**New Story**

**Part 9**

**04/01/2020**

Jarwan Sunderson was sound asleep when Deidre called. Although it was early, he had elected to get some sleep in the hope of manning one of the watches he and Dunzin had set up. One person standing watch in the warehouse, one in the Power shop, and one roaming the colony, Truth be told the person entrusted with roaming probably wouldn’t leave the vicinity of the warehouse. The ground was still to muddy. The only reason they decided on an outside post was to have someone to go between the other posts in an emergency.

Polly Bitterlly woke him by shaking his shoulder, not that he was hard to wake any more.

“What, oh Polly, is something wrong,” he asked.

“Mom said to wake you up, the ship’s calling.”

“Okay, thanks,” he said. Struggling to his feet he looked around, a few of the people were still up talking or eating, but a large number of them had succumbed to the days weariness already. He made his way quietly over to the command corner, as they now called it, and took the mike from the colonist on duty.

“Jarwan here, over,” he said.

Mike Halerin’s voice came back, “Jeez, sorry Jarwan. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“That’s okay Captain, I was just getting an early nap so I could stand watch later.”

“As I said, sorry. The reason I called, and it may be for nothing, but we’re getting some weird things going on in the air. A lot of changes in temperatures and shifting wind currents. Don’t know if it means anything but I thought I’d let you know. It could just be the planet settling down after the last couple of days.”

“Or,” said Jarwan, “it could be another bunch of bad weather brewing up. Appreciate the call Mike, maybe I will stay up for a little longer.”

The two men quickly signed off the call and Jarwan sat thinking. He had been waiting for the other shoe to drop and now he felt an uneasiness, maybe this was it. Grabbing a cup of coffee he sent Polly, who had followed him, to get Dunzin.

It didn’t take long for her to return with the man.

“What’s up chief?” said Dunzin as he grabbed a cup for himself.

“Halerin says the atmosphere’s getting a little flaky again. Doesn’t know if it means anything but thought we’d like to know,” said Jarwan.

“You think it’s going to start raining again?”

“I don’t know, but we ought to be prepared for anything. What’s our status?”

The tall man shrugged, “Well we’re in good shape here.” Dunzin looked around and then continued, “The only thing I could suggest that’s doable quickly is prep another hidey hole.”

“One of the below grounds?” said Jarwan.

“The one the Expo team set out from, Number 1. I’ve been using it to store the overflow for the stuff I wanted to get into here. There’s already an emergency generator and accessories stored in there. Wouldn’t take me any time to get some other stuff, heaters, lights, and so forth in there.”

“How long do you think?”

“Well, since the planet already bit us in the ass once I’m not for putting anything off. I’ll get some guys and get started tonight.”

“I don’t want you or anyone else going without sleep, again. We can deal with this in the morning,” said Jarwan.

“That’s okay boss. I’ll sleep a lot better if I don’t have to worry. Just to be on the safe side I’ll rig a follow along cable between here and there.”

“That’s got to be 300 meters.”

“Not a problem,” said Dunzin, “I’ll use a couple of the other buildings as anchor points. If it turns really bad everyone can use it as a handhold to change buildings.”

“Good thinking. Tell you what, when you’re ready to string cable come get me. I can help.”

“What about standing watch?”

“If I have to leave, I’ll get Denise stand in for me. Chances are if something did happen inside I’d have to get her anyway.”

Dunzin nodded, “So, its just Denise now. No Dr Bitterlly.”

Jarwan gave him a mind your own business look and headed back to his napping spot. He still had time to get a little sack time.

§

The robot wasn’t as interesting as the alien skeleton. It was tall, but only a little taller than josh who topped out at 2 meters. It was about a meter wide for most of its height and ran on a triangular set of tracks that could rotate in various directions. Josh guessed that they would rotate to keep two tracks always facing forward. What would have been the head area was simply the top of the body cylinder and covered with various sensors that it obviously used for eyes. He decided that it would be a bitch to sneak up on. The two cannon barrels they had faced were complimented by another pair extruding from the robot’s back.

“This would have been a nasty character to tangle with,” said Josh.

Wendy said, “I don’t know. The guy next door took him out.”

“Yea and look what it did for him.”

“Hey, I didn’t say it would be easy,” said Wendy.

Josh looked around the room they were now in. In their initial haste to check out the skeleton and live screens they had neglected the room the robot was in.

It was a large room, about as wide as the rom next door, but much deeper. It was filled with row after row of shelves. Shelves loaded down with items, boxes and what looked like weapons or tools. It was obviously a storeroom. Okay, thought Josh, now maybe we can get some answers about the people who build this place.

“Wendy, go get Mikiu. I think he’ll want to take a look at this. There’s all kind of stuff in here to examine.”

“Sure,” she turned a walked across the hallway.

He was turning to start examined the warehouse contents and it was just accident that his eyes caught a glimmer of movement. He wasn’t even sure that it had happened but apparently his body did.

He found himself in a crouch, his firearm in his hand and coming up. He heard himself shout.

“Wendy.”

Hearing her name she spun around, just in time to catch a flash of energy across her stomach. Instinctively she fell backwards and down, screaming as she did so.

Josh felt the weapon recoil in his hand as it discharged — saw a hole open in the robots back. Just then he heard another sound as Susan fired with her energy weapon. The robot made a squealing sound as both weapons struck it. A second later Josh and Susan fired again, this time joined by a discharge from Mikiu’s weapon. This time the robot teetered and slumped to one side.

He raced to the robot. It was no longer moving and both its front barrels were now pointed downward. Looking up he saw Susan racing to Wendy who lie withering on the floor. Mikiu was also racing forward and he saw something the others couldn’t, Jameson lying on the floor of the other room, not moving.

“Mikiu, behind you, Jameson,” he shouted.

Going to his knees beside Wendy, his heart in his throat he grabbed hold of her shoulder and shoved his other hand under her head. She was withering in pain and he was afraid she’d injure her head in the process.

“Whoa, try not to move. Susan, get something under her head and get out a Pain Jab.”

He let his mind go partially blank and revert to his field medical training, which fortunately, was up to date. The shot from the robot had been some kind of energy beam that had caught her across the stomach, just missing her breasts. The shot had burnt away her field suit, all four layers of it and had singed the body shirt underneath it. He could see the flesh underneath starting to blister. Susan handed him a short self-contained drug injector which he promptly applied to her stomach. It only took a few seconds before her frantic movement slowed to a stop.

“Oh, God that hurts like a mother,” she said, pounding the floor with her right hand, the other clenched in fist.

“Just give it a second to work. Then I’ll need to take a closer look. Susan, watch her,” he said.

