it does get eaten so the stuff in there should be fairly recent. Probably not a lot of variety but it’s as good as what we’ve been eating down here. And there should be plenty of bottled water too. I know that gets stocked regularly, especially during the summer.”

Jarwan licked his lips and tried to make sense of the look on the doctor’s face. It looked like he felt. “Denise, I love the girl too. But the truth is, and ignore Dunzin’s comments, we will dig ourselves our of here, she will be in no more danger up there than she is down here. Furthermore, she might just help us get out of here. As long as she’s strapped into the digger correctly there’s no real danger. Even if the thing tips over she’ll be able to unstrap and climb out. And it’ll be a real help to us getting out if she can clear some of the debris out of the way.”

Dunzin added, “Even if she doesn’t clear the ramp itself, she can get rid of the stuff that’s funneling down on the sides. That’ll make our job a lot easier.”

Denise looked Jarwan squarely in the eyes. “You explain it to her. If something does go wrong, I don’t want her blaming me.”

He nodded, a slight smile crossing his lips. He keyed his mike. “Polly, how’s it going with the comm link.”

There was a brief silence before she answered, her voice raspy form effort. “Sorry, I got busy talking to the Deidre. I think the link’s ready. I’m not going to be able to talk to them when I turn this on am I?”

Jarwan glanced at Dunzin who thought for second before shaking his head. “From the look on Dunzin’s face I would say you are correct. But I think we can fix that, or rather you can fix that with a little cable switching. But let’s not worry about that for now. Got something new we want to ask you to do.”

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The girl, tired though she was from crawling underneath the cab dashboard, perked up her ears. They had something new for her to do. That meant further reprieve from being yelled at. She tried to keep the eager of of her voice. “Sure.”

It wasn’t until he was halfway through explaining it that she caught on. They were asking her to stay out here by herself. She didn’t even have to think twice about it. Being the only colonist younger than her brother meant she was used to being alone. She had family and friends, but no social circle. “Does this mean I’m off the hook for rescuing number three? She hoped the use of the word ‘rescue’ would help.

Her mother’s voice answered instead of Jarwan’s. “Off the hook, I wouldn’t go that far. But I’m not mad anymore. I’m proud of you, we all are.”

“Thanks mom. So, what is it I’m supposed to do.”

This time it was Jarwan’s voice. “For right now, just relax while I talk to the Diedre. Then Dunzin will tell you how to reconnect the cables so we’re all on the same channel. And then, well he can tell you the rest.”

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