**Part 6**

**03/07/2020**

Wendy spoke up, “I’ve already been shocked going through it once, twice isn’t going to kill me – I hope.”

With that she took a deep breath, closed her eyes and took a running start through the entrance. She stopped on the other side, gave herself a once over and turned to face them.

“No field.”

Hearing that the rest of them hurried out into the daylight. Josh looked around, everything looked the same as yesterday morning, which felt like it happened a week ago. He was relieved to see that the blanket of blue that had chased them away was gone, of course, so was their boat.

“Boats gone,” said Josh.

“No, no it isn’t,” said Jameson, he was looking to his left.

Josh followed Jameson’s gaze to the next point over and there still, tied to the docking ring, floated the boat, apparently right where they’d left it. Without a word they all moved towards it. Silence reined until the bottom of the boat was in view.

Wendy broke that silence, “That’s our boat alright. I’d recognize it anywhere.”

Josh laughed, “You can’t be sure, there isn’t a mark on it.”

She gave him a *are you kidding me look*, “You don’t think I’d remember the first boat you took me sailing in.”

He gave her a curious look, “We weren’t sailing and if I remember correctly, you were driving.

“I like driving.”

At that he gave her a slight double take before turning his attention to Mikiu.

“Why is it not filled with water?”

“Remember how it wicked away the rain, I bet it does the same thing with any water.”

“That would be a really handy feature for a boat, unsinkable,” said Josh. “Wendy, you still have the phone (verify)?”

She nodded, pulled it from her belt, and handed it to him.”

“Thanks, I’d better check in.”

He walked a short distance from the water and called the Deidre.

§

Mike Halerin sat back in the command chair and processed information. Things were now getting really complicated. What had started out as an attempt to help some friend, and okay, make a little money in the process, was now turning into a mess. Time to come clean and figure out the status of everything.

He turned to Yelaa, “Get Dorkin on the comm, tell him to warm up a shuttle. Then get me Sunderson.”

§

It took a few minutes for her to get Jarwan Sunderson on the screen, he had been busy with a last minute effort to tighten the water proofing of some of the colony’s structures. He appeared sweaty and tired, looking like a man to whom sleep was a distant memory.

“Jarwan, sorry to bother you. I know you’ve got your hands full.”

“No problem old friend, is there news of the approaching ship?”

Mike Halerin felt his face muscles tighten up. “Yes and no, there’s going to be news, at a conference at 1600 today. I’m afraid you’ll need to be here.”

“In person?”

“I’m afraid so, I know that’s a pain in the ass for you, it won’t take long. Dorkin will be there with the shuttle in under an hour. As soon as the meeting if finished he’ll take you back down, four hours tops I swear.”

Jarwan looked grim for a second, and then responded. “Okay, if we need a meeting I’m not going to argue. Tell you the truth, it doesn’t matter much if I’m here or there, not a lot that I can do, not a lot that anyone can do at this point. Does this concern the kids?”

“Only peripherally, although they will be talked about. And before you ask, I have talked to them and they’re fine. Not holding out on you.”

His friend nodded his head, “Fine, don’t start without me.”

The Captain nodded at Yelaa who cut the communication.

She asked, “Tell Russ to start down?”

“Yea go ahead. Pass the word to Wally, Jerimy, and Dr. Lovis about the meeting. I want you there too, 1600, got it.”

“Okay,” she said,” I’m going to have to get third shift to cover.”

He nodded and headed for his quarters. He had somethings to think over before the meeting.

§

“Okay guys, I just talked to the ship, nothing’s changed,” Josh said. “Our instructions are to wait, and call back at 20 hundred hours, apparently they’re having some big meeting in a couple of hours to decide what to do.”

“Don’t they have to wait until the incoming ship gets into range to find out what they want?” asked Mikiu.

“Hey, I’m just telling you what my Dad said.” He glanced at Wendy, “Your dad is going to be at this meeting too. I gather that things at the colony haven’t gotten any better. But he did say they haven’t gotten any worse either so don’t fret.”

“Fret,” said Wendy, “what century are we in? But thanks.”

He nodded and looked at his time piece. They had time to kill.

“Well, unless someone wants to go fishing I suggest we move back into the elevator room, eat and catch up on some sleep.”

No one spoke up and Josh led them back into the center room, making sure to set an alarm to call the ship at the agreed up on time.

§

Captain Mike Halerin looked around the conference table from his seat at the head of it. He didn’t look forward this but had decided that the best part of valor was in getting it done quickly.

“I want to thank you all for coming, especially Jarwan since he had to travel so far to be here. You’re not going to like some of what I’m going to tell you, but that can’t be helped now. I need to let you all know what’s going on.”

The others were looking at him curiously. He decided to dive in.

“The fact is I’m pretty sure I know what ship that is, who’s running it and who they’re carrying.”

He took a deep breath, the others were all leaning forward, he had their attention.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have kept this a secret, but I really didn’t think it would happen. I should have told the truth when we first saw the ship. I think it’s the Arbiter.”

“Talong?” asked Jerimy.

Halerin nodded, “And he’s carrying passengers.” He continued, “It’s a science colony, from Fargonius IV that he was on his way to pick up. I talked to him before he left Sartagius, he was worried that his ship might have some trouble making it back so I told him where we would be.”

“You’re thinking it’s him Captain?” asked Wally.

“I don’t know why anyone else would be here, or why they would be making such a circumspect approach. It’s got to be the Arbiter, and I’m thinking that she was in worse condition that he led me to believe.”

“Why,” asked Yelaa, “was he picking up a colony group.”

