

The Unlikely Heroines of Callisto Station

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Chapter One

Lottie wanted to break something. Because she hadn't! She'd shaped the cafeteria tray perfectly, with an ergonomic curve to support her elbow. She hadn't had access to screws or nails, so she cut tabs into the workbench and slots into the tray, but the creators of workbenches had clearly not thought ahead to the eventual need for a series of slots to be cut, so when she'd inserted the expansion tray—with minimal force!—the entire surface had broken. How was that her fault?

"We're in this together," Saravit said. Which was a lie. He was in with *them*, with those who cared more about toeing imaginary lines than creating a better work environment. How stifling it was to live in a closed structure, surrounded by the same hundred people day in and day out. Everyone knew everyone's reputation and didn't care to learn more.

Saravit waited for her to look at him before he continued speaking. "Tell me what happened. Start at the beginning." He was saying all the things he would say in a regular session. This was not a regular session. Their regular sessions were in a semi-private cubicle inside the station infirmary. There was a wall of translucent pink that curved around Sara-vit's little area. It was meant to be informal, to put the patient at ease. It reminded her of a nail salon waiting room, especially with the comingled scents of astringents and the sounds of nurses and doctors going about their business. Maybe it did set her at ease.

Today they were not in the nail-salon waiting room cubicle. They were in Saravit's private bedroom, with the door closed. A gently tapered cube of a room, like her own, only with a built-in desk where the roommate bunk should be. It smelled vaguely spicy, like an expensive male perfume. Saravit sat on his bed: military corners, the blanket turned flocked-side-up for a softer look. A battered teddy bear sat near the foam pillow. Lottie sat in the room's only chair,

which swung out from under the mounted desk so she felt balanced on the edge of scissors.

Saravit's fingers flexed where they were interlaced over his knee. He was moving carefully. There was a line like a separator between his thick eyebrows. "Lottie, you know why you're here."

It was unfair how he was making her start the conversation. A minor humiliation, an acceptance of guilt. The stillness was boiling in her. She stared hard at the depthless eyes of the toy bear. "Because people are afraid of me."

"No. No." Saravit leaned forward, blocking her view. His eyebrows had gotten even straighter, the line between them even deeper. "This isn't about what other people feel, nor the equipment you damaged."

"Ha! No one cared. No one dragged me to see you until I took apart the bench. Anyway, I didn't damage it. Not really. It was already damaged; it wasn't going to work like it was. Anyone could see that."

"Could they? Dispassionately, how would you evaluate your behavior this week?" Saravit's eyebrows normally tilted outward, giving him a sheepish expression when he smiled. The expanse between his brows was paler than the rest of his face. The crinkle made his whole countenance darker. She realized suddenly that he could perfectly play a tragic, brooding hero: someone who is found out later to be a vampire or to have sealed his rival into a chamber in his basement. The heroine would know better, but still fall for him.

Throughout graduate school, a gothic novel a week was Lottie's main vice. In antique paper or digital copy, the heroines might have attacks of "nerves" but the symptoms were always gentle, passive: a weak cry, a faint. Her love had betrayed her or gone missing or died, but for the sake of his honor and her own reputation, she would make no greater sound than a kitten's sigh.

Lottie was not a romantic lead, but neither was she the monstrous spinster hidden in the attic. "I didn't hurt anyone. Everyone is acting like I hurt someone. I didn't. I never would." Yes, sometimes she felt like she was boiling and the only way to release the pressure was to turn something into a mess of itself, but this was not one of those times.

Saravit parted his large, thick-fingered hands. "You promised you'd come see me immediately if you stopped sleeping at night or felt restless."

"There were no warning signs." No, bad answer. That was an admission that there could have been. "I feel fine." Lottie wanted to get up and move, but that was a warning sign. She stared hard at the ceiling. The insulation layer made it look like it had been dipped in marshmallow. How insane it was, that the station padded its ceilings and bolted down its chairs. If something happened with enough energy to disrupt the thousands of tons of inertial force that kept them spinning, bumping their heads or tripping on chairs would be the least of their worries.

Saravit made a long, slow groan, like a metal brace deciding if it was going to fail. He leaned forward, arms on his knees, and shook his head. His hair was bristly, black, showing flashes of brown scalp.

Lottie got the distinct feeling she'd missed something, made some confession without noticing. "I know when I have warning signs. How could anyone else know but me?"

"Lottie, the jig is up. You've been avoiding contact with your supervisor and the medical team. You lied to your roommate and piled sample containers in your bed so she'd think you were sleeping. Most importantly, I know you deleted all the security footage from the camera in your bedroom. Why would you do that?"

This was an easy area—the area of things instead of people. "I deleted the footage for your sake. The security AIs can't make nuanced decisions. They would page you in the middle of the night when I'm just not feeling sleepy. It's ridiculous that they'd bother you because a person stepped outside their rigid, unrealistic boundaries of 'normal' behavior. People get insomnia. For ordinary reasons. Caffeine, for instance. Or worry. The gravimetric project is at a delicate stage. We aren't sure the initial experiments are reproducible. We need to isolate all sorts of variables in the redundant tests, and we can't order new equipment for overnight delivery to Jupiter!"

Saravit wasn't listening. He was waiting for her to finish talking. There was a flatness in his eyes. "A failure in any system on this station could result in the loss of life. Those cameras make

sure there are no pinholes in pressure, no fires, and yes, no behavioral anomalies. Your neighbors say you were skipping rope all night.”

“That’s ridiculous. Who can jump rope all night long?”

Saravit’s eyebrows retreated. Like they were forgiving her. Like he appreciated the aesthetic value of her lie.

Lottie squirmed. “I only jumped rope that one time, and I was very quiet about it. I needed to burn energy so I would sleep. You’re always saying I need to sleep! I would have gone to the gym, but . . .” Lottie bit her lip.

His mouth tilted up on one side, joining his eyebrows in amusement. “But you hadn’t disabled the cameras there?”

She hadn’t disabled those cameras, because it would be a severe security breach to have no oversight in a public space. Shouldn’t there be credit given where credit was due? Lottie’s hands hurt from claspng them so tightly together, yet she squeezed them further, felt the creak and strain of finger-joints. “Don’t make me take medication. I’m in the middle of a breakthrough and I need to be sharp. I’m doing amazing things.”

“The truth at last. Mania can feel like it’s worth it, but it will pass, and you will do impulsive things you may regret.”

“I’m not a child!”

She shouldn’t have raised her voice. Also, she shouldn’t have stood. He was looking at her now, very seriously, like he was afraid of what she’d do. She hated that look, especially from Saravit. Other people gave her that look all the time, but not him. “Lottie, if administration finds out you’re not taking your medication you’ll be fired. Shipped off to Earth. Do you understand? The only way I can protect you is to get your levels back to normal as soon as possible.”

“Two more days.” Lottie dropped to the floor. The fabric of her pants tugged on the rubber nonslip surface. Saravit rolled his eyes and reached for her forearms, trying to pull her back to her feet. She pushed him away with her elbows, keeping her fingers clasped. “One more day? Just one!” He almost got hold of her, and she reared back. “I’m rewriting the entire security system! It will be smarter! Better for everyone!”

“Lottie, that’s not your job. Sit . . . be calm. If you can’t sit . . .” She pushed him again, and he let go, stepping back as far as he could in the small room, to the corner between the bed and wall, his hands raised. “You’re right,” he said. “People are afraid of you. They are afraid when you don’t sleep, and they are definitely afraid when you break your workbench.”

“It was too weak. It didn’t work right and I was angry at it and I’ll make a new, better one. I need to keep working while I have the energy.”

Someone knocked on Saravit’s door. He held up a hand as though warding them off. “You didn’t . . . did you stop taking your medication on purpose? Did you knowingly trigger this episode? Lottie!”

The knock repeated, and Facilities Manager Xiao Fung’s voice, muffled by the thickness of metal and insulation, said, “Vit? What’s the deal? You in there?”

Lottie had always feared Facilities Manager Xiao Fung. She had forearms as thick as Lottie’s legs, and her upper lip was permanently curled in a sneer, and she was always sitting next to Saravit in the lunchroom, which was where Lottie wanted to sit.

Saravit took Lottie’s hands and held them until she moved her eyes to his face. “Forget about her. Forget about the world outside this room. Did you stop taking your meds on purpose? Did you set this up because of a project?”

Lottie wanted to melt. She wanted to scream. She had been sitting still way too long. She tried to tug free, but Saravit was stronger. She let herself hang from his hands. He pulled her up, dragged her to the desk, and set her against it. How dare he keep her standing when she didn’t want to? She should be on the floor. She should be crawling. He pushed the scissor-seat with his knee, folded her into it. “Easy, easy,” he said.

It wasn’t easy. Tears and snot clogged her throat, making her gasp and hiccup. “There’s this deadline. It’s unrealistic. I had no chance of making it. Months of research on the line. You know how Dr. Izen gets. Her damn gravity grant. I thought if I stopped sleeping . . . sometimes I’ve

done things; I've done things I couldn't dream of doing when I'm . . . when I'm calm. So I took a dose of antidepressants and stopped taking everything else. And I took a stimulant. The lab workers all take no-doze, you know. I . . . it worked like I planned. I had it under control."

The words helped. She opened her eyes to find Saravit had retreated again, to his corner away from the door. His hands were outstretched, as though to catch her.

The knocking continued.

"Lottie? Remember when we agreed that you'd respect my opinion if I said it was time to take a shot? It's time to take a shot."

She wanted to pace. Pacing was mad. There wasn't room here, with the desk and the bed and two humans. Also, turning in spin-gravity always made one incredibly light-headed. Pacing wasn't done. That was why she had to jump rope—it was stationary. You lived with this fear of turning, like life was a jogging track. With all these people not looking behind themselves, it was a wonder Saravit had time for her. The station should be full of paranoids.

Lottie climbed onto the desk chair, then the desk, then stepped onto Saravit's back, onto the bed, onto the floor.

Saravit stepped sideways to block her access to return to the desk. "You need treatment, or you'll lose your job."

Lottie froze. Oh no. Oh no no no. Dropping forever, all the way back to Earth, a failure, a nothing. That wasn't fair! She marshaled her strength to plead, "One more day."

"It's already been one more day than it should have been, and you know it. I'm sorry. You did an amazing job hiding this from me. I'm proud."

Was he? He looked honest. She did trust him. But . . . fired? He kept his hands on her arms and set her back in the chair. "You're a good person, Lottie, and a great engineer. You'll figure this problem out on your own, the slow way. I believe in you."

She knew what he was doing. Compliment her. Keep her still. Imply that she could figure out not just the research problem but also her emotional state. Now he kept one hand on her, a still hand, pressing gently, convincing her to stay in her seat, to be still. He opened his medical kit with the other hand. Lottie wanted to cry. She wanted to scream. She wanted her scream to tear straight through the metal walls like a laser bursting a balloon and spill all of them out into the void like frozen droplets of atmosphere.

And she knew that wasn't right, to feel like that. Still she screamed, and she closed her eyes.