He hadn’t forgotten Jameson, if nothing Devante III had taught him not to forget any of his team members. He hurried across the 5 meters of space to where Mikiu sat with Jameson.

“How is he?”

“Caught him in the leg. It’s bad but I don’t think it got the bone. He’s passed our from the pain I think. I need to wash this out and get some medicine on it. We’re going to have to come up with something to bandage it,” said Mikiu, his breath quick.

“We need a couple of bandages. Wendy’s got a nasty burn across her belly. You think he’ll be able to walk?” asked Josh.

“Maybe with someone to lean on. We’re going to need some kind of cane.”

Josh leaned back on his heels, “Well, we’ve got a whole warehouse of stuff in there to find something.”

Looking at Mikiu he asked, “Didn’t you say that thing was dead?”

“It was. It didn’t register any power. Maybe we woke it up somehow or our presence in this room did. Could you tell who it was shooting at.?”

Josh shook his head, “Not for sure, I just saw it move and then I was firing.”

“Good thing you did. They might both be dead,” said Mikiu.

Josh raised his voice, “Anyone got any spray on bandage?”

“Jameson always carries a bottle, he hurts himself a lot,” whispered Wendy.

“Check his pack,” he said to Mikiu before heading back to Wendy.

He grabbed her hand as the knelt beside her. “How’s the pain?”

She smiled and tightened her fingers, “Still hurts, but I can stand it know. Thank You.”

He returned the smile. “For what. I should have blasted that thing when we first saw it.”

“If you hadn’t shouted, I might not be in pain, just dead. I prefer the pain.”

“Well, I’m sorry anyway. You’ll be okay.” He turned to Susan, I hate to split us up but we need some of the clothing from the lounge room. Are you okay to handle that.”

“Sure,” she said, “you figure on dragging them back on it?”

“Seems like the easiest way,” he moved out of the way for Mikiu who had arrived with the sealant spray.

“Shouldn’t take me very long. I’ll be right back,” said Susan.

Josh waited till she started down the hallway. “Susan,” he gave her an admiring look, “nice shooting. That goes for you too Mikiu.”

Susan raised her gun to her head in salute and took off down the corridor.

Mikiu was examining the damage to the robot. “I don’t know how much Susan and I helped. We were using beam weapons. I think the big hole you blow in its back probably did the trick.”

“Maybe, and maybe the only thing I did was piss it off and you guys finished it off. It’s not like Fargonius where we knew who to blame,” said Josh.

Mikiu slammed done the alien artifact he had been examining, “Bullshit, it was nobody’s fault. Especially not yours. Damm it, you’ve got to get over it. The Captain cleared you. The review board cleared you, and the company cleared you. The only person who hasn’t cleared you is you.”

“I don’t like getting people hurt,” whispered Josh. “I don’t want to do this any longer.”

Mikiu gave him a strange look, “Well, I hate to tell you this buddy, but I think you’re stuck with it a while longer.”

Josh looked up at him from his seat by Wendy, “I didn’t mean this exact second. Now quit horsing around and find something we can use as a crutch.”

§

Jarwan grabbed his thirtieth or fortieth cup of coffee. It was now approaching daylight. The transformation of the underground warehouse had taken most of the night, but they now had a functioning second refuge. He was sitting with Denise and Dunzin discussing how to handle the near future.

“I don’t like the idea,” said Denise. “The only thing splitting up the colony is to make it harder for me to treat people if I have to trudge from one place to another.”

“Yes,” said Jarwan, “but it doubles the chances of the colony surviving if something really bad happens.”

“How bad could it be if it only hits one building. They’re only a couple of hundred meters apart.”

Dunzin grinned and said, “It’s not the distance, it’s the altitude.”

Jarwan and Dr. Bitterly both said, “What”, simultaneously.

“It’s easy. This building is ten meters taller than the other one. Depending on the weather one might be affected differently. That’s all I meant.”

“Math. Simple math,” said Jarwan. “If we split the people up and we do have to evacuate from one build to the other we only have to move half as many people. It’s quicker.”

“People are not math!” said Denise.

“I know that.” Jarwan said testily and then caught himself. Raising his hands in front of himself in supplication he said, “Sorry, I’m just really tired.”

“I know, I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have snapped like that.”

Dunzin let his head slump forward, chin on his chest. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

Jarwan saw Denise look quickly towards Dunzin as if to inquire about what was wrong, and then realize that he had been exercising his sarcasm. She didn’t look happy.

Instead of arguing she asked, “What about flooding. The other warehouse is underground and has a ramp down to it. Doesn’t the water build up there or leak underneath the door. “

“Drains,” said Dunzin. “When we built that warehouse we didn’t know what the weather patterns would be like so we installed drain pipes everywhere. They go down about 20 meters lower than the warehouse floor.”

“Yea,” cut in Jarwan, “it might float if it rained enough from the water underneath it, but it won’t float. At least I don’t think so. Besides, we can drive the treaded cargo haulers right inside.”

“Why didn’t we use it to begin with?”

The two men looked at each other and shrugged. “To tell the truth,” said Jarwan. It was the oldest warehouse in the colony, and this was the newest. I guess we just went with the newest.”

She looked at them suspiciously and Jarwan had the feeling she was deciding whether her leg was being pulled. Glancing at her legs the though crossed his mind that he might like to pull one himself. He immediately chastised himself with the old wrong time and place argument.

“Well, what’s the answer chief?” asked Dunzin.

“I don’t know, half these people were up all night helping us. Doesn’t seem right to make them do more work. However, since I’ve got a working amount of caffeine in me now. I’ll give the Deidre a call and see if anything has changed.”

The others nodded agreement and he set off to the command corner where the radio was located.

§

“Sir, I’ve got Jarwan on the radio,” said Yelaa.

“Thank you, I’ve got it from here,” said the Captain as he hit the comm panel on his chair arm.

“Jarwan, is anything wrong.”

“That’s what I called you for. I’m trying to make some decisions on people placement. Just wondered if anything has changed?” came Jarwan’s voice.

“Let me check, hold on.” He looked over to Wally ready to give an order but the man was already running his console. Halerin sat back and waited for him to finish.

“Whoa,” said Wally.

“That’s not exactly what I wanted to hear.”

“Sorry boss, I just checked this twenty minutes ago, but it’s changed a lot sense then. A storm of some kind is brewing up, but I don’t see no clouds. It could be just wind.”

Jarwan, who was still listening, said, “Just wind, how much wind.”

Wally shook his head. “I don’t have anyway to tell yet. It could be bad.”

The Captain looked down at his chair arm, “You thinking sand storm. Have you ever had one of those?”