“Not a whole colony, just a research team. They had been doing a dig on alien ruins. But another group, placed there later as a regular colony begin to get antsy. Started assigning religious attributes to the ruins. First thing you know they start getting into disagreements with the science folks. Last mission they ask Mendez if he can come back and get them after he finishes his cargo drop-offs. Well, he couldn’t from where that last drop left him but as soon as they got back to Sartagius they fueled up, loaded up a cargo for Fargonius and took off. The plan was to arrive early and tell them it was a scheduling mishap. That’s as much of the story as I know.”

“So, we don’t even know for sure if it’s the Arbiter,” said Wally.

“It might be the Arbiter, but we don’t know for sure who’s crewing her,” added Jerimy.

The Captain said, “I wouldn’t worry about that. Mike wasn’t going to tell his crew about coming here unless he had no choice, and he wouldn’t put that information in the ships log or anything. I made him promise not to write it down.”

Sunderson said, “Crap.”

They all looked up. The colony leader looked around and then realized that he had spoken out loud.

“Sorry guys, that slipped out. I was just thinking that if there’s very many of them we’ll need to get them to the surface, and this is a really lousy time for us to have guests. I’m not even sure how were going to handle our own people if this keeps up.”

“I apologize Jarwan,” said Halerin. “I know that things couldn’t be much worse but don’t worry about helping. It’s a small group of scientists and their families. If need be we can take care of them on the Deidre.”

Jarwan shook his head, “No, you guys are already risking your ship helping Rinein, if there’s any more helping to be done, we’ll do our part as well. Although I wouldn’t guarantee how comfortable we can make anyone.”

The Captain looked around the table, proud of his crew and his friend Jarwan. He had known that they would be supportive, his logic in not telling them before hand was weak in a way. Technically, there was no crime in them aiding there fellow Sartagiusians, but things were changing in the Association. Some old factions and cadres were beginning to gain strength in various places concerning things on other worlds, man’s urge to control was attempting to reassert itself. The Captain had not seen a reason to attract any attention. It could mean trouble in the future, especially now that trouble had found the colony of Rinein.

He dissolved the meeting. “Jarwan, you fill in however you need to down below. I’m going to talk to the exploration team again in a few hours. I think it best, for now, that I just tell them to continue with their exploring. They appear to be getting closer to this world’s secrets and just maybe they can identify the source of the problems. I will of course, fill them in on this meeting so that they know what’s going on.”

§

Jarwan nodded his acknowledgement, shook the Captain’s hand and headed for the shuttle bay. He knew Dorkin would be waiting. He began to mentally make lists on what things would need done. He didn’t have much time, which was okay because he had little to work with, but the thought of being able to do some good for others took away the weight of the Colonies own problems. There was always a silver lining.

§

He felt uncomfortable, something that had never happened in his thinking spot. He was puzzled about this, but then his puzzlement gave way to something else, the memory of a memory. He could remember that there was an action he needed to take, something long ago foreseen. It swam just below the level of his conscience. He would wait, eventually it would surface to his aware mind and he would act. For now, he did the only thing possible in such a time, he thought, in his thinking place.

§

This time, instead of walking off to communicate with the Deidre by himself Josh simply put the satellite phone on local group, and they all sat around it just a few meters outside the central control room on the island. The phone unable to get a signal in the interior which would have been more comfortable. The wind and the motion of the water had picked up as it approached nightfall. It felt like a storm was brewing. Though there had been no signs of clouds during the day they were now filling the sky overhead. Josh was hoping the phone meeting didn’t last long, the effect of the storm on their communications link was unknown, and besides, he wanted to stay dry.

It took three attempts to reach the ship.

“Deidre here, we can hear you son, sounds kind of noisy.”

“Yea Dad, I’ve got everyone using their own comms, the phone let me set up a local group.”

“Nice feature that.”

“Yea, so we’d better get this over quick, before the rain starts.”

Josh listened as his father filled him in on the fact that he had known who the ship probably was from the beginning. It didn’t surprise him that his father had kept the knowledge a secret. The man wasn’t a big talker to begin with and he was reticent with information and feelings. Talong Mendez was an old family friend, and he actually knew Dr. Allsop, having taken a class from him on Xenobiology some fifty years ago. He remembered more about the subject than the man, probably he surmised, because he used Xenobiology often in his everyday life.

His father was saying, “I’m sorry for keeping this from you son. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s okay Dad, I understand, Talong is an old friend. By the way, I know Dr. Allsop, he taught a class I took a long time ago.”

His Dad sounded interested, “Really, do you think he’ll remember you? What kind of man is he? Does he know what he’s about?”

“Whoa, one question at a time. The class was fifty or sixty years ago, I doubt he’ll remember me, maybe, but he doesn’t teach often. He seemed to be a nice guy and yes, he’s really smart. He knows what he’s talking about.”

Josh thought for a second then added, “In fact, we could probably use him down here.”

“Well son, I don’t know how we could get him to you easily but we might arrange something where he can help over the comms. Wally wants to talk with Mikiu about some ideas he has for maybe getting a video link, or at least sending up some stills.”

“Okay Dad, love you.”

“Love you too son, here’s Wally”

Josh handed the phone to Mikiu and shutoff his local comm. “The rest of us are going inside, you talk with Wally.

“Thanks, I always wanted to be a lightning rod,” said Mikiu.

With that, Josh led the others back inside.

§

John Johanson looked at the board for a fifth time. It hadn’t changed, he hadn’t thought it would. He kept checking it anyway, because he wanted to be sure when he talked to the Captain. He sat back and thought about it again, trying to see something he had missed, some angle that he had not explored — but nothing came to mind, no revelations, no inspirations, he was fresh out of ideas. He knew that he was going to die soon, they all were, but he never would have thought, in all his imagined deaths, that the thing that betrayed him would be his engineering skills. Those had always been his saving grace, but now he was out of grace, and that was indeed, a sad way to die.