Saravit said, "I won't do anything without your consent, but I need you to let me treat you. This isn't good for you, being like this. There could be damage. To your heart, to your respiration, to your brain chemistry. Do you trust me to know what is safe and good for your health?"

Oh no. This wasn't fair. She stood on the seat, but he rose with her, kept his hold on her hands, and delivered the second blow. "If we don't trust each other, how will we work together? I have to trust you to keep your word, and you have to trust me to tell you the truth."

It was true. She had promised to trust him. She remembered it even if she didn't feel it in the moment. Lottie crawled back into the seat. Saravit let go of her wrists. She put her hands between her legs, where she could keep them from moving. He waited, hands still outstretched like she was a child on a ladder and might fall. "Yes," she said. "I trust you."

It went fast then. The official consent. The muscular-shot chemical that would trigger her neural implant to manufacture calm. She felt the prick, smelled the alcohol as Saravit put away his materials. She didn't feel it yet, but soon she'd be exhausted. Just when she didn't have time. The project still needed to be finished. In one day, the research staff would finish the battery of tests they were working on, and if she didn't have the software worked out, they couldn't start their next jobs. She would be blamed, but it wasn't her fault. She'd been so close to done!

Her brilliant streak was being killed, her abilities curtailed. Did anyone have a right to murder something like that?

Her anger, however, was already fading into resignation. That was the worst part, like she was siding against herself.

Saravit rubbed her hand. "There. That wasn't so bad, was it? There."

She liked that. And she knew, like waking from a dream and remembering who she was, that

she would also like falling asleep. “Are we done?”

“Tomorrow, first thing, we’re going to meet and talk. We need to decide what we’re going to do, as a team, if you feel you need stimulation to stay up longer or work faster. We have to balance that need with the needs of your brain chemistry. Self-treatment without my guidance is not the answer. Would you want Dr. Izen to work without your guidance when an experiment needs engineering input?”

It was unfair of him to put it like that. “Couldn’t I ever . . . be manic . . . in control? A controlled manic? For a day, maybe, or an hour?”

“I wish it worked that way. We’ll talk tomorrow in more detail. Meet me in my office at 0900. Are you okay to get back to your room? I’ve asked station security to stay out of your way.”

Lottie nodded, stood, and waited for him to open the door to the hall. In the morning, she would feel she’d made the right decision, and that it had been her decision, but right now she felt like she’d been punished for a crime she had not committed.

Saravit opened the door and wished her well like she had stopped by for a chat. She knew without looking—never look behind you in spin-grav—that he was hanging in the door, watching her go.

Station security might have been keeping a polite distance, but Xiao Fung wasn’t. With her hands on her hips and her legs planted far apart, she blocked the walkway in the up-traffic direction. Lottie would have to pass her, or risk breaking one of the most stringent rules of etiquette on the station and walk spin-ward on level two. All life on the station funneled through the two main corridors, the one downstairs and this one. People walked spin-ward on level one and anti-spin on level two.

Xiao was what Lottie’s mother would describe as a “fireplug of a woman.” Wide and low in the hips with a square face made squarer by her severe haircut. Standing like that, she resembled nothing quite so much as a road construction barrier.

Lottie’s room, her bed, lay ahead, past where the corridor floor tucked away behind the ceiling. Life on a ring station meant always feeling like you were walking up a ramp.

Lottie felt the future effect of the shot creeping on her, a cold presence. She lowered her head and tried to duck into the widest open space between Xiao and the wall. “Leave me alone.”

Xiao turned deftly in place. “I would love to. What were you doing in my boyfriend’s room?”

Perhaps Xiao’s years as a maintenance engineer had destroyed her inner ear. Lottie had spun in place once to find out what it felt like, and it had sent her straight to the deck.

Xiao swiped at her arm, but Lottie flinched out of reach and walked as briskly as she could without running. Xiao followed, growling, “He’s too nice to set boundaries, but I’m not.”

Every ten feet, the corridor had a depression painted a darker grey with a dark groove in the center for the emergency bulkheads that lowered to trap air if there were a leak. Lottie had a superstition about not stepping on them, a transplant of her childhood game of not stepping on sidewalk cracks. She hopped one, two. Xiao kept on her. “A birdie told me you’ve been acting crazier than usual. I’m thinking it’s an act, to get his attention. Saravit gives all he has to you patients, and you walk all over him.”

A technician stepped into a doorway to let them pass. A pair of conversing specialists—Dr. Zhang’s lab, closed-system farming—squeezed around Lottie and Xiao, oblivious and uncaring of their drama.

Xiao was the shorter woman, but her strong legs made up for Lottie’s stride. Also, she was remarkably good at slipping around people, even the person pushing a full cart that Lottie had only evaded by stepping on top of a pipe she probably shouldn’t have stepped on. (It flexed under her foot like an animal gapping.)

“Admit it. I’m not asking for more than that. You’re after my man. I don’t blame you. It’s not like you have options. Go ahead, be jealous. I can’t stop you. But off hours—”

Lottie tripped, she couldn’t tell on what; the corridors were kept scrupulously clean so it had to be air itself, a drag of the toe. She almost fell. Oh no. Perhaps the exertion was making the drug enter her bloodstream more quickly than expected. She sagged against a convenient wall, watching Xiao’s mouth working without hearing her words. How would she get out of

this conversation? She needed to rest. The wall was comfortable, covered in safety foam. It gave gently, like the silvered wood swing on her front porch when she was a child. She'd sit there reading, pushing her father's endless sari-fabric throw pillows off onto the floor like she was burrowing down to the wood, down to her deeper self, while her heart ached to join her heroines in their windswept castles. She always saw herself as the sidekick, the well-meaning friend, not the main character. She would make them tea and explain the decisions they ought to be making.

Oh no. This was the downturn. She was distracted and sleepy. Next came the depression, the longer analog to her short beautiful week as a comet burning. She hoped Saravit could get her through it quickly. Her first on-station depression had lasted two weeks. She'd hardly moved from her bed, skipping work shifts without telling anyone. It hadn't seemed worth the effort. There had been disciplinary hearings. She skipped those, too. She was threatened with being reassigned as a janitor. That was how the university avoided paying travel vouchers for firing—demoted you to the worst possible job, with the worst possible compensation, and waited for you to leave on your own.

She hadn't even shown up for the reassignment orientation. Julie started sleeping over at someone else's room. Lottie never found out who or how they'd managed, since there weren't any unused beds in the station. There were rooms that weren't in use, yet, but those were sealed and airless.

One day the new station psychiatrist was sitting on the floor by her bed and asked her, "Are you okay?"

"No," she'd said.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Do you feel depressed? You've been depressed in the past, isn't that right?"

"Go away."

Saravit nodded. "In a bit. I'm going to be here, if you decide you do want to talk."

Xiao snapped her fingers in front of Lottie's face. "Hey! Am I boring you?"

"I . . . I just got a shot and it's making me drowsy. I'm not after your boyfriend, please leave me alone."

Xiao opened her mouth to say something else, when a speaker overhead announced, "All security volunteers please report to your stations. Medical and maintenance crews prepare for an emergency procedure at Docking Bay A."

Xiao looked up at the ceiling. "I wonder what the hell that is."

Lottie didn't wonder what the hell it was. She used what energy she had left to stumble blindly toward her bunk, where she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * *

Chapter Two

Xiao Fung watched Lottie run away like Xiao was fuckin' Godzilla. Yeah, that's right, heaven forbid you talk to the lowly monster who fixes the toilets. What could you expect from a snot who destroyed her workbench rather than call maintenance? Bothering Vit at home like he was her personal servant. If it had been her home, Xiao wouldn't say anything, but she sure as hell stood up for her friends.

Now wasn't the time to let bullies take up space in her mind. She picked her radio off her belt. "What's the story, Mason?"

Her chief electrician had ears all over the station. Sure enough, Mason's gruff voice answered, "Ship in distress. We gotta let 'em dock. Probably boring."

Xiao checked the corridor section number, in its usual place on the ceiling. "We got any repairs needed outside of maintenance hatch C-1?"

"Dude."

"I'm just asking! I'm right by maintenance hatch C-1, and I don't have anything on my immediate schedule." Actually, she was off-duty, but Mason didn't need to know that.

"You're going to EVA just to ogle these guys? I thought you already had a boyfriend." Ha, ha.

Xiao jogged ahead two corridor-sections and into the maintenance airlock receiving room. “I have certain privileges as the lady who knows where all the trash goes, and one of them is the right to go outdoors whenever I damn well feel like. So we got something outside of C-1 or don’t we?”

“I’m looking; don’t wet yourself. Wish I were as easily amused as you. Let’s see . . . yeah, we got a winner! Remember that cable run on the exterior we lost throughput on months ago?”

Ugh. Yeah she remembered. Data trunk line—operations noticed when they couldn’t detect a toilet leak remotely after a smell complaint. Boy was that a job.

“Our temporary shunt is still out there, huh?”

“Yup.”

Xiao went into the receiving room. She wriggled into a suit bottom and clipped her radio to it. “I was always going to fix that. Do me a favor, log my EVA and find a tech to run safety for me?”

Mason griped. Xiao didn’t care. Putting on a spacesuit felt like returning home. Her youth on Mars had been nothing but environment suits, all the time. Oh, they were hell, for sure. No one liked them. But now that she spent most of her time in shirtsleeves, the pervasive stink of old sweat and sweet coolant, the scratch of the netting was like putting on a well-loved pair of slippers.

She got the wiring kit out of the tool locker and hooked it to her suit. “I’ll trace it back to section C-81. That’s where we patched in again. The break is probably near the airlock. They usually are.”

Mason tutted. “Is there no task so boring you won’t use it to gawk at a spacecraft?”

“Boring?” Xiao huffed, shrugging into the top of her suit. “What if something goes wrong? You think of that?”

There was a sound like Mason taking a screwdriver out of her mouth. “I think I’ve got a gorgeous view of the ducts under administrative services. They’re complaining about the heat again. They should try putting their backs on the outer wall. My tits are about to flake off.”

Xiao jumped down to the airlock rather than use the ladder to the lower level. Some people wouldn’t do that, scared their tiny human body would hurt the station wall or something. Some people!

“The number-pushers still bitching about the cold? I changed the max setting on their thermostat.”

“Boss, I could light that office on fire, they’d still say it’s too cold. They know we’re in space, right?”

Xiao clipped her tether and cycled the airlock. With her thumb, she switched her personal radio off and flicked on the suit radio. “When they want fish for dinner, they know.” The doors parted on blackness. How could anyone forget this?

With a mad grin, she fell into the beautiful dark below. The force of the station spin sent her out on her tether, then yanked her back toward it as her inertial angle kept straight and the station swiftly moved. It was an expensive roller coaster ride, but it ran whether you rode it or not, and Xiao loved riding. With ease she timed the moment she could reach a handhold, assisted with a tiny jet from the EVA suit, and she was swinging across the ladder of handholds on the station’s exterior to the edge, where she could start climbing “up.”