“Not so far. But with everything the planet’s been throwing at us it wouldn’t surprise me. In fact, it might just be ratcheting up. Thanks for the info Mike. I’ve got to go make some tired people do some more work.”

“Don’t envy you there. We’ll keep a closer eye on this,” said the Captain.

“Thanks, Rinein out.”

“Wally.”

“I know, I’ll keep a steady eye on it from now on, or maybe I’ll assign it to someone full time.”

“That sounds like a better idea. Don’t stretch yourself to thin.”

Halerin sat back in his chair, doing his best not to fall asleep.

§

He found the doctor and his second in command where he had left them. “Okay, I talked to the Captain. They double checked and things are getting more excited up in the atmosphere. Wally thinks maybe we have a big wind coming up.”

“A big wind?” asked Denise.

Dunzin filled in, “He means a sandstorm. That could get ugly, although the desert really isn’t set for sandstorms so it could be just dust, or even really high winds. It could be trouble.”

“And I don’t want to find out if it’s trouble the hard way. I think we start getting people over to the other building now. Say about 10 at a time and have them carry their sleeping stuff with them. That way we don’t have to break out new blankets and cots over there.”

“What about Micael. Do we move him now,” asked Denise, her doctor side on display.

Jarwan nodded, “Yes, I’d rather do it now when we can take our time instead of dragging him over if it starts to get bad.”

“Makes sense,” said Dunzin. “I’ll get things started. Doc, we might as well use a hauler for Micael.”

“I’ll get hm ready.”

§

Fortunately, the trip back to the lounge room, while taking time, proved no great task. Mikiu and Susan pulled Jamerson on one of the alien coveralls. It slid easily down the smooth grey floor. Josh helped Wendy by going slowly and keeping a hand around her waist. She was still in pain and he gave her an oral medication after they arrived. She was now semi-sleeping on the half circle couch they had claimed as home base.

Mikiu carefully cleaned each of their wounds and applied a topical cream that acted as an anti-bacterial and aided healing. For a bandage they just cut up one of their emergency blankets. Josh hoped that they could get help soon. They didn’t have a lot left in the way of medical supplies.

Mikiu looked at him and asked, “Okay, reluctant leader. What do we do now?”

“Well, the first thing we’re going to do is contact the ship. Find out what’s going on and see if they have any way of getting help to us. While we’re up there we’ll refill canteens and rinse out some of those left behind clothes, only if it’s to get the dust out of them.

After that, well then, I’m open to suggestion,” finished Josh.

“We’ve got to do some more exploring, especially the star base level,” said Mikiu.

“You hoping to find a ship and fly out of here?”

“It’s a thought, since I don’t see any other way out of here.”

“What about the boat?” asked Susan.

Mikiu asked, “Which direction. Unless the boat remembers where it picked us up and we can figure out how to give it orders we don’t know where the way back is.”

“Yes, we do,” said Josh. “The trackers, they can tell us the way to go.”

“Okay,” conceded Mikiu, “there’s still the matter of the force field in the forest. How do we get through that? Face it guys. We either learn to control this base or we learn to fly one of their ships. I give us even odds on both.”

“Okay, we’ll figure that out later. When we have some time to think it through. Right now, I just want to make sure we have water and that the ship is aware of our condition. Past that we all need some rest to get over the excitement.” Josh looked at his watch and continued. “It’s light out, if the weather still good it shouldn’t take us long. You two go get some more of these oversized coveralls. I’ll watch the invalids.

As he watched the two leave he quickly checked on Jameson, who was still asleep. They had given him a Healing Jab before moving him that would keep him out for about 16 hours. Give his battered let a chance to heal a little bit. Josh knew that burns were one of the hardest wounds to heal but the cream they had placed on it was a miracle worker at handling burnt skin. He was concerned about the depth of Jameson’s injury and the fact that he had felt enough pain to render him unconscious. He knew that a third degree burn like that should result in no pain and he was worried that the area underneath had been badly damaged.

Wendy was a different story, for the burn was not as deep. She was in a lot of pain and without medical attention there would be scarring. The main thing though, was that she would be alright. Something that was very important to him. He had been in love so to speak before, but his connection to her was different. The sharing they had done with the communications rod had been quick, intimately deep, and without a doubt, permanent. He had no idea what that meant for the future, for now It was just a fact.

He was startled out of his internal emotional considerations by the return of the others. Mikiu was dragging a half dozen clothes of the same size and color. They looked a lot like towels.

He dumped then on the center table. “We didn’t look around enough in there. Some of the lockers weren’t for personal clothes, but for towels and such. I’m guessing there’s a shower room or pool for cleaning up. We didn’t look for it. Should be easy to find if we need it.”

Josh picked up on of the towels and felt it’s surface with his thumb and fingers. Didn’t feel like a towel but he had a suspicion that it would wick moisture away quickly. “These should function nicely as bandages, if it doesn’t dry to quickly.”

“That’s what I thought,” said Mikiu.

“And we thought the blue would go with Wendy’s eyes,” added Susan.

Josh had to do a double take to make sure she was kidding.

“Okay, fold one of these up so that they’ll fit a pack and I’ll take it up with me,” said Josh.

He felt Mikiu’s eyes on him, “Did I suddenly grow horns or something?” Josh asked.

“Might as well have if you think you’re going up top by yourself. One of us goes with you,” said Mikiu.

“I need both of you here too take care of these two.”

“No you don’t,” muttered Wendy. “I’m awake enough to hold a gun or whatever. You and Mikiu go. Susan I will talk about you.”

Josh licked his lips and thought about it. So far nothing had happened in this room other than the intrusion of the maintenance robot the first time they had been here. He didn’t like that the seating station they had chosen was right by the opening. He didn’t like the idea of leaving Wendy alone with only one able bodied person to look over her. But it came down to using what he had, and that was a limited amount of people.

He blew his lips full of air and slowly exhaled, “Okay, I don’t like it, but I don’t see that I have any choice.”

He and Mikiu gathered up what gear they needed including two of the towels. The would each carry one and Mikiu cold rinse them out while he called the ship. He clipped the satellite phone to his belt and made sure that Wendy’s firearm was in working order. It was projectile weapon not unlike his own. She assured him that she could use it and Josh believed her.

Going out the entrance he turned to the couch, “Wendy, don’t believe anything Susan says about me. Some of it might be true.”

She smirked as he and Mikiu headed for the elevator room.

§

Karen Meeks climbed over the beam torn from the maintenance tube roof. This was ridiculous she told herself for the tenth time. She was a god damm cook, not an engineer. Muttering to herself the 70 year old young woman continued crawling through the congested space. She was trying to reach the inner section of the three stage airlock that connected the Shuttle Bay with the ship proper.