He struggled to his feet, looked over his shoulder at Anderson.

“Bill, I’m going up to talk to the Captain. Keep an eye on the power consumption, do what you can to save some of it.”

Anderson nodded, “You going to tell the Captain how bad it is?”

“Aye.”

“Tell me first, what are you thinking?”

The big man wet his lips. His people deserved to know the truth, but his loyalty lay with the Captain. Still he reasoned, since they would soon be dead, the niceties of civilized honor didn’t strictly apply.

“Okay”, said Johanson, “I’m going to tell you. However, you are to tell no one, although it will soon become known to all. I want every other man or woman to hear it from the Captain. It’s his story to tell.”  
 Anderson nodded, he was a quiet man, and John did not fear him talking out of turn.

“We’re heading into the Tingies system to meet up with the Deidre, no one knows that but me, the Captain, Allsop and now you.”

“We don’t have enough power to slow down do we?”

“No,” said Johanson, “we don’t, we did when we started in system, but then the second power rail blew. You saw that, it’s gone, and we’re in trouble.”

“But the Deidre, she will help us, will she not?” asked Anderson, his voice raising in pitch.

“We don’t know, we can’t talk to them, our comm systems are shot, literally. That last attack took them out and we’ll have to wait until we are in close and see if a comm unit from one of the lifeboats can reach them. The major problem is that Jerimy was going to overhaul his systems. We don’t know what condition the Deidre is in or how long it would take them to respond. We are hoping for the best. But now, the best we can do is try to swing into a long orbit in the inner system and hope they can get to us before we freeze, suffocate or starve.”

“I don’t think I like any of those options,” said Anderson.

“I don’t either. I’m telling you because I know you’re a religious man and a family man. You should tell your wife, but first, monitor these systems while I talk to the Captain,” said Johanson.

Anderson nodded again and took Johanson’s place at the power console.

John starred at him for a second, fighting down a wave of sadness before heading for the bridge.

§

The Captain listened quietly. When John was finished he asked only one question. *How soon do we need to initiate for an inner system orbit?*

“As soon as possible Talong, I figure in the 24 hours,” said John.

“Why so long, couldn’t we do it before then?” asked the Captain. His mind running through all the things that could go wrong.

“I want to get close enough to the Deidre that maybe we could reach them with a portable comm unit, let them know what’s going on.”

“They’re overhauling, they won’t be able to come after us.”

“Probably not,” said Sunderson

The Captain nodded his assent and returned to writing in the paper logbook before him. That was something John Johanson had never seen on the bridge of a Starship.

§

For once, the Bridge was fully manned, the Captain, Wally, Yelaa, Russ and Jerimy were all present. Normally in a casual orbit the average Bridge complement was two and on rare occasions, although it was frowned on, only one. Captain Halerin surveyed the faces of those around the room, everyone was studiously watching their consoles. They were waiting for results from the recon drone that the Captain had finally decided to eat the cost of. Normally such expensive items were retrievable, but to get to where it needed to be the drone had been boosted to several times its normal velocity. The ship, in its current condition was unable to retrieve anything.

He glanced at the time display mounted high on the wall where it displayed the official ship’s time. The signal from the drone should reach them at any time. Then they would have information to go on, instead of making guesses on what might be.

Jerimy broke the silence, “Finally, data.”

The Captain turned his attention of the engineer and waited.

After a long moment, “It’s the Arbiter all right, but her transponders weak. I’d say it was operating on battery power. That’s odd.”

The Captain continued to wait, since there was no reason to ask questions now. When Jerimy had something he would pass it along.

“Getting visuals and scans now,” said Jerimy. “Hold on.”

Then, “Damm, you’ve got to be kidding me,” the engineer’s hands tightened on the edge of his console. Halerin saw his friends body stiffen and then slowly grow limp. His own impatience got the better of him.

“What is it?”

“It’s the Arbiter all right, but from these readings she’s almost dead. Power levels are almost non-existent, no emanating radiation, no deflector field, and she doesn’t even have running lights on.”

Halerin rose from his seat and crossed to Jerimy’s console, “Visuals?”

“Not yet, maybe in a couple of hours and then we’ll only have a short window, that drone is moving fast. It’ll blow past them in about 15 hours.”

The rest of the members of the Bridge now had their attention focused only on the two of them.

Yelaa asked, “Any response to the radio call we put on the drone?”

“Not so far,” said Jerimy.

The Captain spoke up, “Okay, there’s nothing we can do for a couple of hours, any chance of slowing that drone down?”

Wally said, “WE already did. We used up most of it’s fuel in getting there in a hurry.”

“Well we’ll just have to wait then. What we can do is start analyzing this data to figure out what happened to her. Once we do that, maybe we can come up with a plan to help them.”

Jerimy said with some trepidation, “If there’s anyone left to help.”

Yelaa responded, “Don’t talk like that.”

Halerin said, “Someone started that ship in system. I think chances are good that there’s someone alive. The question is, can we do anything to help them?”

“Maybe,” said Jerimy, “it’s just a guess we made that they’ve been sitting out there. Our guess could be wrong, and maybe she wasn’t under power. At any rate, the power readings I’m showing don’t guarantee that life support is functioning.”

The Captain scowled, “Let’s not have any of that meanly mouthed talk. We’re going to work the problem like there’s somebody out there to save. Now let’s get to it. Let’s see what we can come up with. Our friends are counting on it.”