For now, she ignored the cable run, climbing past it to the roof of the ring. The station spread out before her, a landscape of ash-grey ceramic and various metal and plastic patinas, all blushing pink from reflections of Jupiter, which dominated the view; the moon the station was named for was barely visible in the swirls and colors. The engineers and scientists could work on pie-in-the-sky money-making dreams for the university, but Xiao and her crew made the very real dream of a stable living platform come true.

“News on the rescue,” Mason interrupted her reverie. “These a-holes say they don’t have any EVA suits on board, can you believe that?”

Xiao stood on top of the habitat ring, hands on her hips, and craned her head back to watch a dark wedge-shape slowly creeping into view. “Well, that’s stupid,” Xiao said. “But not a problem for docking.”

“Nonstandard dock,” Mason said. “We’d save hours if they could fly their people over in

suits.”

High above Xiao was the squat cylinder of the station hub with docks on either end. The station felt still, despite all of it spinning ninety-four meters per second, the two nearby arms that connected the ring to the hub were insane skyscrapers, making her deliciously tiny. Saravit should see this, she thought, and laughed at herself, because Vit got space-sick every time he so much as went to a view-port.

Tracking the arriving ship, she estimated she had a half-hour wait before it reached the dock. She sighed and looked for that damn cable, still thinking with a back part of her brain about how she'd describe the ship in distress to Vit.

* * *

Lottie woke, refreshed and blank, staring at the familiar pattern of braces and insulation over her head, and then she remembered who she was and what she'd been doing the day before, and she felt deeply, horribly embarrassed—like embarrassment was a liquid in her mattress, and her weight had pushed the liquid out, and it was rising, soaking her slowly from back to front.

She rolled over and covered her head. Had she really jumped rope in the hallway outside her room? How had she thought that was a good idea? Hiding her head did not make the shame pass nor allow her to slip back into the blameless world of sleep. Blue numerals on the wall unrelentingly informed her it was 08:13. She had to see Saravit at 09:00. She had enough time to shower before the appointment. Not enough time to waste crying about it. Saravit had this knack for picking times. Like he'd clocked her sleep cycle. Maybe he had.

Couldn't she play the languishing damsel, touched with the haunting beauty of near-death? If she were ignored in her suffering, she could have the satisfaction of feeling herself ill-used.

No. If she didn't go to her appointment, Saravit would be at her bedside at 9:05 to administer his advice and medication in full view of her roommate and nosy neighbors.

She felt sick, sitting up, even after a year of practice doing so in spin gravity. She was almost thirty years old. When would she stop needing to lean on someone?

Julia, on the bunk opposite, glanced at her and hurriedly returned her eyes to her reader. Lottie felt it like a slap. Julia was a nice roommate, but the nicest of roommates became an enemy to battle by millimeters if you let resentment settle in. “Julia? I . . . I'm sorry about . . .”

“Hm? Oh. No, it's fine. Everything's fine.” Julia spoke too quickly, in a false-bright tone.

Well, that would have to be revisited.

Lottie felt like a stranger visiting someone else's room. Maybe they all were. Whose rooms were these? There wasn't much to personalize a berth on a space station; possessions weighed one like anchors, costing as much to transport as another person. Julia had decorated her side of the room with delicate silk scarves her wife back home on Earth had painted with paisley fish and flowers. They were the perfect answer to maximum beauty per ounce, but they made Lottie's side of the room look barren, with nothing other than a hologram she'd bought. It displayed a shelf of nineteenth-century novels in leather and cloth bindings with glints of gold. The emitter was a flat plate about the size and shape of a nail file, and it was designed to display on a shelf, but Lottie's shelf wasn't very wide, so the books were miniaturized to fit, which made them look like child's copies. They weren't books she had particularly read, either, though she sometimes entertained the idea of looking them up and downloading them to her reader, especially the one titled “Rented a Husband.”

Lottie reached through the imaginary book spines and picked up the wire basket she kept her shower things in. It wasn't the right kind of basket. Everyone else used the same small carryalls that they must have gotten as a sign-on gift when the station welcomed its first employees. Her basket came from the dispensary's excess stock. It was meant to lower French fries into boiling oil. Lottie was always doing things to save money that ended up making her look foolish. Her sonic toothbrush and moisturizer tube kept slipping through the holes so she'd had to line the bottom with a playing card, also purchased from the unwanted overstock. She didn't recognize the game it was from—it had a picture of a woman holding two swords, and it was not big enough to cover the entire bottom, but if she put her hairbrush just right, it forced the smaller objects to stay over the card, and the bristles stuck through the tines, locking the brush and card

in place.

She was stalling. The heaviness, the slowness, the lack of a desire to do anything would pass. Slowly, but they would. It helped knowing there was an end to this feeling.

The showers weren't far, two sections down the main corridor. She could do it. She wrapped herself in the towel she had left hanging from her last shower, not wanting to bother getting her bathrobe out. The brighter corridor felt painful. She kept her eyes on the floor, found the bulkhead seams. One seam. Two.

The door to the shower room was kept open due to high traffic. A tasteful wall of frosted plastic hid the view inside. The floor was laminated in a realistic wood texture, like wide pine planks. Someone had decorated the showers of Callisto Station like Scandinavian saunas. Normally she found it a pleasant luxury. Today she was depressed, and the laminate seams on the "wood" benches advertised how far they were from the comfort of growing trees.

Only three hooks had clothes on them, which was good, she'd have a nearly private shower. She hung her towel and turned to the shower chamber holding only her basket.

Xiao's voice hit her like an assault, amplified by the smooth walls of the shower. "Tough fuckin' procedure, all right. After the fuckers figured out our spin velocity, even. They're still at it. I'd still be watching but shit, a gal's gotta sleep."

"You're the only weirdo watches ship docking like it's porn."

A slap, a laugh. They were supposed to conserve water for rinsing, but that slap had sounded wet. You weren't supposed to stand around in the shower after rinsing. Everyone knew that. Why were Xiao and her friend hogging the room?

Except, of course, that the shower held six easily. The normal rules of decorum didn't include trying to avoid someone.

Lottie was still standing there when Xiao and the other woman walked out. They froze on seeing her. Xiao scowled. The other woman was chief electrician Angela Mason. She had an unreadable expression. She was tall and very pale. She turned on the body dryer and shook her short hair with her fingers. "They're going to want full repair crews when they finish docking. You stayed up all night for nothing."

Xiao looked at Lottie. "You come here to shower or to stare?"

Lottie rushed into the shower room, feeling more naked even than ever. An older woman stood in the back corner, doing a slow, careful job of passing the rinsing nozzle over herself.

Lottie pumped two presses of soap into her hands and did her hair and armpits. There wasn't time for much else, thanks to Xiao, who knew she was in the shower now and would try to capture her in another unwanted discussion. She would probably follow Lottie to the infirmary and get more ridiculous when she saw Saravit.

No. This wasn't a book, Xiao wasn't the villain with nothing greater on her mind than tormenting Lottie. She would be long gone by the time Lottie finished.

Except Xiao wasn't. She was dressed and leaning against the wall by the exit.

Lottie got under the nearest dryer and hoped Xiao would go away. She didn't. Lottie wrapped herself in her towel and picked up her toiletry kit. Xiao followed her into the corridor. Lottie asked, "Don't you have a docking ship to inspect?"

"I got time. Medical staff has first round on these things. Just remembered I never got an answer about what were you doing in Saravit's very private personal bedroom."

Lottie wished she'd brought clothes to change into as Xiao had done. Instead she was facing her wrapped in a towel, carrying a ridiculous basket.

"Vit was upset and distracted last night," Xiao said. "What did you do to him?"

If Saravit was upset, did that mean she was in trouble with administration? Lottie locked her eyes on the bulkhead for her room. She could count the steps. Spin-ward. She could break the rule, this time. It was short enough. She'd run to her door and slam it shut. Xiao would have to give up and go do whatever it was Xiao did when not being a beast. She started. Ten more steps.

"Hey!" Xiao said, but whether she objected to Lottie's rudeness or direction wasn't clear. Five more steps.

The bulkhead slammed shut. So did the ones fore and aft of them in the corridor, locking

Lottie and Xiao together in an airtight chamber. She had only enough time to notice this before the lights went out.

* * *

Chapter Three

Darkness crashed against Xiao's eyeballs. Ghosts of bright points swarmed in her vision. Xiao snatched up her radio. "Mason, you there? Mason?!" Silence.

Xiao had gone blind once. The doctors said it was a nervous reaction, some cocktail of being dehydrated and going from a dark interior to a bright exterior too fast. Please not again. Feeling the radio, the rough grip pattern on the button, defined a density to the darkness, made her feel it wasn't her. "Carmi? Lee? Is anyone on this fucking thing?"

Why weren't the emergency lights on? There were supposed to be glow-strips . . . oh, right, this was the section they had to tear the strips and sealant up to fix the plumbing. Carmi was supposed to get them back on last week. She was going to kill Carmi. "Jake? Director Paz? Anyone?"

"The radio won't work without power," an eerie, creepy, set-her-hairs-standing-on-edge voice said, far too close and far too unseen.

Xiao touched the reassuring solidity of the wall. "It's a radio. It's got its own power. See?" She pressed the button that made a green light come on and held it out in vaguely the direction she'd heard Lottie.

Except it was a red light. Lottie looked even freakier in dim red light, hair hanging in her face and clutching her towel and that ridiculous fry basket. Xiao let up the button and felt better about the dark.

"It's not the radio's personal battery that's the problem. The radio connects to repeaters in the walls. Those lost power."

Who was this creepy engineer to tell her how a system on her station worked? Even worse that she was right. This wasn't Mars, the corridor shielding blocked traditional radios. Xiao hooked the useless thing back on her belt and felt over her pockets. A flashlight or a screwdriver would come in handy about now. Hell, a scrap of metal with an edge would be enough.

Why the hell hadn't she brought her multi-tool to the shower? Mason always did. Xiao got frantic, patting every part of her body. Maybe she could turn a button into a tool.

In her front pants pocket was a slender stylus with a light on the end, a gift from the people who sold the station its latest oxygen extractor. She must have left it in these pants days ago.

Thank you, laziness! The stylus cast a dot of white light on Lottie's arm. It wouldn't do much, but it would be better than continually pressing down the button on her radio. "Right," Xiao said, "I gotta get to where there's a functioning repeater so I can figure out who broke the station and fix it."

Xiao played her penlight over the edges of the bulkhead behind her, the seams around it misleadingly promising cracks. The bulkheads would drop if there was a power outage; it was one of the station's fail-safes. But what had shut down power so completely?

"Can you open it?" Lottie asked behind her.

What a stupid question. "Assuming this is a power outage and not a hull breach in the next compartment."

"How would we know?"

This was great. She'd stayed up all night watching a stupid docking procedure—and was it her fault she cared so much about her chosen profession? Lottie sounding like a lost kitten got on her nerves. Grown women shouldn't sound like that. Xiao tapped the bulkhead with the back of her penlight. "Sound waves don't travel in vacuum. You knock, it sounds hollow, you got air."