Once there she was hoping that she would be able to tell what had happened to their communication with the rest of the Arbiter. This was not what she had signed up for, she was a cook. However, she was also only one of two ship officers in the Shuttle Bay at the moment and being a cook did not outrank an engineer. Hence, she was elected for this job. To be fair Jed Pulmer was doing some critical work of his own, repairing life support.

That meant she got to do the crawling with a torch, and fortunately there had been a helmet mounted one in a locker. She also got to do the crawling because she was a lot slimmer than Jed. Of course, she supposed, technically that could be considered her fault, she always gave him extra portions of whatever she was preparing. *No good deed* she told herself. Anyway, she thought, as she managed to pull loose a ventilator grid, it wasn’t exactly a good deed. She was trying to get his attention. She thought he was cute and her last relationship had ended months ago.

Finally, she was able to worm her way into the airlock that opened into the airlock. Maintenance work on an airlock was a pain in the ass because everything was triple layered for atmospheric integrity. And worst of all, they had to be open and closed manually. It was assumed that during an emergency there would be no power for doors or hatches. That meant a manual control wheel and slid lock for every stage of the lock. That also was a pain in the ass. The fact that the power was out and necessitated the manual controls only made her anger worse.

She gave a sigh of relief as she slid through the last hatch and into the outer section of the airlock. That was the section that was closest to the ship’s interior. The next door should open into a corridor, except it wouldn’t. That was the thing she was here to figure out why.

Coming to her feet she heard a voice.

“Karen, is that you?”

She jumped a half meter in the air, she hadn’t expected anyone to be trapped in the air lock.

“Doctor Abernathy is that you?” she asked.

“Yes it’s me,” came the doctors voice. “I got trapped in here whenever what happened happened. What did happen?

“Don’t know for sure. We had some kind of emergency. The airlocks went on lockdown and we lost communication with the control room. We thought you were still up their.”

The light from her torch cast the older man’s face into a stark mixture of shadows and angles. “No, I just got into the lock and both doors slammed shut. The air was bad for a few seconds but it fixed itself.”

“Decompression in the corridor. That must be what caused the locks to close. Something must have happened.”  
 “Like what?”

“Could have been anything, an explosion, something breaking loose or who knows what. The fact that this ship had held together this long is a miracle,” she said.

Turning her light to the inner door she tried her hand at the controls. None of them wanted to respond. She got the impression that the power level was too low to cycle the middle doore.

“We’re going to have to return the way I came in, the maintenance tunnel.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun,” said the Doctor.

“Believe me, it isn’t.”

She handed him a spare small torch from her belt. “Here, use this. Just follow my butt.”

“I was taught never to argue with a lady, lead on.”

§

Once again he was awake when Cheryl turned to him. Saying quietly “Sir?”

“Cheryl, you don’t have to be polite when I’m already awake,” the Captain said.

“Sir?” this time her voice was full and surprised.

He sighed, “Sorry, all I mean was that you don’t have to be gentle on my account.”

Jerimy said from the other side of the room, “What he’s trying to say diplomatically is that he’s not always asleep.”

He gave the engineer a one-eyed dagger look. “Why is my chief engineer always on the bridge?”

“It’s too noisy in engineering.”

The Captain started to continue the argument before realizing that his crew was just breaking up the tension. They were right, even the Captain needed to be reminded to lighten up.

“Yes Cheryl,” he said.

“I’ve got your son sir,” she said.

“Put him through.”

“Dad, are you there?” asked Josh’s voice.

“Yes son, go ahead,” he replied.

“Any chance of you getting some help to us?”

The Captain felt that old tightness in his stomach that usually meant trouble. “What kind of trouble you got?”

“I didn’t say anything about trouble dad,” his son’s voice sounded irritated. Couldn’t be helped. That was one of Josh’s failings, the inability to ask for help.

“Josh?”

“Okay, we got shot at by a centuries old robot. Jameson’s got a bad leg and Wendy took one across the belly. There both okay. Well, let’s say that Wendy’s a lot more okay than Jameson, but I’d like to get them medical attention. Plus, there’s a couple of other things you and I need to talk about.”

Captain Halerin turned to Yelaa and whispered for her to get Dr. Lovis. “I just sent for Dr. Lovis. The shuttles are both away dealing with the Arbiter, but as soon as they get back I’ll see about getting one down to you.”

“You need to try it with a drone first Dad. Make sure there’s no field or shield. I’ve got enough casulities on my hands.”

“We’ll try that first. What’s the weather like,” asked Halerin.

“It’s fine right now — why?” asked Josh.

“It looks like somethings brewing but It may only effect the colony.”

“Okay Dad. Long story short. We stumbled across a security bot in a fight with a dead Alien. Apparently they both lost. When we started nosing around I guess we triggered it back into action and it started firing. We took it out. The dead alien of course is just a skeleton but I’m sending up some pictures. Maybe some of the brains from Arbiter will find it usefull.”

“Right son, I’ll get Wally and Jerimy and we’ll look over what you send. In the mean time I’m turning it over to Dr. Lovis. She can tell you what to do,” said the Captain.

“Okay dad, put the doc on.”

§

Mendez watched with interest as Johanson finished closing an instrument panel. After checking a couple of read outs he seemed satisfied. The tall man looked over at the Captain, “That’s all we can do on our end. It’s up to the crew in Engineering and the Bay to connect on their end.

“You think they’ll figure it out?”

“The guys in engineering will, but I wouldn’t bet on the shuttle bay. If Jed and Karen aren’t fighting other battles….”

Captain Mendez knew what John didn’t say. If they were still alive in the bay they would figure it out. Engineering had almost immediately brought the new power generator online. A sure sign that at least someone was still thinking. They had no indication of any kind from the shuttle bay, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. The two shuttles hadn’t seen any obvious signs of additional trauma to the ship when they did a couple of fly buys so for now, they were treating it as a communication problem.

“How long till the shuttles finish shoving us into position”

Surprisingly Cheryl answered, “Russ checked in a few minutes ago. He said they were going to go till 2200 hours. Said we should be lined up just about right by then.”

Mendez nodded, mainly to himself. If they got them on the right course, it would just be a matter of getting them to the right speed. After that, they still had a lot of things to work out. Getting the civilians off loaded to the Deidre would be the most important of course. That is, if there were any left to off load.

§

Karen was glad when they got back to the shuttle bay. Dr. Abernathy was exhausted. He was past middle age and even the relatively easy life of a human being living in space hadn’t kept him in good shape. She decided that she should get on him about it when things got back to normal.