§

Josh looked up. He was seated with Wendy with their backs against the outer wall and midway between two of the openings. Susan and Jameson were similarly positioned to their left between openings. Josh glanced again at his timepiece, Mikiu had been outside for the better part of half an hour. Talking with Wally trying to work out some means of communication that wouldn’t involve them having to return to the surface and be at the mercy of the elements. Elements which were rapidly getting angry. The wind and the now falling rain were creating a tongue like curtain of wetness extending from each of the door openings. As far as Josh could tell the wind was shifting directions often enough to throw water the same distance into the room from all five points of the star.

Then, as they watched the rain became harder, bullet like, crashing into the floor with an even harder wind at its back. After a few seconds Mikiu came stumbling in through the door, head down and his left arm shielding his eyes. Straightening up he shook the water from his short hair and moved to them handing the sat comm to Wendy.

“Well?” asked Josh, after a suitable pause for Mikiu to get seated.

“We talked over a couple ideas and we were going to set up a schedule to try some of them but …,” Mikiu quit talked and motioned to the heavens with his hands.

“Do you think any of them will work?” said Wendy.

Mikiu shrugged, “Given enough time we’re bound to figure out a way to do it.”

“Time is something we don’t have a lot of,” said Josh

“Yea, I know,” said Mikiu, “Wally wanted me to pass on something. Your Dad and Jerimy launched a highspeed drone at the Arbiter. If that’s who it really is.”

Josh said, “Dad must be getting antsy if he’s willing to waste an expensive drone like that.”

Wendy looked up, “Can’t they just retrieve it?”

“If they had full engine power, yes, but they don’t and shooting off a drone from so far away means you have to accelerate it fast. There’s no chance of catching it until much later. They tend to get damaged or lost.”

Josh looked around as the snap of lightning rang in his ears.

“I was wondering when that would start,” said Mikiu. “It’s really getting nasty out there.”

Josh walked over to the doorway to look out. It had gotten much darker since he had come in.

“Yea, okay, this looks like it’s settling in for a while. I think we need to head back down, and maybe hang out in the lounge, or maybe do some more exploring.”

Wendy asked, “Are you sure you want to do that. What about your Taph, Tapho….”

“Taphophobia,” said Josh. “It doesn’t bother me that much with you guys around. Besides, we’re all going to get soaked if we stay here.”

The others muttered their agreements and soon they were all once again clustered around the central pedestal. This time it didn’t take Josh long to bring up the control panel. He started to just hit the down bottom button but then pulled his hand back and thought about it. There original, and probably still most important job, was to find out why the planet had decided to go insane. He didn’t know for sure that it had anything to do with the alien remains they had stumbled over, but the technology here was still functioning and meant there was a good chance that it was related to the colony’s mishaps. Besides, at the moment there was nothing they could do to help either the colony or the Deidre. So if they could find out something they could be useful. His father had always taught him that wasted time may mean wasted opportunities, and he would feel better attempting to do something.

He glanced at Mikiu, “Want to do some recon?”

“Hit the other levels on the way down?”

“At least long enough to determine what there’re about.”

Mikiu nodded, “We’ve got plenty of daylight to burn, so to speak.”

§

The return trip to the surface was the roughest landing he had yet endured on Tingies 0017. Russ Dorkin the pilot, had flown in worse weather, but this made his top ten list, and he had been a shuttle pilot for 40 of his 65 years. Jarwan thanked him and exited the shuttle thru the pilot’s hatch, not bothering with the passenger hatch. He had bundled himself into a heavy weather parka for the thirty-meter trip to the terminal building. There he could see a ground transport waiting.

Quickly, without a goodbye wave to the pilot Jarwan duck walked to the transport and climbed in. Glancing out through the windows he saw the pilot immediately take off again. Martha was sitting across from him handling the control stick. It had been a good guess that his pickup driver would simply wait in the transport and avoid the horrendous weather.

“Sorry about the weather boss,” she said.

“Not exactly your fault Martha, give me a sit rep,” said Jarwan.

“We’re still locked down in the big dry goods warehouse, Dunzin and the boys finally got some more pallets in and we’ve been restacking stuff. That opened up a good deal more room. We should be able to get more cargo moved in today and tomorrow.”

“The power generators, they all running?”

“Yes and no, Number one is splitting duty with Two and Three’s in standby mode. Micael wants to rotate them tomorrow.”

“Distribution?”

“Everything is going through Distro One, although if we rotate we’ll use Distro Two. Power looks good all the way around,” she said, while slowly maneuvering the rain filled desert road. The bad thing about wet sand is that’s harder to drive in than mud, Jarwan was aware of that. Fortunately, Martha had brought one of the Colonies two tracked cargo haulers, both manually operated and much better for this type of weather than an automated unit. You could teach a robot to drive a treacherous path but you couldn’t teach them to guess which part of it was going to give way.

Marth asked, “So, what was the big secret?”

Jarwan, wanting to explain it only once said, “Nothing that can’t wait until we get back. It’s not a long story, and we really don’t have much to do, so I only want to explain it once.”

She nodded, “Good enough.”

§

On the Deidre everyone was waiting for additional data. To be specific, they were waiting for the closeup approach video from the Drone so that could figure out why the Arbiter’s power levels were low. Finally, the video came though, and everyone on the Bridge gasped.

“Mother of God, what happened to her?” asked Wally.

They had routed the incoming video to the large wall mounted display so that everyone could see. The long graceful ship that was the Arbiter, no longer looked like a Ship of the Line, her long sleek surface with the open tail rails connecting the engine assembly was discolored all along its length. Beams that should have stood out gleaming from the light of the systems star were almost invisible with charring. It was obvious that the ship had been in a fight – a fight it had lost.

Jerimy said in a hushed voice, “She must have been taken by surprise. No way she could take that much damage unless she was caught unawares.”

Halerin said, “She was probably in the process of picking up passengers when she got it, used the engine shielding to protect them.