"I'm not sure I trust a test as subjective as that."

Of course she didn't. Xiao found the emergency release lever and gave it a yank.

Nothing happened. Xiao yanked it harder. And harder. And harder. She grunted, feeling the strain in her arm and pain in her hand where the handle bit in. She stumbled backward into Lottie. "It shouldn't do that," she said. Because it shouldn't. The only reason for the emergency

release to fail would be if there was vacuum on the other side.

Annoyingly, Lottie said, "Isn't there a mechanical fail-safe in case of low pressure?"

"Yes, but this isn't that. No way. I heard plenty of echoes while I was killing myself trying to get it open. You think after all these years fixing broken shit in space I don't know how to test for vacuum?" Xiao pushed past Lottie to try the other bulkhead. She gave up after three tugs, huffing. "What are the odds both of those sections of corridor were breeched but this one wasn't?"

Lottie's voice was high-pitched, wheedling. "C-could it be an attack?"

Kid obviously watched too many pirate movies. "No one's going to come all the way up here to steal stuff that's cheaper on Earth. What, you think there's some religious extremists got a beef with studying gravitation?"

"It could be a battle . . . ships firing on each other. We're just the backdrop, caught in the crossfire. They could have punctured most of the chambers in the station!"

"If you don't shut up with the hypotheticals, I am going to puncture a few chambers of my own. There is air on the other side of this bulkhead; that is a fact. The power is out. That is a fact. Stick to facts."

Xiao wasn't some Earth-raised newbie. She was a proud Martian. Her mom had been fixing pressure systems since before Jupiter was a place people went. Where were Lottie's folks? Lounging under a blue sky in their shirtsleeves, Xiao would wager.

Lottie's voice, still creepy, still too close, "Is there another way out?"

"I'm trying to think of one!" Of all the people to get caught with. Why couldn't it have been Mason or Jake?

There were the bulkheads, sealed, emergency locked. There were the nonfunctioning damn emergency lights. There were the insulated interior wall plates. She could take those off, but the bulkhead walls went to the outer edge of the station. Cable runs and pipes punched through, but those were sealed all the way because what sense would it make to have holes if you were trying to trap atmosphere? What was that repair they'd done? Right. Toilet line. There'd been a leak in the pneumatic flush coming from the C section head that resulted in a pervasive stink in the corridor and the flush not working so well, either. They'd had to pull the whole wall and floor off. The waste pipes came in long sections; you couldn't just pop a foot off. It had wound up being a gasket at fault. She remembered that. It wasn't a fun repair, but once they got the old gasket out, it went pretty fast putting it back together.

No one on that detail had wanted to come back to the corridor section ever again, much less to do finishing, but shit, that was no excuse to leave the damn glow-strips off.

"What are we going to do?" Lottie plopped herself down on the floor. "I'm freezing, and I want to die."

Was Lottie going to freak out on her? Xiao didn't know how to handle that. "I told you I'm thinking. There's a plumbing line under this floor, but it's not big enough to crawl through."

Lottie sniffled. "Well, can you connect to the data line that tells the door there's an emergency?"

"If I cut that, it'll default to locked down. That's what it does when the power is out, which is the whole problem."

She couldn't see Lottie's expression, which was good because it was probably scarier than her being a vague lump of damp hair on the floor, but Lottie was definitely either starting to cry or stopping. Her words had that stutter-and-hiccup quality. "I didn't say c-cut it. I said access it. So we can send it a signal to open."

"Send it a signal with what, your toothbrush? I don't bring my tool kit to the shower." Ugh. She knew exactly where the door control connected. If she had a screwdriver and a handheld signal box, she could do it. "I probably will, from now on."

Lottie's too-soft hand brushed Xiao's. "Show me where the wire is."

"And you'll do what, exactly?"

"Send it a signal," she said, with surprising firmness, "With my toothbrush."

Xiao didn't like letting an emotionally unstable research engineer near official operations

equipment, but she didn't see another plan coming to light. The air was already smelling stale around them. Xiao bit at a button on her sleeve until it came loose and then wedged it into two of the four slots on a Phillips screw head. She couldn't budge the first screw, so she moved on to another. The second one went easy. Top-right was slippery. Wasn't it always the way? She tucked one, then two screws in her pocket. She scraped her knuckles and dropped the button twice, but she finally got the third screw free. Then she broke the button trying to get a half a turn more on that tight bottom-left screw. "Fuck it." She wrenched the panel down, using the stuck screw as a pivot. She stepped back and shined her light into the wiring. "It's here." Lottie squeezed between her and the wall. She'd knotted her towel on one shoulder like a tiny toga. "That smooth, grey wire that I'm shining up and down on. That's the security network feed. It's fiber optic. How you going to patch into that without an optical transmitter?"

The cable was a deceptively fragile-looking thing, like a flower stem against the same-color grey metal behind it.

Lottie snatched the penlight from Xiao without a word of by-your-leave. Xiao got a narrow flash of a face screwed up in concentration, and then the light was inside the wall panel with Lottie's head. Now it was Xiao's turn to ask, "What are you doing?"

Lottie grunted like she was trying to take a particularly recalcitrant dump. She had the penlight in her teeth. Light vanished and appeared as she moved, flickers and flashes. *Oh*. Of course. Having a source of light—the penlight—and something that could fine-tune it with vibration—the toothbrush—she was making an optical transmitter. That was . . . pretty clever actually. More practical than she'd have figured for a research engineer.

Lottie made an open-mouthed noise, "Ahhh-HA!"

There was a heavy clank inside the door. Xiao yanked the emergency release, and this time the bulkhead lifted, just a few inches. Xiao had to muscle it up enough for Lottie to crawl under, then she followed.

"Told you it wasn't vacuum on this side." The penlight danced over bulkheads. They were in another empty, sealed section of corridor. Fuck. All that work to end up in the same situation. Had moving up-spin been the right move? At least a few glow-strips were working in this compartment. She could see the ragged edge where the one on the right had been torn. She looked back at the bulkhead they'd raised. "Can you do that again, Nervy?"

Lottie crouched on the floor, checking the contents of her shower basket next to the glow strip. "Yes, I can, and don't call me 'Nervy.'" She looked up at Xiao, face all big eyes. "I don't know how many times my toothbrush can emit the pulse before it runs out of battery."

Xiao checked her radio. Still no answers, still a red light. They were on the second level, which was living quarters, kitchens, stuff like that. Downstairs were all the more vital places, where the gravity was Earth-normal. (It was barely lighter on the second floor. Some people thought they could feel the difference, but who didn't feel lighter getting off of work?)

What was the nearest important place they could get to, that was likely to have emergency power and communications? The infirmary? She did mental math. Two more bulkheads to C stairwell, then eight to sick bay . . . or if they went the other way it was four bulkheads to a stairwell to . . . Ten versus eight. Either felt like crawling across a desert on her elbows. Was there another option? She turned in place, imagining the layout. "We're only two sections from a maintenance airlock. The EVA suits have radios designed to work outside of the station. That should get us a direct line to command and some answers."

Lottie took up a position by the bulkhead. And . . . stood there. Right. Clearly, she expected Xiao to interpret standing there as "yes, let's do that, now open the panel for me." Even Director Paz would be friendlier in this situation.

No time to gripe.

Two bulkheads exhaustingly raised and lowered—eight screws, two buttons broken, her fingertips sore, and her shoulder aching from wrenching the heavy bulkheads up, and at last they were in the airlock receiving room. Emergency lights were functioning in addition to the glow strips, painting the room with a semi-romantic glow. Xiao pulled the radio out of the nearest suit. "Control? This is Facilities Manager Fung. We are trapped and without power in

Maintenance Hatch C-1. Control?”

Silence answered her. Xiao looked at the radio. There was a wee green light. There was even a reading of all the available signal bands. External Communications said “Receiving.” So did Internal Communications. Xiao looked at Lottie, who hung back against the line of suits on the opposite wall, watching her with scared, wide eyes. “Easy, Nervy. Doesn’t mean anything. Maybe they’re too busy to answer.”

“Or they don’t want to.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

Lottie flinched at Xiao’s words. Great, now she couldn’t raise her voice, either.

The radio cracked. Lottie looked like she wanted to leap on it. Xiao pressed send again. “Hello? Anyone there?”

“Yes! This is Haizle in Human Resources.”

Xiao squinted. “Haizle? What are you doing on the horn?”

“The power’s out! Do you know what’s going on?”

“Kind of hoping you’d tell us. We’re in Maintenance Airlock C-1.”

Haizle took a deep breath and adopted a story-telling cadence, “So I went into the communications room to talk to Ria because there was that ship docking, and I figured she’d get the scoop? But Ria stepped out to go to the bathroom and I was waiting for her when the lights cut out. I can’t get the door open. I can hear people on the other side, though. The rest of HR. All the consoles in here went black, too, and I thought there was emergency power for those, but this radio just made a noise and that was you and now you’re caught up.”

Xiao groaned. “Anyone else out there? Anyone not in the dark?”

Lottie, all giant eyes, said, “There ought to be dozens of people near radios. There are radios in the command center and emergency radios in the corridors.”

“Yeah, which means this isn’t just a power outage. Someone purposefully knocked communications out as well as the lights.” Maybe an EMP. What if the whole space station was now a spinning wheel of dead junk? How long could they breathe and stay warm without oxygen scrubbers and heating elements?

Xiao looked at the equipment around her. Four EVA suits, the tool locker, a janitor’s mop bucket. It would take something like fourteen bulkhead sections to open and shut to get to Operations. Eight now to get to the infirmary. Operations might be more useful to get control of the station back, but Xiao would rather head to the infirmary and make sure Saravit was all right.

Xiao felt a rising panic that maybe she, Haizle, and Lottie were the only people left alive on Callisto Station. “I’m going outside,” she decided.

* * *

Chapter Four

Lottie wondered if Xiao had gone insane. You didn’t go outside. Xiao put the suit radio back in its sleeve. “You can stay here or come with, I don’t care, but I know I’ll travel quicker and have a better idea what is going on if I’m EVA.”

Lottie crouched on the floor like a terrycloth cavewoman. If Xiao left her here, she’d never get up again. It was slightly more frightening than leaving the station. “I’ll go too, then.”

“Have you ever done EVA?”

Lottie shook her head.

“Then you’d better stay here.” Xiao was moving, clipping things. She was sure and steady. She had a plan.

A heroine would go with. She would save the day and win the love of her coworkers, the forgiveness of management, the respect of HR. “I could help?”

Xiao paused, sighed. “Kid . . .”

“What if you need something like what I did with the toothbrush?” Lottie covered her face. What a stupid argument.

Xiao looked angry. She pulled another environment suit out. “Put your legs where legs go. I’ll help you in. You do absolutely everything I tell you and nothing I don’t, and we’ll get through this. Clear?”

Trembling in fear, but also grateful, Lottie nodded.

"I need you to say it."

"Everything you say, nothing you don't. Clear."

"Okay. Good. Stick your hand in there."