The inside of the shuttle bay hadn’t changed much in the time she had been away. It was still barely lit on emergency power and the air was a little stale. She was happy to note that it wasn’t getting worse which meant that life support was still functioning, at least in some capacity. Jed was waiting to meet her.

“I see you found our wayward doctor.”

“In the first lock chamber. I think he just be decompression,” she said.

“So, he has no idea what happened. “

“None I’m afraid and I didn’t learn anything from the airlock panel. I just showed no pressure on the other side.”

“Well,” said Jed, “that’s probably what it is. Those sensors are really simple. They’re pretty reliable.”

“You have any luck?”

“Yea, I got the air filters working better, although you can’t tell it yet. And I think I Mr. Johanson got those new power units online. It’ll take two of us to connect everything up, but that should put us in good shape power wise. At least it’ll keep life support running. I don’t think we’re in good shape for anything else though.”

“You find any clues as to what happened?” she asked.

“No,” he said, looking around to make sure no one else was close. “I don’t even know if anyone else is still alive.”

“They must have talked to the shuttle pilots, I know that they’ve been pushing us around.

“Yea, I felt it too. When we get the power online we’ll be able to cycle the lock. I’ll put on a space suit and see if I can make contact with anyone,” he said.

“Wrong, I’ll put on a suit. I weight a lot less than you. I won’t need as much air and besides, I’m a cook, you’re engineer. I’m expendable”

“The fact that I’m an engineer is the reason I have to go. You wouldn’t have a clue on how to rig a comm line or anything else. For now, let’s just get power hooked up. We’ll worry about it then.

§

The light was starting to fade when Josh got off the satellite phone. He had gotten a lot of information from Dr. Lovis to augment his own medical training. His main regret was not having access to a lot of medicines that would be helpful.

Mikiu was sitting patiently. He had finished filling the empty canteens and rinsing the towels minutes ago. He had laid the towels out to dry and was waiting for Josh to finish on the phone.

Josh was putting the phone back on his belt when Mikiu asked. “What was that about the weather.”

“My Dad wanted to know what it was like down here. Apparently they show some kind of build up over the desert,” answered Josh.

“Think the weather’s going to make another run at Rinein?”

“That’s what they think.”

Mikiu looked thoughtful, “A lot of those monitors down below were watching things that could be useful for weather forecasting.”

“You think this base is responsible?” asked Josh.

His friend shrugged, “Who knows, this stuff is way beyond us. You find out anything that’ll help Wendy and Jameson?”

“Nothing exciting, just using what we have in our med kits. Doc gave me some ideas on what level of pain killers they can tolerate.”

“Jameson is going to appreciate that when he wakes up,” said Mikiu.

“Doc recommended we keep him under for a while. At least until some of the meds have a chance to do some work.”

“That’s going to make it harder to take care of him. We don’t have any diapers.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. Let’s get back. Susan probably needs a break by now.”

“Yea, let’s go.”

§

The wind was definitely picking up intensity. It wasn’t blowing things around yet but Jarwan could sense the onset of a storm and to make things worse, it was getting dark. They had finally got half of the people over to the second site along with their gear and now Jarwan wondered if they had enough time to move them all.

Dunzin had the same thought. “Jarwan, you think we should move them all. If this is a true windstorm below ground will be safer.”

“You think there’s a chance this structure won’t hold up,” he asked.

Dunzin, giving the warehouse a quick once over as if re-evaluating it, said, “I don’t know boss. If this is the planet taking a second run at us, then I think I’d like to be underground. But if it starts dumping rain on us again you’ve got to think about the drainage system — will it hold up.”

“It did the other night,” pointed out Jarwan.

“Yea, it did. And this one held up too and it got pretty windy the other night.”

Jarwan said nothing. He was thinking about the past, the distant past.

“You know,” he said, “when I was a boy on Duncan. We used to get these really bad summer storms. Twisty ones that used to pick stuff up and every house or living building had a shelter. You know where those shelters always were?”

I’m betting underground,” said Dunzin. “Did you ever need to, I mean did it every save you?”

“Me personally, no. My family was lucky, but I saw what happened to the houses when they did get hit by a storm. Sometimes the damage was pretty bad and sometimes, the house just wasn’t there anymore.”  
 “You want to move everyone?”

“Can we?” asked Jarwan.

“The people yes. And while there moving they can carry a lot of the stuff with them. It’s mostly already packed up.” Dunzin was grinning.

“I see, you’re reading minds now.”

“No, just took a guess. Give me the word.”

Jarwan thought for a second, then said, “The word is given. The first thing I want to move is the radio. Oh, what about the guys at the Power Shop?”

“I’m going to have them set it for auto shutdown in case anything happens and have them get their butts back here. They can help me. I’m going to move the emergency generator we installed here over to the new place. Won’t have time to set it up tonight but we’ll have if we need it.”

“Okay, let’s get started.

§

Karen sniggered, she couldn’t help it.

The suit was a little large for her small frame.

“Jed, how long has it been since you ran a suit drill?” she asked.

He glared at her, “It’s been a while but it’s not my fault we don’t have any kid sizes.”

“I don’t need a kid’s size. But we’ve got to have something smaller than this,” she said.

She was beginning to get frustrated. The trip though the maintenance tunnel had been bad enough. Now she had to go out through the lock to see if she could find any sign that someone else was alive on the ship. Worse yet, she had to do it in a space suit that was overly big, in every aspect.

Jed pulled on a cinch strap and the suit got closer to fitting. He was getting exasperated, “How can anybody who cooks for a living be so damm tiny?”

She tried to keep upbeat, not an easy task at the moment. “You don’t seem to mind my size when we’re naked,”

He glanced around quickly to make sure no one was close enough to overhear. “Let’s advertise our relationship. I’m having enough trouble getting respect from these brains.”

“And you think they’d think less of you if they knew you were screwing the cook?” she asked.

“No, that’s not it. I just don’t want to give them anything to talk about,” he said.

“You’re not ashamed of me are you?”

He snapped his head back around to stare at her. Then with a deep breath he leaned over and stuck his tongue down her throat. She resisted for a second, surprised, and then went with it. She thought people aren’t nearly as up tight when death is close.

“Whoa cowboy, where did that come from,” she asked, feeling her face warm.

“Just making sure you knew how I felt.”

She smiled, “Got it.”

“Now quicker you get out there the quicker you get back and out of the suit,” he said.

“Right, tell me again how much air do I have?”

“Two hours, which means in one hour and thirty minutes I come looking for you regardless of what these moron’s think,” he murmured.