Yelaa exclaimed, “Did you see that, there it is again.”

“A flashing light, Morse I think”, Yelaa added.

Halerin read the code subconsciously, “Still alive, almost no power. Low system orbit in twenty-six hours.”

The flashing light continued the same message, over and over. It was obviously set up for continuous sending, the question of life was not answered.

Wally asked the question they were all thinking. “Is that automatics or is there still someone there?”

Mike Halerin answered in his Captain’s voice, “No way of knowing at this point. Can we send a response with the drone?”

“Yes,” said Jerimy, but considering the lag between us and the drone a flashing beacon to let them know we saw them is our best bet. I can set it up quick.”

The Captain nodded. “Do it. Then we’ll see if anyone’s home.”

§

On board the Arbiter they almost missed it, if Allsop hadn’t been killing time on the bridge they would have missed it. As it was he starred for a full moment before realizing what he was seeing.

“A light”, he said, pounding the transparent portal before him, “a flashing light.”

“Where”, asked the Captain. He starred at it for several seconds and then settled back down into his seat.

“They know we’re out here and what we plan to do.” He motioned to one of his Bridge hands, Cheryl. “Keep an eye on that light, let me know if it changes. As soon as they have time they’ll send something intelligent, I hope.”

§

Josh turned to the others, “Okay, we’re going to do this trip down a little different.”

“How so?”, asked Jameson.

“Simple, we’re going to make a few stops on the way down. I don’t know how many of you noticed but the control for the elevator has six stops, or at least what we think are stops, between us and the bottom floor.”

Susan looked puzzled, “Isn’t the answer we’re looking for more likely to be on the bottom level. I mean, how big can these other levels be?”

Josh shrugged, “That’s another reason to check them out, we don’t know what we don’t know.”

She nodded and none of the others seemed to object.

“Good”, he said, “let’s do this in an organized manner. I’ll handle the control, Mikiu the scanner of course, and the rest of you make sure that every entrance is covered.”

Mikiu added in, “It may well be that all five are not present on every level, chances are these are maintenance related levels, but you never know, the answer we’re looking for could be on any one of them.”

­ With everyone is position Josh put a hand on his sidearm but left it holstered. With his left hand he touched the setting for the first level while thinking about his desire to go there. Like the last time they had left the surface, nothing happened for a second until once again the five openings vanished and he felt the floor pull away from his feet. It only took a matter of seconds to come to a stop again. Josh looked around, ready.

Mikiu was wrong, at least about this level, all five openings returned. Each opened out into a dimly lit space. The light was coming through transparent walls in the shape of the upper island, a large round center and five extended points. Beyond the see-through material were sea creatures of many differing shapes and sizes, all illuminated by a dull glow apparently coming from the island shaft above and below this level. Without a word he led them into the outer space and up to the transparent wall looking out. Josh looked at his companions, they were all as mesmerized by the variety of aquatic life before them, as was he.

“Aquarium?” he asked.

Mikiu, laughed, “I would say we found the observation deck.”

“It’s very pretty,” said Wendy, a look of amazement on her face.

Susan and Jameson quickly echoed the comments of their peers.

Josh stepped back and looked around the rest of the space, as he suspected, it appeared to be an exact match to the top of the pillar as far as the layout was concerned. He did a quick recon to his left and right, going far enough in each direction to ascertain that the pattern was followed all the way around the center area while at the same time staying within seeing distance of the rest of the group. He still had concerns about the group being split up.

“Okay guys,” he said, “let’s check out the next floor down.”

“But this one is beautiful, cant’s we stay for a while?” asked Wendy.

“Sorry, I’ll bring you for a picnic on your birthday.”

She stopped him for a second with her reply. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

He continued to the control panel, unsure of her seriousness.

§

She watched the flashing light on the screen with intensity, as if her life depended on it, which it might. She knew the light itself had no magic properties, but the message it might send could very well tell whether her life would continue past 90, which she very much wanted, or end here, in this system on the edges of explored space, encased in a cold dead tube of metal until the ship, or time itself, ended. She shook her head, Cheryl always got morbid thoughts at times like these, it was because of her grandmother she thought, always telling the grandkids tales from the great out coming from Earth. Personally, she thought that the old stories were just that, stories, although one couldn’t be sure. Even with digital storage the data on man’s spread into the galaxy was mostly a matter of myth.

Even while letting her attention wonder her mind snapped her back to the moment when the pattern of flashes began to vary.

“Captain, message coming through,” she said.

Head Hopping ???

Captain Mendez drew himself up out of introspection, got himself back into the now, “What are they saying?”

Bill Anderson, the engineer, was taking the message down, his cross training was in communications. “*No to long orbit. No to long orbit. Burn to slow. Burn to slow.* That just keeps repeating Captain.”

Mendez nodded, turned to his Chief Engineer and friend. “What do you think John?”

Johanson thought for a moment and then said. “Well, we can’t get stop, but we can get slower. At this point I don’t think it matters much. We don’t have enough power left to do much of anything. I’m not even sure we could pull off a long orbit.”

Cheryl raised her voice, eager to be heard. “Shouldn’t we let them know we got the message.”

Mendez smacked a forehand to his head, “Sorry Cheryl, me and the chief Engineer are practicing our stupid act. Bill, let them know we got that, tell them to go ahead and send more.”

§

On board the Deidre things were moving rapidly. Russ Dorkin his second best pilot after his son and Lydia Renaul were rapidly fueling the two shuttles. The rest of the engineering section were attaching bumpers that were normally only used in station work to guide heavy cargo pallets. They bolted extra fuel to skeleton structural beams bolted to the outside of the shuttle. Normally it would take two days to convert the shuttles to cargo handling at a station or deep space cargo base. But they didn’t have two days so they were doing it in hours.