The bath towel bunched up. Lottie pulled her arm free, trying to tuck it down as much between her skin and the suit as possible.

Xiao was different, giving instructions. Lottie's best teacher had been like this, calmly handing her the secrets of mathematics at the rate she could grasp them, like an unspooling rope ladder. Xiao hooked a tether from Lottie's suit to a bar on the floor and then tugged it, reassuring them both with its solidity. Then she did the same for herself. She hit a big red button. Then she reached for Lottie's hand. Lottie squeezed her fingers through the layers of two suits.

"Now we step off. Don't jump, just step. Easy, like slipping into a swimming pool."

It was not like slipping into a swimming pool. Lottie's legs kicked over emptiness. Xiao tried to slip her hand free from Lottie's grip. "No!"

"Girl, I need two hands, and I do this all the time. You really want to climb out one-handed?"

"Oh God," Lottie said. Xiao stopped trying to get free. After a moment, Lottie was able to make herself let go, clamping both hands onto the bar her tether attached to.

"Now climb down. Just like a ladder. See? The next bar isn't even a full arm's length away. Get both your hands on the rung outside the lock so it can close." Lottie let go for a millisecond, felt the ice of fear and latched on again.

Xiao was going to yell at her. Lottie swallowed the fear and grabbed the outside bar with her right hand and brought her left double-quick after. It slipped, but Lottie got a tight grip on her second try.

She felt a tiny trickle of mania, like a stimulant hit. Adrenaline.

Xiao wasn't even breathing heavy. "Nothing to worry about. You let go, nothing bad happens. You drop to the end of your tether. Then, since the station is spinning, you fall toward it, back along the anti-spin side. If that happens, relax, let the spin do its thing. You'll think you're going to splat like a bug on the station, but you won't. You might not even hit it. Mostly you get close and start drifting away again. So to recap: if you fall, relax and I'll get you. Clear?" Lottie was having too much trouble breathing to respond. Xiao continued like she had. "Follow me. One hand at a time. It gets easier." The edge of the wheel was only twelve feet away. It felt like a mile. Lottie had to talk herself up to each hand transfer. By rung four, she was doing great, hands slapping along too fast too slip.

"Easy, you'll tire yourself out."

Lottie could not imagine a way she wouldn't!

"It gets better when we go around the edge." Xiao hung off the corner of the station, pointing. "Hold here." Doggedly, Lottie swung and clung, swung and clung, and then curled up so she could hook her elbow into the rung. "Good. Now we're going to re-tether. Watch me. Pull out the second tether and latch it here, like this. Now you. The hook is on your suit here." This part was pretty easy. Just pulling a cord, hooking a hook. "Good. Now unhook the old tether by pulling the tab. No, harder. Good."

Lottie's hands were wet inside the gloves.

"Now we're going up over the edge. It's going to feel like climbing up a ladder. Way easier, right? Your feet'll have lower rungs to stand on, and every foot we go we get lighter. This'll be the best view you've ever seen in your life!" Xiao lifted up, out of sight. Lottie felt bereft, alone, and really, really not cut out for this. Still, the allure of foot-rungs drew her up. It was easier. She looked down, but that was terrible—a wall ending abruptly on blackness.

Xiao reappeared. Strong arms pulled Lottie's body up, over the lip, like she was a doll. Wow. No one had picked her up like that since she was little. She risked opening her squeezed-tight eyes. Xiao smiled at her, proud as a parent.

Xiao straightened from her crouch. "Would you look at that?" Xiao's voice was breathy with awe. "Gorgeous, isn't it?"

Lottie wanted nothing more than to rest at Xiao's feet. She peeked.

Jupiter had every color in it, like thousands of potions swirling in unmixed tea, organic depths cut across by the black shadow of the far side of the station's wheel. It wasn't true that you couldn't appreciate beauty while depressed. Lottie knew this was beautiful. She felt a soft, muted awe. She knew she'd remember it with warmer emotion.

She knew why Xiao loved coming out here.

* * *

Xiao had been focused on coaxing the scared engineer. When she followed Lottie's gaping gaze, however, it was not the view she expected. The station was a dark cutout, the reflected Jupiter light making it a haunted house version of itself. "All of this should have lights. I mean all of it. There are system diagnostic lights, navigation lights for craft coming in . . ." Xiao lost her breath.

The ship that had docked the night before was brightly lit, a glowing mechanical tick burrowed into the main airlock on the center spindle. "Those bastards!" She pointed for Lottie's sake. "The emergency-docking ship. It must have been them. Those absolute bastards. They must have done something to take out the whole power system, plant and backups and everything."

Lottie got to her feet, arms out for balance like she was expecting the station to buck her off. "I . . . we can't know that."

"You seriously want more evidence than what we're seeing? A strange ship docks, and a few hours later, all power on the station is gone but they're still fine? Oh, we are going to Docking Bay A, I tell you that." Xiao unhooked her tether to travel faster. She bounded over the "roof" toward the station arm.

Lottie gasped. "I . . . wait."

Xiao paused and safety-tethered. She looked back at Lottie, who was toddling drunkenly along the roof with no tether connection. "Tether right now!"

Lottie stopped, wobbling, seconds from any random accident sending her floating away to her death. Fucking rookies! Xiao had to go back to her.

Lottie had re-tethered by the time Xiao was in arm's length. "But you . . ."

"Do as I say, not as I do."

Xiao didn't have time to worry about this kid. "Stay here," she said. "Don't move if you can't tether every fucking step. I'll come back for you."

For some unknown reason probably having to do with engineers, the access ladder was on the "outside" of the station support arm, so she had to squeeze around a corner over limitless space. If you looked at the maintenance ladder's impossible height and thought about it like you were on a planet, you'd lose the heart to go on. Fortunately, she knew the spin-gravity dropped off pretty fast. Xiao climbed, the strain bleeding out of her arms and shoulders, and her legs lifting away from the station.

Lottie moaned behind her. Poor kid sounded like she was barely holding on to her lunch.

The enemy ship—because that was how Xiao thought of it now—was getting clearer as she got closer. It was an old-style Russian cargo ship. Dinky. Crew of eight, but you could cram more in there with no cargo. A lot more. They were common grunt-carriers at the shipyard back on Mars. No guns, *usually*. This one had been fitted with new engines and lots of patches and repairs, which made it resemble nothing so much as a compressed wedge of junk. She'd paid close attention to the problem of docking the pain in the ass. Its docking ring had a lot of seal-destroying jerry-rigs on it built for someone else's custom dock. Xiao thought she'd seen every type of dock there was, and there weren't many. Even the most egotistical, individualistic ship designer was motivated to make that part standard. She'd thought it was an interesting mystery—some early nonstandard ship still out there maybe? But now it had the air of a missed warning sign. It was designed not to dock: too small for the station airlock, and the modifications made parts of it too big. They'd used clamps and evacuation hose to mate the hunk of junk to Callisto Station.

Xiao was almost to the center cylinder, jumping vast sections of maintenance ladder one hand at a time. She didn't worry about being spotted. Those cargo ships only had two docking

cameras standard, and they would be facing a wall now. Would the people who welded scrap metal to their hull have the resources to add cameras?

Xiao was a ninja. Invisible. She hooked her tether as close to the airlock as she could and stabbed the inflated evacuation hose with a long-handle screwdriver. The first two punctures auto-sealed, but after the third she kept the screwdriver in and wriggled the hole big enough that air flew out, keeping the gap open and painting a visible distortion over the metal behind it.

Then she found a clamp that was holding a mooring and cracked it open. She kicked the compression-foam shim out from under another.

She was sweating heavily, and exhausted, but making good progress untying this Gordian knot.

Her radio crackled to life with an unfamiliar male voice. "Hey! HEY YOU messing with our ship! Stop that this instant or you'll regret it."

"Will I, though? What have you done to the director?"

"Stop messing with our ship!"

"Put the director on. I hear her voice; I'll stop."

"For fuck's sake, your director is fine. Everyone is fine. We're not here to hurt anyone. Be reasonable, stop what you're doing, and we'll talk this out. Meet me at the other dock."

Lottie's voice cut in. "Xiao? Xiao, I think you should listen to him."

Xiao tried to find Lottie's tiny form against the tilted landscape of the station. "Don't you dare give comfort and support to the enemy."

Lottie sounded like she was talking down a suicide. "I'm not. He can't hear me. We're on a private channel. I just set it up. Look on your display. Do you see the channel?"

Did the nerd have to keep showing her up? This was her station, and she was going to save it. Xiao got another clamp loose. She pressed her back to the station and set her feet on the enemy craft and PUSHED. Ugh. Too much inertial mass. She scrambled for something to use as a lever. Yes, they'd left an impact bar on one of the clamps that had been hard to close.

Lottie said, "Please don't make them angry, Xiao."

"Station crewmember, you are risking your crewmates' lives. Stop or we start killing hostages. Do you understand? We have guns, and we have your people."

Slowly, the ship separated, drifting gently away, a centimeter at a time. "Too late." Look at that. Look at what she'd done! The pirate ship was floating inexorably away. She'd saved the day!

"Jesus Christ. We were going to steal some shit and leave. Now we're going to have to kill people."

Xiao let herself dangle in zero gravity and rest for a moment. She giggled. That was inappropriate, but she couldn't help herself. She felt giddy. And tired. She felt like she could sleep for a month.

"You crazy bitch! I'm coming to get you!" Let him come, after her rest.

Lottie was coming up the arm, stopping every few rungs to re-tether. Wow that must be exhausting. She was almost to the top. She must not have stayed put at all. The enemy's words were bouncing around in Xiao's brain, turning her jubilation at having defeated him into sick awareness that this may not have solved everything.

Xiao radioed the enemy. "You want your ship back, I could get her. I'm here; I have jets. She hasn't gotten far. You just gotta promise not to hurt anyone and to leave the minute I get it redocked." No answer. Xiao forced herself to count to ten. Calling too soon would smack of fear and desperation. What should she say? Act like she had the upper hand. Maybe point out that their ship was getting further and further away while they thought about this. Yeah.

Lottie hooked her tether a few rungs away and stopped, hanging there. "How could you do that? What are we going to do?" she flailed. "They're going to kill us all. We don't have any way to defend ourselves. Do . . . can you fight, in that suit? If they come out here?"

Xiao had been so focused on having a chance to be the hero. A next step would have been good to have. "Apparently some asshole is 'coming for me.' You go find somewhere to hide. I'll stand my ground, take it like a woman." Xiao set her jaw. "Maybe while they're pummeling me you can come up with a better plan."

“That’s not funny. Come on.” Lottie unhooked her tether and clipped it onto Xiao’s suit. Then she crawled back the way she’d come.

“Where are you going? Hey, don’t tether to another person. You don’t—”

“Infirmary,” she said. “I was supposed to meet Saravit at 0900.”

The sweat all over Xiao’s body flash-froze. Shit, Saravit. Had she just put him in danger? Lottie was making steady progress, spooling the tether line between them. In another twenty feet it would be at its limit. Xiao pushed off after her. “You know you’re late for that appointment.” It came out snarky and calm. Good. Heroes said things like that. They didn’t go blind with worry and curl up in a ball.