She gave him a playful punch in the shoulder before fastening down her helmet. Carefully, it had been a long time, she ran through the checklist projected in the heads up display on the inside bubble of her helmet. Technically everyone was supposed to drill on these every year and the Captain was good about maintaining readiness. But once a year wasn’t much time to develop any level of expertise. She felt Jed’s hand’s pulling poking on the chest and back pack controls as he double checked her from the outside. Finally she decided that everything was ready to go.

“I read everything in the green,” she said.

“Same here,” he responded before grabbing her by the arms and swinging her around to stare in her helmet. “Be careful, just because the suit’s ready doesn’t mean you are. Anything you’re unsure of call up the manual or try to reach me. I’ll be on another suit radio.”

She nodded and them remembered the radio. “Radio check, you here me Jed?”

He let go of her arms and stepped back, “Loud and clear, try not to get your self killed.”

“Roger that,” she said as she made here way to the airlock.

§

The transition to night was now complete and since Tingies 0017 was moonless the darkness of the night was total. They had set up lamps at various places along the guide line to help people make the walk from one building to the other. Even with the lamps in place much of the path was in darkness and people were forced to go slow in the increasing wind. Jarwan was glad that they had moved half the colony already, or the would have run out of time.

Even now that the last of the colonist had started the trip, short in distance but an eternity in length he felt uneasy. Turning to Dunzin he asked, “You’re sure that’s everyone?”

Dunzin looked at his boss and smiled, “Let’s go check it again. We’ll make sure we didn’t leave anyone or anything behind.”

“Thanks, I was going to look anyway.”

“I know, so was I.

The two men alerted the two burly men shepherding the line of colonist and wend back inside. The room was still brightly lit and the absence of people made it look forsaken. The two of them divided up the room and with hand torches searched carefully. No one had remained. Jarwan didn’t think that anyone had been left behind but being sure was a comfort. As he headed towards the door he heard Dunzin call to him from the corner that had been the command center.

He arrived to find Dunzin kneeling before a footlocker full of sidearms.

“You think we’ll need to fight off the wind,” he asked.

“I think I want to stick this in the back of the last hauler before we drive it into the warehouse.”

Jarwan frowned, “You expect trouble Dunzin?”

The man shook his head. “I’d rather wait and explain it until after we finish the move.”

“You’re serious, you really want to take along weapons.”

Dunzin let his head drop. “I didn’t want to worry you. I talked to the Deidre while you were moving some of the over. The chances are slim that we would have a problem but there are armed alien robots on this planet.”

“You know how stupid that sounds?”

He looked his boss in the eye, “Wendy and Jameson were both shot.”

It took a second for Jarwan to register what he’d just heard. It took another two seconds for it to make sense and then another second for him to grab Dunzin’s arm and respond.

“Wendy’s been shot?”

“Sorry, sorry Jarwan. She’s okay, just a belly burn. I screwed that up. I didn’t mean to scare you,” said Dunzin.

Jarwan let go of the man’s arms and slid to a seat on the floor. “She’s okay, you’re sure?”

“Yes, it was an old security robot. Apparently, they woke it up somehow. Anyway, the guys from the Deidre took it down. Jameson got hit too, he’s in worse shape but they said he’ll be okay.”

“Jameson, how bad is it,” said Jarwan.

“They didn’t say. I got the impression they didn’t know for sure,” said Dunzin.

“So, do you really think we’ll need weapons?”

“Can’t hurt to take them.”

“No,” said Jarwan, “it can’t hurt. Well let’s get them over there.”

Jarwan held up a hand. Looking around he grabbed a couple of coffee mugs off the remaining desk. They were he and Denise’s favorite mugs. Noting the free space in the arms locker he threw the mugs and whatever else he found on the desk in on top of the weapons. Dunzin, seeing what he was doing joined in the effort. Soon it looked as if the locker was just filled with miscellaneous junk. He didn’t want to have to explain to anyone why they were bring weapons.

It both men to carry the locker to the door, not that it was heavy only awkward. As soon as Jarwan pushed the door open he knew that they had pushed the time limit to the max. The wind was now blowing heavily enough to make keeping ones feet difficult — the weigh of the arms locker helped steady them. Sliding it into the back of the truck wasn’t easy but having the vehicle sides to hold onto helped. It took both of them to slide it to the front of the cargo bed and anchor it with a hook strap. Getting the door open on his side proved difficult for Jarwan, but he had an easier time than Dunzin who was more exposed to the wind

With the doors shut the cargo hauler whipped back and forth on the shocks. It was apparent that much more wind intensity would be disastrous. Jarwan threw the vehicle into drive and pulled it out of the warehouses shelter. He braced himself, fully aware that they had yet to experience the full intensity of the wind. Beside him Dunzin was holding on to the roof bracket above him with both hands.

As soon as they caught the wind in the cargo haulers backside he truly thought the little truck was going to take flight. It did rise to the limits of the shocks and slide across several feet of mud and sand before the four wheels found enough traction to give him control.

“Damm, you got this thing Jarwan?”

“I got it. I don’t know how long I can hold it,” yelled Jarwan.

“Good thing the winds blowing in the right direction. I hope everyone got inside.” Dunzin was forced to yell as well, the wind was loud.

“You think they got everyone inside?”

“If they didn’t, we’ll be able to see them in a minute. If they’re still there.”

Jarwan nodded, although he was pretty sure that Dunzin wouldn’t be able to discern a nod in the bouncing cab. It didn’t matter. He was to busy driving to worry about further communication. It took several scary seconds to wrangle the hauler around the curve and slight slope to the ground that was the top of the underground warehouse. Normally it was planted with a garden, but right now he could are less. His attention and intention were centered on the down slope drive in entrance ahead. He felt his heart leap into his throat as the wind forced the cargo hauler sideways, but with a hard twist of the wheel and a sudden jump of acceleration he managed to get the nose down the entrance way. After that it was a matter of bouncing off the sides a couple of times as the wind help shove them into the first turn. It was much easier driving after they made the turn and were out of the direct wind.

He looked over at Dunzin, “Well that was fun. Did you see if anyone was still on the line?”

His second in command laughed. “I didn’t even see the line. I don’t know if it’s still there,” said Dunzin.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Jarwan, “there’s no way we could go after anyone.”

They had one more turn before arriving at the wide vehicle door. The two double backs effectively eliminated most of the wind. The door opened on cue and Jarwan drove the battered truck into the warehouse.

He slumped over the steering column, exhausted from the long night, the news about Wendy and the drive here. Dunzin shook his shoulder.

“Come on boss, we should probably mingle. Or at the very least get everyone bedded down safely.”