“Yelaa, tell them to burn now. They need to slow themselves down now if we’re to have any chance of altering their course,” said the Captain.

“Should I fill them in?” she asked.

“No, No Not now, let’s get them to slow down first. Then maybe we’ll have time to explain how crazy we are.”

She nodded and within a couple of minutes the message was off to the drone for resending.

§

­ Captain Talong Mendez had order the bridge lights on the Arbiter to be turned off, as well as most of the overhead illumination throughout the entire ship. Power was being saved wherever possible. He had ordered all of the rescued colonist, with the exception of Allsop who remained on the Bridge, to occupy the small shuttle bay, the rest of the crew was either with them, or in Engineering. Power to all remaining areas had been cut. He couldn’t cut all life support power or the air would freeze, but it was now advisable to wear winter gear, even on the command deck. He had no illusions that the little power saved by these efforts would be worth the discomfort to his crew and passengers, but the moral boost of at least doing something together was certainly worth the effort.

Cheryl broke the dark silence, “Captain, message changing.”

“You got it Bill?” The answer to his question was a curse, and then a small console light came on.

“Sorry Cap, I can’t write in the dark.”

Mendez nodded, and then realized that no one could see him in the dark. “That’s all right Bill, no expects one you to.”

Anderson muttered his thanks and kept writing. He had learned Morse as a young child from his great uncle who was an hobbyist in radio. He had learned to write his text by hand while listening to Morse code and that was the way he did it, even with a screen and keyboard at his disposal.

“Not much of change, they’re just repeating the message to *slow down now, as much as possible. Explain next.”*

He heard Allsop’s voice out of the darkness. “What do you think he’s up to?”

Mendez decided to act. “Don’t know Doctor, we worry about that later. John, what can you do to slow us down?”

The big, tall engineer raised a hand to his chin, deep in thought, glancing from one console to another. He glanced at the Captain.

“Well Sir, I’ve got a couple of thoughts, one of them you’re not going to like.”

Mendez hurumphed to himself, “I know when you can me *Sir,* I’m not going to like it.”

The Engineer walked over and sat in the control console chair nearest the Captain, spinning it around until they were facing each other, the Captain’s head now level with his because of the increased height of the command platform.

“I”, he said, holding a single finger vertically, “think we need to flip the ship long ways and hit the emergency landing thrusters as well as the ion drive at overload level, hell, even the maneuvering jets, everything.”

“Will that stop us?”

“No it’ll kill some speed, but when the ION drive blows that’ll help.”

The Captain raised his eyebrows, “Part of your braking plan is to blow the end off of the ship — my ship,” he said calmly.

“Not blow it off, just, mess it up a little,” clarified Johanson.

“And how,” the Captain’s voice was quieter now, “do you plan on doing that without killing us?”

The big Engineer smiled, “Carefully.”

“You’re smiling, what aren’t you telling me?” asked Mendez.

“I want to burn out the ION engines, not explode them violently. It’s a matter of scale, the engine outputs will be torched, and it won’t do the plasma chambers much good, but it will put a lot of stop in our stopping. We’ll still be moving but a lot slower and I think I know what Captain Halerin has in mind. But we need to do it know, the sooner we slow down the better chance they have to help us.”

Captain Talong Mendez thought for just a second and then nodded, “Do it.” He hadn’t risen to the rank of ship commander by over thinking things. He trusted Mile Halerin and his Engineer trusted him, that was good enough for him. It wasn’t like they had a lot of options left anyway, the long orbit they had planned to attempt just meant they would starve or freeze to death, at least this way if things went bad the explosion would be over in a hurry.

The turning of the ship, although something they had done innumerable times when docking, now became an exercise in terror of both the known and unknown variety. For those crew members in Engineering, who could sense and recognize what was happening, it was the expectation that any microsecond one of the myriad things that must occur precisely in sequence would fail, — for those civilians in the dark of the shuttle bay it was the terror of the unknown as the ship was doing something unexpected. Fortunately, it was a simple maneuver, at least in normal times. Now it was another exercise in what next.

The Captain let those thoughts run around in his mind as the maneuver was completed. He felt a little guilty, but keeping his mind occupied with other people’s terrors made it easy to ignore his own. He let out a sigh as he saw the rest of the Bridge crew relax, their relief was his own.

“Burn coming up Cap,” said Johanson, who since the death of OReily, pulled double duty as the ships navigator and pilot when one was needed.

Mendez decided to waste power on the intercom. He had been tempted to warn the remaining crew and passengers of the last maneuver, but figured that they would survive unharmed. The braking that was about to occur, even though it wouldn’t be harsh, could possibly injure anyone who wasn’t seated and anchored in some manner. He figured a little warning would help.

He spoke quietly but firmly and quickly. “Folks, grab hold of something. We are going to slow down in a hurry. Thank You.” A habit, saying *thank you,* something he had always done. This might be one of the times he was actually serious. He did appreciate all they had done so far.

He squeezed the arms of his own chair as he heard Johanson say, “Here we go.”

At first, there was no pressure. Then, little by little the pressure to slid forward increased as his grip tightened and his knees tried to grab the edge of the chair. He heard Anderson yell something to Johanson and then there was an intense jerk forward on his body — he almost lost his grip. He saw Cheryl lose the same battle and slam the top half of her body into the console. But she appeared unhurt. The jolt had not been that bad and that worried him. It should have been worse — and then it was.

The force tore his hands from the chair as he stumbled towards the control consoles. His feet trying to take their proper place beneath him even as he slammed hard into navigation. He heard a grunt of pain escape his lips followed closely by another one from the lips of his Engineer Johanson who had been manning the console. He felt the big man’s frame go limp as his breath was driven out of him by the weight of the Captain’s body. A wave of darkness fell across his eyes as he felt himself rebound backwards to the deck, and then, nothing.