Infirmary. Yeah. It was a good place to regroup. It had emergency power and data lines. With any luck, Vit was safe. Not important enough to be in danger. Right? Whoever these guys were—pirates or terrorists or something else—they wouldn’t care about a psychiatrist, right?

If they were “coming for her,” would they squeeze out between their ship and Dock A? Or would they use Docking Bay B on the other end? How long did it take to put on an EVA suit? Assuming the assholes weren’t already wearing them?

Now she felt the prickle of being watched and followed, all too visible, exposed, naked. Not smart enough. Not strong enough. Not enough.

Quit crying, she silently snarled to herself, and it sounded like her mom, which made her want to cry more. Untethered, she let the station spin and Lottie pull her along while she looked back. No sign of figures coming out of Docking Bay A. Yet. Concentrate on reaching Vit. Save him, then save the rest. She turned toward Lottie again.

“Hey, Nervy! You’re going the wrong way.” Xiao hooked her feet into a hold-ring and pointed.

Lottie waved in acknowledgement and turned up-spin.

Well, if they didn’t get killed, she was going to have to be nicer to Nervy Lottie.

* * *

Chapter Five

Saravit woke at 0700 and got ready for his day. He had an appointment with Lottie at 0900, but first he was churning over how to patch things up with his girlfriend.

Saravit was one of two men on the station; spacefaring corporations preferred to hire the lightest personnel they could, and that made men less appealing. Somewhere along the way a preference turned into a prejudice, and now even heavier women were preferred over slight men.

Saravit was not a slight man. Back in Thailand he was modestly tall, but when he did his coursework in orbital psychiatry practice, he was head and shoulders above all his petite, female professors. Everything about his body and society told him he didn’t belong up here, and yet here he was. He couldn’t help it; a childhood spent watching cartoon astronauts battle monsters had left him inextricably in love with outer space.

Watching his little sister deal with her schizophrenia had made him just as devoted to treating mental illness. It was a bad fit of two dreams: not many jobs for men off Earth, and not many mental health jobs, anywhere. He’d worked hard, though, and persistently, to find his niche.

Then he had to deal with the silent accusations of passed-up female applicants who noticed how this administrator or that looked at him. The jokes that weren’t really jokes. “It’s nice the admin decided to decorate this place. Your biceps are a public good.” He cultivated a sexless persona, dressed in looser clothes, urged people to consider him a doctor first.

And then Xiao burst into his office and paced. PACED. Saravit was still trying not to look sideways, and this woman paced. “I don’t need a psych eval, and you aren’t going to give me one. Just put down I’m a pain in the ass, and let’s both get back to more important work, right?”

She wouldn’t sit down. “Aren’t you dizzy?”

“Nah, it’s my super power.” She explained in quips and jokes that her inner ear had been damaged as a kid. Horribly and purposefully as part of a “training program.” No dizziness reflex. She shook his hand and said, “Good luck; we won’t be seeing much of each other.” She left.

Saravit could never resist a chase.

Xiao was delightful to chase. Bewildered, at first, by him, as he was by her, then amused, then

grateful.

So. He'd broken procedure and met with Lottie in a private place. She was too manic. She needed absolute quiet and lack of distraction. And Saravit needed administration not to see how bad the case was so they'd trust him to resolve it. Administrators were blind to the horrible cost of discipline and turnover when they had a perfectly good employee, given she got treatment. A brilliant one, even. Lottie was worth the investment.

Xiao had reacted like she'd found him in bed with her.

All of his patients were women. Plenty of those women already had girlfriends, thanks, but the ones who didn't, who weren't interested in other women, followed him with hungry eyes. He couldn't do anything about that.

He suspected Xiao had unexamined trauma in her past. She'd come up from very hard, rough work, repairing ships for capitalist ventures on Mars. She walked like wolves were hiding in the side corridors waiting to pounce on her and only a swagger would keep them at bay.

Saravit had held a woman after her girlfriend was swept out an airlock. He had kept trapped repair workers calm with his voice. He didn't know how to pry that brittleness out of Xiao, make her realize how strong and capable and loved she really was.

He went to the mess hall and got a cup of tea and a brick of egg-like-substance, and he read through the daily briefing for the medical staff while he ate. Then he went to the infirmary.

Doctor Langdon waggled her fingers absently at him, staring at a wall screen. "They've been at it all night, poor things. All my nurses are up there, floating, waiting to treat any injuries. The ship's a transport, crew of five with twenty passengers going to the ice mines on Ganymede. New workers, I guess. They said they didn't have any injuries on the radio, but they're all male, and you know how men are." She winced, apologetic, and said, "No offense."

Saravit raised an eyebrow at her to let her know it was only their long friendship letting that slide.

He unfurled the screen at his station. His calendar came up by default, and the time. 08:47. Lottie would have come down fully from the manic period, but it would be delicate work to keep her from sinking into a depressive state.

So much of treating an illness like hers was an exercise in cooperation and communication. This was not the first sign that Lottie would become noncompliant, and he wasn't sure if he could work up a controlled stimulation plan that would please her and let him rest at night, but he needed to attempt it or lose her trust.

"Lottie's coming soon. If it gets too busy, can you bring people in through the patient area to keep traffic down?"

Dr. Langdon leaned against Saravit's private partition. "I heard what happened in the engineering lab. It's a miracle no one got hurt."

"Lottie isn't violent by nature. She never means to hurt people . . . just things."

"Let's hope she always knows the difference." Dr. Langdon had a cup of something steaming. She took a sip. "Don't worry. I spent the night clearing out all the minor cases just in case all those transport ship fellows have—"

The lights went out.

No alarm. No siren. The glow strips stood out like they were written on his retinas until the emergency lights flickered into being, bathing the room in red. Saravit stood, flooded with the need to react, but nothing to do.

Dr. Langdon set her cup down on Saravit's desk. "I better check the patients."

"I'll come with."

The bed area was comforting. It was a place you might normally see with low light. There were two patients, an infectious woman in an isolation tent, and another, sitting up, alert and worried on the edge of her bed, with a broken ankle. Jennifer, a research project manager.

"Just relax," the doctor said. "There's been a power failure. We're fine."

Jennifer looked at the other bed. "Does that mean the air isn't circulating? Am I going to get what she has?"

That patient, thankfully, was out cold and didn't hear the insensitive comment. Dr. Langdon

set her hand on Jennifer's arm. "The isolation tent doesn't need power. Really, everything is fine."

Would it be, though? Saravit wanted to check the bulkhead, check the computers, check something!

Dr. Langdon was staring at him. Nudging her head toward her patient.

Oh. Right. He had a job. He sat down next to Jennifer. "How'd you break your ankle?"

She looked at him with deadpan contempt. "That isn't going to distract me. I can barely walk. What if we need to evacuate?"

"The sick bay has the best, most redundant systems on the ship. If anything, other people will be trying to reach here. Hang tight. I know it's hard to do. Did you bring something to read?"

Saravit tried to keep his attention on Jennifer as Dr. Langdon inspected the bulkheads. She pulled the emergency release handles and grunted and tugged. They wouldn't budge.

Every person on a space vessel knew what that meant: hull breach. Saravit saw the panic widen Jennifer's eyes. "It could be a malfunction of the bulkhead system." He waved at the red emergency lights. "We've lost power. Perhaps this is a safety measure." Oh, no, Lottie. What a terrible time for her to be isolated away from her doctor!

Dr. Langdon picked up a tablet, and another. "These have power, but the data lines are down."

Saravit tried to think of something Jennifer would grow absorbed talking about. She wasn't a sports fan, didn't gush about a particular fiction series in his memory. "What project are you working on now?"

"Staying alive?"

With a screech of protest, the bulkhead nearest them opened. Saravit jumped to his feet. Dr. Langdon dropped a data tablet with a clatter.

A white man with his hair shorn to silver stubble walked in. He swung a long black rifle up from his side and centered it on Saravit's chest. "Nobody move."

Saravit turned his body toward the gunman, putting his hands up, aware of the patient behind him and how little he could protect her.

Two more men ducked under the bulkhead, carrying large, dirty canvas sacks. Saravit was very conscious of their maleness. It had been a long time since he'd been near this many other men.

One was slender, clean-shaven. He could have been a model if he weren't wearing baggy workman's overalls. The other had curly brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard. Like a lumberjack come into town for a formal occasion.

Dr. Langdon stepped in their way. The leader, with his thick neck and silver stubble, gestured at her with his gun. "Show us where the good stuff is and we won't take everything."

Dr. Langdon crossed her arms and raised her chin. "And what, exactly, is 'the good stuff'?"

"Don't get cute, grandma. The sooner we're out of here, the sooner you all go back to business as usual." He advanced on her, and Dr. Langdon stepped back.

Saravit wanted Dr. Langdon to be stronger, but how could he ask that of her? He wanted to step forward himself, but Jennifer's hands were on his back, making him her shield.

The men tore open cabinets. Wipes and towels and hospital gowns tumbled to the floor. The model dumped a tray of tools into his canvas sack. The lumberjack tugged the medicine cabinets. They were locked, of course. Model came up and tried to pull the door off. The leader pointed his gun at the lock. "Get back," he said.

Dr. Langdon muscled her way between them. "No. Stop." She shook as she pressed her thumb to the lock. It was wrong to see her tremble, her face bathed in sweat. However, when she turned around, she glared at the gunman with infinite contempt. "That only works in old films. Shoot that gun and you'll perforate the hull."

"Don't worry," He gave the doctor a sly wink. "I'll make sure the bullet stops inside you."

* * *

Chapter Six

Lottie wondered if this was what it felt like to suffer from an anxiety disorder. Her joints ached

from clenching, but she felt shaky and loose, like she had diarrhea. She was aware of being naked inside the spacesuit. It rubbed and touched in weird places, a constant reminder of her vulnerability.

Xiao babbled: The infirmary was one of the only places with separate emergency power. Saravit would be glad to see them both. Hey, how about this macho one-liner to say to the invading men? Did Lottie think the enemy could track where Xiao was by a radio signal? If they were pirates, maybe they could negotiate with them? If the solar marshal headquarters on Mars sent deputies, what did that make the minimum and maximum wait time to keep the pirates occupied? A couple months? Could they lock 'em up somehow? Maybe in one of the garden bays? That way they wouldn't have to unlock and feed them.

Lottie had stopped listening around the time they'd reached the main ring, where the spin pressed her against the "roof" and the going was more natural.

"That's it; that's where we get in. Lottie, stop!"

Lottie stopped, grateful, as Xiao led them "down" to the underside where the maintenance hatches, for some sadistic reason, opened. Who designed that? Why? Her arms, wrists, and hands ached with the effort to crawl on a ceiling over a bottomless pit.

She hooked her elbows into a ladder rung, every muscle screaming while Xiao enacted the ritual of airlock opening.