Reluctantly Jarwan pulled himself from the hauler. Dr. Bitterlly offered him a cup of coffee. “Here, it’s not any better than the stuff at the old place but it might wake you up.”

He smiled at her as he leaned against the truck. “What if I don’t want to be woke up?”

She smiled back at him. “Then maybe you should go to bed.”

“Best idea I’ve had all day. Care to join me,” he asked. Realizing what he had said he started to apologize but she cut him off.

“Don’t worry. I know you’re tired. Get some sleep,” she said as she stepped away.

Just as she was about to wonder back into the crowd she turned and gave him another smile. He smiled weakly back.

Dunzin laughed, “I think you just got a green light.”

“Yea, maybe, I think it’s a deferred green light. Why do we call it a green light anyway?” he asked.

“I think it had something to do with ancient traffic signals,” answered Dunzin.

Jarwan laughed, “Traffic signals, the way I was driving. I’m sure I would recognize one.”

“You got that right. I’m going to go check the power gereration and see if they’ve got the radio hooked back up. Why don’t you get some sleep?”

He nodded. “That’s sounds like a plan.” He wondered off in search of the new command corner.

§

Karen Meeks told herself, this is still ridiculous. However, it was easier than moving through the emergency maintenance tunnel of the airlock. Outside the airlock, yet still inside the ship she found herself with wide open corridors to use. The only thing to overcome now was the lack of gravity. The tubes, three of them, between the main body of the ship and the engineering and shuttle bay sections of the ship, were not provided with artificial gravity. When the Arbiter was built the technology of deck plates with built in permanent gravity was still a young science. It was also expensive at the time. To save money sections of ships such as the Arbiter were built with out it in some areas. Thus, Karen found herself floating uneasily in the corridor outside the shuttle bay.

Her instructions from Jed were simple. Find out if anyone in engineering or the command center were still alive. Secondary to that she was supposed to find out what happened to cut them off from the rest of the ship.

She turned slowly keeping one hand on the airlock door. She did the required practice of getting into a suit once a year per regulations. However, the Deidre, had no easy place to practice maneuvering in zero gravity — no place that was safe anyway. They made up for it at stops on space stations, which sadly they hadn’t done for a while. \

Moving slowly, that was the key ingredient in moving in no gravity, she made her way aft towards the red door marking engineering. Arriving there she hit the intercom button and waited. After a minute had passed she hit it again, and then a third time. She decided that either the intercom was broken, they couldn’t hear her, or everyone was dead. She hoped the latter wasn’t the case.

She gave them a good five minutes to answer before keying the entrance panel for status. According to it all three airlock doors were closed. She cycled the inner chamber which took a while.

Moving carefully she moved from the zero gee of the corridor to the normal gravity of the first airlock chamber and keyed the door shut behind her.

She waited while the inside light changed from red to white, a sign of filling air. Checking the gage on her wrist to make certain that a viable atmosphere was now present she repeated the process. Going through the center door, closing it, and waiting for the chamber to pressurize. Just to be safe although the doors control panel told her that their was an atmosphere on the other side. She left her helmet on.

The door slid open to a barely illuminated engineering control deck. That didn’t surprise her a whole lot because the guys liked to keep it that way. She didn’t know why.

Moving forward she checked the nearest consoles, everything seemed to be showing green, not that she was familiar with what they should look like.

She moved further into engineering down a catwalk above large pieces of machinery whose purpose she barely knew — and then she saw them. Two men, stretched out, both dressed in coveralls and neither of them moving. With her heart in her throat she knelt down to check on them. To her relief they were both breathing strongly. She recognized them at the men Jed had said would be here, Clark Cline and Paul Sharon. There was no sign of injury. It looked like they had just fallen asleep. The only clue was the open panel beside them. Shaking Clark roughly by the shoulder she managed to eventually get a moan out of him. Soon his eyes opened and he looked around surprised, and then fear showed in his eyes when caught sight of her helmeted head.

She held him down gently with one hand and motioned to his companion. He understood and went to work waking up Paul. She checked her wrist computer to verify the air, but elected not to remove her helmet. Not knowing the condition of the two men she had no desire to put the helmet back on by herself. She was out of practice.

Instead she keyed her mic. “You guys okay, what happened?”

Paul was now awake and both of them were sitting up. “We were checking an air line out into the corridor to see what was there. You know, to figure out what happened, and I guess we drew in some fire suppressant or something. Took us both out.”

Clark chimed in, “I think it was a cross bleed with a coolant line. That’s what it smelled like to me. What are you doing scarring people in a suit?”

Karen laughed, “If I scare you, you’re in serious trouble. The truth is I came out to find out if anybody else was alive. We can’t talk to you guys or command.”

“Well,” said Paul, “we’re still her and so is command. At least they brought some power back online. “

“Yea, we know, but we didn’t know when they did it. It was after the trouble?”

“Trouble? That wasn’t trouble, something blew up. Command vented the tunnel into space to put out the fire,” said Clark.

Karen nodded, That would explain the vacuum. You guys okay, anyone else down here?”

Paul answered, “As you can see we’re good. And no one else was here. We’re just keeping an eye on equipment that will probably never work again.”

“You want to come over to the shuttle bay with me?”

Paul hesitated before answering. “No, don’t think so. Unless the Captain tells us to we can’t go anywhere. They might need us to do something.”

“Like what?”

“Who knows, anyway, we’re okay here. We’ve got food, water, a head, a place to sleep everything you need to wait out — whatever it is we’re waiting for.”

“Shuttle, we’re waiting for a shuttle from the Deidre, and you don’t have the most important thing. A way to get on said shuttle.”

“Hey,” said Clark, “even if they get most of you to the Deidre and they get Arbiter in a stable orbit, the Captain’s going to keep us to get this boat fixed.”

Paul responded, “You really think we can fix this thing.”

Clark shrugged, “Given time. Maybe.”

“Listen,” said Karen, “I don’t know what the Captain has in mind, but I do know we won’t find out until we can talk to them. Any chance of getting some type of communications rigged up?”

“Haven’t you got radios in the bay?”

“We haven’t found anything that’ll work, not even a field comm. They all got toasted when we took that broadside in orbit.”

“Hey, we’ve got a field radio. Doesn’t do us much goo down here with all the shielding but it should work from the bay.”

“Great, at least maybe we can talk to one of the shuttles.”

Clark looked at Paul, “Hang on. I’ll go find it.”

Twenty minutes later she was back in the corridor with the field radio clipped to her belt and heading back to the shuttle bay.