His was not the only unconscious body to crumple to the deck plating, the entire cadre of bridge officers and Dr. Allsop also crumpled after the severe shock. The shuttle bay did not fare much better, everyone was unconscious, injured, and in one case dead. Engineering had been better prepared, its members trained to handle the enormous forces of the engines they worked closely with. They made use of the restraints at their stations and did a much better job of bracing themselves for the anticipated ruin of the ION drive. The Engineer in charge, a midlevel officer named Jed Pulmer, quickly shrugged the cobwebs from his vision, and did a quick check of his status board before even bothering to check the conditions of his followers. It made little sense to check the condition of his coworkers if the ship was about to blow or suffer from some other calamity that was unrecoverable.

The multiple beeps of the intercom roused Cheryl Laramie from her stupor. A deep breath quickly told her that she had not escaped injury, the pain in her ribs a strong reminder of her collision with the console. She took a quick look around her, she was the only one still seated, a testimony to the seat rigging she always fastened, but never quite tightened.

Mendez forced himself into a seated position before making the effort to open his clenched eyes. He rapidly decided that had been a mistake. Still, he forced himself to reopen them after a few seconds as the pain in his gut was rapidly subsiding. One look at Johanson, still on the floor beside him, revealed the reason for his quick recovery. The man was clenching his arms around his chest in obvious pain and his breathing was labored. Further away he noted Allsop, and Anderson also attempting to regain their footing. Only Cheryl was up, still at her console. He regretted kidding her about always fastening her rigging. It would seem that she had been the only smart one on the Bridge.

He found his voice. “Is everyone okay?”

Everyone made a noise of affirmation, Johanson’s was the weakest.

“John, condition?” Mendez asked, knowing that the big man would give him an honest answer.

“Cap, I don’t mean to talk bad of no man but if you ever smack me in the back like that again I’m afraid we’ll have to talk about it.”

Mendez relaxed a little. John wouldn’t have answered in a lighthearted manner if he had been seriously hurt. The grin faded as he realized that Johanson wasn’t really a good judge of his own condition. They needed to get Abernathy up here to check everyone out. He turned towards Cheryl, but she was already speaking.

“Captain, Engineering is fine but in the shuttle bay,” she paused and swallowed hard, “we lost one of the crew, Sally Merrian, she broke her neck.”

“Damm,” he said and smacked the floor, she had been a good friend and long-time shipmate. With effort he forced himself to a standing position and stepped awkwardly back to the command chair.

“Anyone else badly hurt?”

She shook her head, “Don’t know yet, Doc’s looking them over now.”

“Good, have him come up here when he’s done.”

He turned his attention back to John Johanson, who had regained a seat, at a different console. The one he had occupied looked to be out of order for now. The man was carefully examining display screens.

“John,” he said casually, “would you like to explain to me again, how you’re not going to blow the ship up.”

The big man looked chagrinned, “Sorry Talong, It shouldn’t have kicked like that. Cheryl, you said Engineering is fine?”

The blond girl turned his direction, “that’s what they said. They were strapped in.”

“Of course they were”, said Johanson, keeping the pride out of his voice Now wasn’t the time. “Get me someone on the line down there”

“Right away,” she answered and bent back to her console, one hand cupping the wireless headset piece in her left ear.

The Captain, just to get it over with, and because he needed to know his own condition, rose slowly to his feet. Fine, nothing seemed broken, but everything felt bruised. He would live. Taking his time he crossed over to the console that Bill Anderson was now studying.

“What have you got Bill, did we slow down?” he asked.

“Anderson gave him a momentary glance, “Don’t know yet, and it may take a while to figure out.”

“Why?”

“Well, first off, we’re now facing the wrong way, the camera’s we were using were in the bow. Second, John apparently blew up every instrument in the stern. Right now we’re almost blind. Give me some time and I can get some data from the bow sensors again, maybe.”

“Well, that seems concise enough. We’re blind,” said the Captain.

“Just for the moment,” wheezed Johanson, “damage wasn’t that bad, inside at least. I have no idea what the stern looks like. We slowed down quite a bit. Hopefully enough for what I think Halerin has in mind.”

“You mentioned that before but there wasn’t time to ask. What do you think Deidre’s going to try?”

John sat back in his chair, obviously in pain, Mendez felt a moment of sympathy. The Chief Engineer continued.

“The problem of course, is that we’re too big. Even if Deidre had her engines up and running it would be a nightmare for them to match up with us, clamp on somehow and kill our momentum. Just trying would probably get us all killed.”

“You’re not filling me with confidence John,” said the Captain.

“Just setting the stage, I imagine that we’ve got a little time to kill and at this point we’re spectators anyway. There’s nothing we can do — nothing.”

“Fine,” said the Captain, “exactly what is it Mike Halerin and the Deidre are going to be doing while we’re sitting here with our thumbs up our ass.”

The big man straightened up a little for the old man’s voice had a hint of anger in it. “Sorry boss, what I mean is that we don’t have any power left. It’s all going to have to come from outside.”

“Shuttles?”

“Yes, sir, if I know Captain Halerin he’s got Josh and Russ headed our way now with their two shuttles, strapped with all the fuel they can carry.”

Cheryl spoke up. “I don’t get it.”

“They’re going to play the part of tugboats,” said Johanson.

“But we’re way to big for them to do anything.”

The Captain filled her in, “They don’t have to be big and strong Cheryl, just have enough fuel.”

Johanson took over the explanation, “You ever see a tugboat in Peciln Harbor?”