Then Xiao was crawling up, inside, and reaching down for her. Lottie didn't want to move. The metal bar she hung from was digging into her triceps, but climbing up seemed unfair work. Here at last she could lose her grip and fall forever into space. It was appealing, but she didn't want to unhook her tether. Xiao moved her tether for her to the inside bar, which bloomed an unjustified feeling of recrimination, like Xiao had scolded her.

"Come on," Xiao said, gentle as a sorority sister helping a neophyte through her first hang-over. "Just fourteen centimeters. Hardly anything at all. You got it. We're doing this together. Now here. Up. Come on, you can do it."

Condescending. She hated her. She didn't want to do anything. But there was that pressure, stupid, like her mother in the back of her head, urging her to put on a show of effort or the neighbors would disapprove. Heavy and weak, Lottie struggled up into the airlock like a fish crawling into a boat.

It felt good to be on a floor again.

Xiao pulled off her helmet. "Woo! Okay. Now, we have four bulkheads from here to sick bay, but thanks to the airlock tool kit, it should go a lot faster for us than our trip out."

Tireless, Xiao climbed up to the second level and could be heard immediately throwing things around.

"I'm naked," Lottie said. Did Xiao forget how this all started with her in a bath towel?

A bundle of cloth fell through the hole in the ceiling. "Spare jumpsuit. Hurry up. The enemy could know exactly where we are."

The enemy. That sounded too reciprocal a word. Did she exist, now, in a universe where she had enemies? Was a sheep a wolf's enemy?

Lottie thought about the work she'd done the week before, on rewriting the security system from scratch. It hadn't been her job, it had been pure mania, but she had learned a thing or two in the process. "Wait," she said.

Xiao poked her head into the ceiling hole. She looked messy and irate. "Wait?"

"I have an idea," Lottie said. "But my body isn't quite working yet."

To her surprise, this pronouncement wasn't met with abuse. Xiao disappeared from sight, banged around some more, and reappeared to drop down next to Lottie. She set something on the floor and unclasped Lottie's helmet, lifting it off her. "That was a lot of work you did. Here, the tool locker had some snack bars. Salty and caffeinated. We use them on double shifts. Like an edible slap on the ass."

A slap on the ass that tasted like a piece of particleboard, with salt.

While Lottie attempted to turn the dry, hard mass into food with teeth and saliva, Xiao supported her like a child and started unfastening the top of the pressure suit.

The salty cardboard was helping. As was the warmth and strength of Xiao's embrace. Lottie was able to crawl upward out of her suit at last, and Xiao helped her into the coveralls. It was a return to childhood, stepping into pants, holding still while someone pulled fabric around you. She wanted to cry. She tucked her bath towel into the discarded helmet.

"We can tap into the security system," Lottie said. "I'll need your tool kit."

"Now you're talking." Xiao dashed up the ladder. When Lottie poked her head into the higher chamber, Xiao was holding out the tool kit.

Okay, now she just had to . . . actually do it. If only the snack bar had the chemicals her brain was missing. "Is there a panel in here like the one you removed on the corridor sections? Something that would expose the security data feed?"

Xiao nodded and quickly removed a panel next to the security camera in the ceiling. Then she crouched next to Lottie, waiting with expectation.

"Now, um, I need to get up there."

Xiao pulled out a collapsible ladder, and held it steady as Lottie climbed up. "I need a multi-meter." Xiao held it up. "And an optical transmitter? And, um . . ." Xiao passed up the optical transmitter and a screwdriver. That wasn't what she was going to ask for, but it would do.

When Lottie was in elementary school, she and her best friend rigged up a system to pass notes to each other on the school network, around the anti-chat-program protocols, by sending pings in Morse code. This would be like that. Lottie needed to access her home directory and her unfinished security system programs, but she couldn't access the login service or the station operating system. But she knew how the data traveled. She could manually form the signal, one bit at a time. It was tedious, but all she absolutely had to do was log in, then she could send the command to route the display . . . somewhere.

She waved down at Xiao. "I need, uh, a display."

"There's a tablet that connects to the duty roster and trouble ticket system."

"The front end doesn't matter." She held her hand down. Xiao frowned, looked like she wanted to say something, but handed the tablet up.

Lottie wished she were good with people. She tested output on the tablet, then sent the request. Did it work? Rerouting . . . her familiar home directory displayed on the tablet. "Yes! This is good. I hadn't finished writing the program, but I can use parts of the code."

"What code?"

"Each camera has its own battery power. The main control system is down, but I can log in to individual cameras." A picture appeared, fish-eyed, of her own forehead, grossly large, Xiao tiny at her feet.

Xiao shook her head. "Recap: You're accessing the security cameras? Can you tell if they know where we are?"

"I can tell that this camera still has its default settings. I think I can access other cameras, too. I just need their identification numbers."

"But have they seen us?"

She saw Xiao's anxiety and bit back her sarcasm. "There's a local log on the camera. The last thing it shows before my access is losing contact with control an hour ago. If the . . ." she still couldn't bring herself to say "enemy" like Xiao. "If our visitors accessed remotely, there'd be a log entry."

"Or they erased the log," Xiao said.

This was pointless. They could argue all day about what an invading force may or may not be doing. This camera's ID was 205. She substituted 204 in her code and pulled up a new view. It showed a section of corridor with someone sitting alone in it, her head on her knees. She checked 206, and that was a stairwell. "I'm looking at other cameras." How long would it take to find the visitors? Over five kilometers of corridor and thirty-two cameras per kilometer, plus special area cameras. That was a lot of cameras. Lottie suddenly wondered at the paranoia of the station designers.

"Can you get the director? The administrative office? Infirmary?"

"I'm looking." After typing a half-dozen camera ID numbers, she realized she could just query

all possible numbers. A flood of images opened on top of each other. She found dark rooms like the one she and Xiao had first been trapped in. She closed those. She found empty sections. She closed those. She found sections with station crew in them. She sorted those into a group.

The next camera was from one of the many hydroponics labs. A large person in unfamiliar clothing, dirty and scuffed, was tearing cabbages free from a hydroponic tray and dumping them in a sack. Lottie trembled with fear and outrage.

“What is it?” Xiao pressed close against her hip, trying to see the screen from the ground.

Lottie made a new grouping label and went back to flashing quickly through cameras. “I’ve found one of . . . them. And . . . oh no.”

She slipped down the ladder, between Xiao’s arms. Xiao stepped back, arms out, like she was ready to catch something.

“They’re in the infirmary.”

* * *

Saravit kept his distance as one of the strangers sauntered around the patient beds, checking for valuables. He felt in their hard stares a weighty expectation that he react to them as a man, in a language of manliness. He had forgotten how much he hated that. It made him feel culpable even in moving to keep himself between the man—the lumberjack looking one—and Jennifer.

The other two were dragging poor Dr. Langdon from cupboard to drawer so she could unlock them all.

Jennifer shoved Saravit and mouthed, “Do something.”

What, exactly, did she have in mind? There were three men with a gun. A stray bullet could puncture the hull of the station, or an oxygen line, or worse. A single shot could be deadly to all of them, including the idiots with the gun.

“They just want things,” Saravit said. “Let them have them and they’ll leave. Anything taken can be replaced.”

“You aren’t going to be the one healing a broken ankle with no pain killers.”

A melodic beep made everyone—including the gun-carrying brutes—jump. The model-pretty one hissed, “I thought we cut all the power.”

“It’s Tejas’s radio. Tejas, answer the damn thing.”

So the lumberjack was named Tejas. “Don’t use my name!”

The leader rolled his eyes, filling his bag with heating and cooling packets. “Because there’s only one fucking ‘Tejas’ in the universe.”

Tejas pulled a radio out of his shirt and turned his back to everyone. The leader let his gun dangle from its strap. That scared Saravit more than anything. A brush, a badly designed trigger—was the safety even on?

“No. Aw no.” Tejas lowered the radio and looked helplessly at the leader. “Ricky! They got a ninja or something. They attacked the ship!”

The leader pushed the pretty man out of his way and squared up on Tejas like he could beat him to death with his pectoral muscles. “Don’t use my name!”

Like there was only one Ricky in the universe?

“This badass kicked the ship off the station! Chet’s pulling everyone back. We gotta fix it or we’re stuck here.”

Ricky—Saravit wanted to love how juvenile and old-fashioned that name was—scanned the room, puffing his chest out even more. “Right. We pull back. But we take a hostage. Grab the doctor.”

Saravit stepped forward. “No. Take me.” He locked eyes with Dr. Langdon, who was trying to communicate a dozen things with small shakes of her head and raisings of her eyebrows. He shrugged. “I can walk faster.”

“Finally a hero, eh?” Ricky pressed his gun into Saravit’s kidneys. “Makes no difference to me. The rest of you dweebs stay here. Try to follow, try to force the door, and we ventilate your boyfriend.”

“It’s okay,” Saravit said, to all of them. He raised his hands. Ricky pushed him into the hallway.

The corridor was darker, fewer emergency lights. The gun-barrel pressed hard, awakening a

chilly, ticklish feeling under the skin. He'd always been sensitive in the lower back. He wondered at the psychology of these men with their hyper-masculine swagger and language. Were they always like this, in whatever lives they had outside of robbing a space station? Or was it a reaction to the situation? "You aren't in any danger," he tried.

"Shut up and keep walking."

Tejas used a remote that opened and closed the bulkheads. What planning went into that gadget? Was it a code they got from the manufacturer? Or was it something more involved, an inside accomplice, a decade of planning, a million investors driving the point of a gun barrel close against his ticklish back?

They stop-started their way through one bulkhead at a time. "Where are you taking me?" Saravit didn't expect an answer. He tried to count the bulkheads, to remember where they were. In emergency lighting, this station he'd called home for over a year felt alien. "My name is Dr. Pradchapet. My friends call me Vit. Could I convince you to leave some pain medication for Jennifer? She just broke her ankle. It wouldn't—"

Tejas stopped, fist cocked back. Saravit froze. Ricky snorted. "Some hero."

The bravado made him think of Xiao. Was she safe? He hoped the thieves didn't come across her. That would end badly for everyone.

* * *

Lottie tried to grab Xiao. "Wait, they're on the move." Xiao was a bull on the march through a paper world, ripping open each bulkhead faster and faster. Lottie had encoded the command to override the emergency lockdown into a sonic tool and now it worked like a remote, just point and press. She wished she hadn't. Xiao pointed, pressed, yanked up on a release lever, ducked, and charged forward. "Please, Xiao! They have guns!"

"So do I." Xiao flexed her arm. "If they've hurt my man, that'll be their last mistake."

Lottie was inarticulate with the futility of it all. At least the anger gave her energy.

Xiao wrenched the next bulkhead open. For a terrible second, there was nothing between them and three large men whose backs formed a wall of shoulders. One was carrying a large sack, like a grimy Santa Claus. He had unnaturally tall hair. Xiao pushed Lottie back and crouched to lower the bulkhead.

Had the men heard the bulkhead open behind them? They were talking loudly among themselves. Xiao eased the bulkhead down, her bottom lip in her teeth. There was the sound of another bulkhead opening, the voices growing fainter.