§

They were again meeting in the Deidre’s conference room. Reserve bridge officers were manning the controls, not a difficult job with the ship in a stable orbit. He had his senior officers here to plan their next move, and maybe start making sense of things. Around the table sat Yelaa, Wally, Jerimy, and Doctor Lovis.

He didn’t have a gavel, so he just coughed. “Okay folks, let’s call this meeting together.”

Everyone stopped what they were doing and starred at him. “I realize that we don’t have a lot of meetings and at this time we don’t have a lot of things to do as a ship. Everyone, especially engineering has their own projects, but department items are not the reason for this meeting. I just want to hash our what’s going on. See if anyone has any ideas or requests. So, I’ll recap where I think we are.”

He took a deep breath, took a look at the notes he had jotted down, and started.

“Number one on the agenda is the exploration team. As you all know, they had some trouble and shooting was involved. Doctor.”

The slightly heavy curvy woman spoke without rising. “Two wounded, neither one of them ours, Wendy Johanson and Jameson Maleef, from Rinein. Jameson is the more seriously injured. He’s going to need some work aboard ship. Wendy caught a blaster shot across the belly and she’s going to be in pain for a while but should have no lasting trouble. However, we need to get both of them out of their and to the ship as soon as possible.”

“What about the colony? Can we get them there?” asked Yelaa.

Wally answered, “Not with the weather the way it is, but the wind is mainly over the desert area. We can probably fly a ship down into the forest. We just don’t know if we can.”

“So,” said the Captain, “what can we do to check that out.”

Jerimy said, “We have an idea. If we land the Captain’s boat just outside the wall we can fly a high altitude recon drone over the forest and see if it can find the lake.”

“Won’t that just crash like the one the Expo team used?”

“Maybe. It all depends on whether the smothering field is also used in the camo field that shields the lake from our eyes. It might not be, and I intend to shield the drone so that it can go through a suppression field.”

The Captain looked at Yelaa, “Anything from the shuttles. No, we finally got a response from the Arbiter itself. They have long range radio back up like we thought. The time lag is still terrible.”

“When the shuttles finish tub boating this trip will they be able to bring back passengers?”

“No firm answer on that yet,” said Yelaa.

He turned his attention back to Jerimy. “Do you actually need to land on the planet to use the drone. Can’t you launch it in the air?”

“I could, I sort of wanted to get a look at that wall and do some testing.”

“How long to get ready?”

“It’ll take me about a couple of hours to get gear ready. Figured I’d take Patty as pilot,” said Jerimy.

The Captain thought for a moment. The weren’t getting anything done from up here. “You’ll need somebody from Medical”

Dr. Lovis raised her hand, “I’ll go.”

Halerin frowned, he would rather not send the Doctor, but command made demands on a relationship. “I’m not happy with the idea but it’s your call.”

She nodded at him.

He rose to his feet, the others did the same. “Olay, Jerimy start getting ready. You can launch at noon tomorrow. That give us plenty of time to get ready and get a read on the weather. I would prefer you launch the drone from the air, but it’s your call Jerimy. Let’s get to work.”

With that the meeting broke up.

§

Susan was talking to Wendy when they got back. Josh had called out so they weren’t alarmed. He didn’t relish the idea of getting shot by mistake. Wendy looked much better. Susan had helped her change into a loose fitting jacket that covered her top and the burned section of her torso.

“Someone looks like they’re feeling better,” he said.

She gave him an even look, “Someone looks better than they feel. Believe me.”

He glanced over at Jameson who was still unconscious, “Jameson stir any?”

Susan shook her head, leaned back on the couch and stretched. “Moaned a few times. That was it. Now that you guys are back, I’m going to catch a few if it’s alright.”

Josh was tired himself, but it was his job as leader to let his team get some rest. “Sure, Mikiu, and Wendy, you too, I’ll stand first watch.”

Wendy waved him off, “Not me, I slept most of the time you were gone. Did you get through to the ship?”

“Yea, I filled them in on what happened. As soon as they can they’ll tell your father. Dr. Lovis gave me some tips on how to treat you two. For right now we’ll just let that first layer of healing jell work.”

Mikiu didn’t need any more prompting. He had laid down while Josh was talking and was out like a light. Josh kept his attention on Wendy. “I’m sorry you got hurt.”

“We’ve been over this. It wasn’t your fault and anyway, you saved my life.” She glanced over at Jameson, “How bad is he?”

“Just what we said before. He’s going to need a real doctor but for now the stuff we got should stabilize his wound. Pain managements going to be a bitch because I don’t even want to come close to giving him to much.”

“Can we just keep him asleep?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I want to know how he feels, if he thinks anything’s broken.”

“Okay, how are we going to get out of this?”

He looked down at his feet. “That’s the question. The answer is, I don’t know.”

A grimace crossed her face as she tried to sit up. “Okay, that wasn’t a good idea. What do mean you don’t know. Didn’t your dad have any ideas?”

“You want some more pain meds?” he asked.

“No, I just got to remember to sit still. You didn’t answer my question.”

“My dad’s thinking of sending down the Captain’s boat.”

“Your dad has his own ship. That’s kind of cool.”

“It’s not his, that just what they call it, the Captains Boat, or the Captains Gig. It’s really just a small shuttle for the Captain to go plays in. It’s tradition, a carry over from ocean faring days,” he said.

“Is it big enough to haul us our of here?” she asked.

Josh thought about it for a second, “No, it seats 4, five in a pinch, they’d have to make at least two trips. Depends on how many people they bring down. They’re going to check the overhead forcefield with another drone. I don’t know when exactly.”

She laughed, “Well, I guess until they come for me I’ll take care of Jameson while you guys explore.”

Josh didn’t like that, although she had a good point. “I don’t want to do that. At least let me keep Susan with you.”

“Maybe till I catch up on some sleep, but after that I’m perfectly capable of keeping watch. Besides, if a bunch of those bots show up shooting there’s not a lot we’re going to be good for anyway. The best defense is probably running, and Jameson and I aren’t up to that right now.”

Josh, while telling himself that he wasn’t going to leave them unguarded, said, “Fine, we’ll talk about it in the morning. You know I might stay with you myself on a shift and let Mikiu and Susan get the glory.”

She smiled, “It’s sweet that you want to spend time with me, but if you’re looking for any kind of romance, I’m afraid I’m out of commission for a while.”

He did his lip inflation thing and said, “Yea, no romance until we do some serious talking, and some serious planning. I don’t want to screw this up.”

She nodded and then tilted her head up, “Fine, but I at least want another kiss before I fall asleep.

The kiss lasted a lot longer than he had intended and she fell asleep right afterwards. He sat on the floor with his back to one end of the couch, sidearm drawn, and watched the door.

§