“Those little boats that shove the big cargo ships around,” she said.

“That’s the ticket. All the Deidre’s shuttles have to do is nudge us enough to assume a safe orbit around the planet, or at least on the same orbital plane as the planet. Whichever they can do.”

“And that’ll save us?”

“No,” said the Captain, “but it’ll give them time to transfer us off using the shuttles. Hopefully, they can help with temporary power for life support till we get everyone off.”

“They have enough room on the Deidre for all of us?” she asked.

“If not on the ship, at least down on the colony,” said Allsop. “An interesting solution.”

“Captain Mike Halerin is a resource full man,” said Mendez.

“I haven’t had the pleasure of meeting him, but you mentioned a son, Josh. I believe he was a student of mine many years ago.”

“That could very well be,” said the Captain. “Josh is a particularly educated man, and an extremely good pilot. Bill or John, one of you figure out how to re-establish communication. In fact, Bill you do it and John, go get your ribs taped.

Cheryl said, “Just wait, the Doctor’s on his way here.”

“Good,” said Talong, settling back into his chair, “he can wrap mine after he gets done with John.”

§

“Damm,” said Lydia’s voice in his headset. “That left a mark.”

Russ Dorkin acknowledged her, “No doubt. You scan this side, I’ll do the other.”

Without waiting for a response he flew past the crumpled remains of the Arbiter’s stern, which was now pointing in towards the star Tingies and began a slow flyover the length of the ship, past the engineering and storage bay sections, up the scaffold beam midsection surrounding the transfer tub, and then up the passenger and control areas of the massive ship. The Arbiter’s design betrayed her history as a military ship When there had been a usage for such vessels. Now conflicts were regional in nature and single planets or planetary groups couldn’t afford the massive cost of designing, building, supporting and staffing a ship of such size or power. She was a relic, but she had served the crew and many colony missions well, Dorkin was dismayed to see her in such a decrepit state.

He slowed down as he reached the area of the bridge. Her external portals were encased with closed blast doors Long scorch marks were evident up down the ships length. It was obvious that she had been in a fight of some kind. He just didn’t know of what kind. With great skill and patience he positioned his craft as close to the Bridge area as possible and aimed his directional antenna. With any luck someone on the bridge would have a portable comm unit on them. He waited several minutes without getting a response. With a sense of foreboding he turned and moved back down the length of the ship until he got to then end of the primary hull. Then he tried again. This time aiming for the auxiliary control center located just before the central shaft leading to engineering.

§

The sound screeched across the bridge. Captain Mendez’s head snapped in the direction of Johanson who was frantically clawing at the comm unit on his belt. It took the man a few seconds to get it clear of his belt and adjust the volume, that was just long enough for Mendez to realize that it was a man’s voice calling them.

“Arbiter, Arbiter, this is Deidre shuttle Alpha calling, do you receive?”

Cheryl said, “That’s Russ Dorkin.”

“Yes, it is,” said the Captain, “Let me have that thing John.”

Johanson covered the space to the Captain in two long steps, stretching out the comm unit to the Captain as he did so. Mendez, took it, waited for Dorkin to finish another communication query, and then answered. “Dorkin, we can hear you, and then some.”

Russ’s voice came back quieter, “Sorry about that, I wanted to make sure and get your attention.”

“Consider it got, how do we look from out there?”

Russ thought about it for a second, delivering bad news had never been his strong point, but one thing he knew. You never lie to a Captain about the condition of his ship.

“Sir, I’m not going to lie to you. The arbiter looks like the back end of a swamp cardinal.”

“That bad, okay, we’ll worry about that later. I assume you’re here to push us into some kind of orbit. Is Josh with you.”

“No Captain Mendez, Lydia Renaul is flying the other boat. Josh is down on the surface with his own problems. In fact, as soon as we can get you into a stable orbit we need the help of some of the scientist I’m assuming you have on board.”

“Yes, we saved most of them. What kind of trouble is Josh in?”

Allsop, hearing the scientists mentioned came over to listen.

Russ answered, “Everything down on the surface is going crazy, the weather is flat out of control, Josh and an Expo team are trapped in some kind of Alien zoo or something like that. They’re trying to figure out what’s wrong with the planet.”

Russ knew that explanation fell terribly short of making any kind of sense, but he needed to get started.

Captain Mendez took a second to stare at the comm unit, this was beginning to sound like bad karma. “You want to repeat that Dorkin?”

“Sorry, know that’s a lot to process. Something is going wrong down on Tingies 0017, the weather is all screwed up, the water levels are going up and down. Josh and Mikiu took an exploration team to the forest, it’s never been looked at before, and stumbled into some kind of ancient alien crap. We got a lot of things going on out here.”

“Sounds like it, how soon are you going to try an orbit us?”

“We got cow catcher’s on, you just tell us where to hook up.”

“I’ll turn you over to Johanson and Anderson. Take it easy on John, I accidentally clobbered him when the ION drive burned out.”

“Oh, is that what you call it,” said Russ.

“That’s what he calls it,” returned the Captain.

“I wouldn’t apologize for clobbering him just yet.”

Mendez laughed. “Okay Russ, I’ll let you guys get to work.”

“Ask them about what they found on the planet,” said Dr. Allsop.

Captain Mendez shook his head, “Not now Doctor. When we get things settled down then we can worry about that.”

The Dr. answered, “Of course. It’s just that I never heard about ruins on this planet.”

The Captain sighed and handed the communicator back to John. “Do we need to prepare in some way?”

“No, I doubt if we’ll even feel them, it won’t be like the ION drive I promise.”

The Captain glared at him for a second before relaxing into his chair to think. A lot of pieces were no in play, and he didn’t even know the name of the game yet.

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