Together, they exhaled. Lottie was grateful that Xiao hadn't frozen at the sight of them, that the fat second of mutual exposure came and went without notice from the other side. Distantly grateful. She sat down on the floor and hugged her arms around her knees.

Xiao knelt next to her. She put her hand on Lottie's shoulder and shook gently. "Hey, relax. They missed us."

Lottie tried to come up with the right thing to say, to explain that this was nothing, just a phase she went through sometimes. Xiao should press on and leave her. "I don't want to live anymore."

Xiao breathed hard out her nose. She looked at the bulkhead between them and the men. She looked back the way they had come. "We can go through the medical administration office. That's only two bulkheads back."

Lottie couldn't begin to answer.

Xiao got to her feet. "Okay, I'll go alone, then. I'll get Vit. Yeah? I'll bring Vit to you, and he'll fix you."

There was no fixing Lottie, though. No fixing at all.

* * *

Chapter Seven

Ricky hated being a pirate. He'd wanted to be a musician. Classical bassoon. He'd heard one in a church service as a kid and fell in love with the timber and melancholy of the instrument.

The plan was to spend a few hard years cutting ice on Ganymede to tide him over while he looked for an orchestra. He'd build some character and have great stories for the rest of his life.

ANALOG

HA! Once they got you on a moon of Jupiter, you were stuck there. Sure, you weren't a slave, legally. You had a bank account and numbers went into it to prove you were being paid and you could buy a ticket off the place any time you wanted. Only the prices were five times steeper to leave than to get there. The math worked out just short of impossible, so you would keep working, keep thinking that you could save up enough to make it worthwhile, to say you hadn't wasted a never-returnable chunk of your life, your youthful vigor, your fully functioning knee. Then you got hurt. Or you got drunk. Or you showed up late. And the penalties carved away any small amount you'd saved, and you no longer dreamed of leaving with a savings but just leaving.

His hair was grey now, and he hadn't touched a bassoon in so long he wasn't sure he remembered what they felt like. He barely knew what women felt like, since the only ones on Ganymede were the bosses and company reps. Titanium women who would sooner step on you than look at you.

He spent his days controlling invisible lasers, watching them carve vast chunks of a moon, exposing secret layers of color, veins of crystal alignment that caught Jupiter's light like tiger's eye. He exposed millennia of information to his own uncomprehending gaze. Maybe there was nothing to learn in a milky swirl or a subtle glint, but it was a history ice wrote for itself and he was paid to destroy it.

At night, with wet feet steaming into the air of the bunk house, trying not to hear the guys fucking, it got to sound glamorous, turning pirate. Better than ice cutter, anyway. Of course, Chet could sell snow to penguins. Chet had big dreams. "We'll turn this place upside down. Give everyone what they were promised. Look at that cutting rig you drive—couldn't that dig out a habitat? Everything around us could be used to make life livable here if we weren't using it to make money for the owners."

Every time Ricky climbed into the rig after that—into that cramped cab full of ice chips and melt water and filth—he couldn't help but look at the holes he made and think how much bigger the barracks could be, how they could have separate rooms, even, if they took the time to dig out and expand.

That's the problem with dreams. They feel simple before you start trying to make them happen.

Chet made friends with a transport pilot. "If you're in, I'll have you transferred to unloading detail. Eventually the whole crew will be our guys, and then we take off."

Ricky could have said no. Maybe if his socks weren't wet he would have. If his knee weren't throbbing and if he hadn't had a moment that day when he looked out over the desolation, the mindless squares cut into glaciers, and wept.

So he was a pirate. Stuck for weeks in a capsule with Tejas, who thought chemical showers were beneath him, and Doug, who never changed his socks. It was like floating inside a dirty jockstrap.

The first hit was easy: an orbiting station where small crews hauled ice chunks out of planetary rings. Those poor bastards had it bad. They were skin and bone, weak from too long in zero-g. They had exercise equipment, but no time to use it. Their tiny capsule smelled worse than a dive bar toilet after chili-and-vomit night. Ricky didn't like to think about that place, but it was where they'd gotten the guns. The company knew those four skeletons were sitting ducks if anyone wanted to rob them, so they'd given 'em hunting rifles. They surrendered 'em for a can of beans.

Ricky hated guns. He'd never wanted to hold one. His mom had been shot when he was a kid, and his dad's dad, too. That was before his time, but he heard about it. No one in his family would ever touch a gun, before now.

Their second raid was a bust. They flew to a point where there was nothing. The pilot insisted they were at the spot. Charts were checked. An alternate place was flown to. The station they were looking for just wasn't there. Maybe it had decayed out of orbit. Only Jupiter knew for sure.

Given the state of their supplies, Callisto Station was their only hope to keep going. Chet said it would be a cakewalk. He'd gotten some inside info on the tech there from the transport crew.

They'd disable everything, and while the academics ran like chickens with their heads cut off, they'd walk off with all the food and anything expensive that wasn't bolted down.

Because he was big and older, Chet made Ricky carry one of the guns. He hated it, but he hated the idea of Tejas or Doug carrying it more.

Then this big, muscular, Southeast Asian bastard showed up in the infirmary. Probably knew kung fu or some shit, all stoic calm. Ricky tried to bait him, and the fucker didn't even flinch. Ricky did not survive fifteen years of slaving for Ganymede Ice to get his head ripped off on fucking Callisto Station, which was supposed to have nothing on it but eggheads.

This was a disaster. How had the nerds undocked their ship? What was Chet doing? His make-everything-stop-working bomb had worked. The look on the station administration's faces as it went off! Flash, bang! They'd shoved the surprised group into a compartment and sealed it. Seconds and they had the whole place. Half the station security contingent was supposed to be on rotation, the station shuttle was away for some reason . . . Ricky hadn't paid that much attention in the plan meetings. He focused on his part, and how much closer this got him to a life not floating in a tin can with Tejas's farts.

There wasn't supposed to be any resistance.

They reached the rendezvous point. This place with a ladder in the ceiling that led up a spoke of the station wheel back to where their ship had docked.

Chet stomped the length of the corridor section, ranting about "our bloody ship" to his walkie-talkie and smacking the wall next to him at the end of each sentence. He stopped, whirled, looked queasy for a second, and then angry at being queasy. Chet jabbed a finger at the big bastard. "Who the fuck is that?"

"Hostage," Ricky said. "To cover our backs. Sick bay was full of people."

"I don't want to be any trouble," the bastard said, hands up, all earnest and serious. This dude probably never felt scared in his life.

Chet got in the guy's face. "Some bitch on this station cut our ship free. She kicked it! Kicked it off into space with her damn foot."

The bastard looked like he knew exactly who had done it.

"We gotta get out of here, Chet. There's like a hundred of them."

"Two hundred and thirty," scary guy said. "And no one has to get hurt. I'm the station psychiatrist. My name is Saravit. Let me help you."

Chet looked like he was going to hit the guy. Ricky tried to warn him off with his eyes. Chet spun on his heel and wobbled again. "FUCK spin-grav." He punched the wall, leaning against it. "A hostage isn't bad. Hang onto him. Anyone tries to stop us getting out of here, we shoot him."

* * *

Xiao burst into the infirmary holding aloft her forty-millimeter crescent wrench, which was the largest tool in the kit, prepared to wail on a room full of space pirates.

Instead she found Dr. Langdon on the floor, putting stuff back in a cabinet. All the cabinets were open, random trays and things strewn around. Dr. Langdon held a hand to her chest. "Oh, Xiao. Thank heaven." She looked around like she'd lost something. "How did you get here? The emergency bulkheads were sealed."

"I don't fix your locks for nothing. Where's Vit!?"

This gal Xiao didn't know hobbled around the corner from the patient area. "The robbers took him as a hostage. He was very brave."

Xiao adjusted her grip on the wrench so the weight was more forward. "Did they say where they were going?"

Dr. Langdon gave Xiao a dirty look and got to her feet. "Of course not. If you can get doors open we have more important things we need to do, like get to operations and get the power back."

"After I save Vit."

Lottie could find him. She could look through the security cameras. Xiao glanced around the room. There didn't seem to be anything she could take to help. "I'll be right back."

Doctor Langdon shouted, "No you won't. You will take me to operations and then take

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yourself to restore the power grid.” Xiao was already stepping under the bulkhead back into the corridor. “That is an order! Are you listening? Come back here!”

Xiao ignored her, but she kept the bulkhead up. Seemed nicer than closing it again.

* * *

Lottie felt and heard someone approach. She didn't look up.

“Hey.” Xiao nudged Lottie's leg with her toe. “Get up. I need you to find where they took Saravit.”

Of course they took Saravit. That went hand in hand with all the awful things happening. Instead of breakfast and a therapy session she got a salty piece of wood and aching cold and a thin coverall with no underwear.

If she'd made it to her appointment, Saravit would have given her the shot that counteracted the depressive slide the antipsychotic shot had started. Or maybe nothing could help. Awfulness was her atmosphere now, and she existed within it.

The toe-nudge was more of a kick this time. “Come on! What's wrong with you?”

What wasn't? Lottie wiped tears she hadn't noticed she was crying. “I haven't had any medicine.”

Xiao crouched in front of Lottie. “I'll get you help, but I need you show me where Saravit is, or how to use that tablet of yours.”

“It's not hard.” Lottie had forgotten about the tablet. It was tucked under her arm. A few droplets of perspiration clung to it. She tapped it on and swiped through camera feeds while Xiao watched.

Xiao snatched the pad away and paced while she flicked the screen. “These sons of bitches. They're all over the station. Where is that asshole walking? How did they take control of our own damn bulkheads?”

Probably the same way Lottie had taken control of the damn bulkheads, but saying that would be work.

“Found him!” Xiao was breathing heavily, shaking. Lottie should have been afraid of her like this. Xiao paused and patted her head. “Hang tight, Nervy. I'll get your doctor to you.”

And then Xiao was gone.

* * *

Xiao stood in front of a bulkhead. The bad guys were on the other side, a half-dozen of them, two holding guns on Vit. How could she get him out of there? All she had was the ability to open bulkheads, look through cameras, and a heavy wrench.

She waited to see what the bastards would do. One turned to pace and nearly fainted. Heh. Rookie. She saw Vit reach out, probably saying something nice and calming. The pirate nearest Vit hit him with his gun stock. Oh, Vit!

* * *

Lottie should get herself to the infirmary. She wasn't going to get anything done like this.

More accurate to say she didn't want to get anything done like this. She could. It was just every task had additional steps. Standing: Step One: push the sorrow and lethargy aside. Step Two: convince yourself life itself is worth continuing. Step Three: extend knees. Every motion required a return to Step One.

Xiao had left all the bulkheads leading to the infirmary open, and since they opened upward it was convenient for crawling, but it felt like weeks before she crossed into the medicine-smelling place. Dr. Langdon rushed to Lottie and helped her into a chair. “Poor dear. I . . . I'll be with you . . . I'm not sure what to do, but I'll be with you soon.”

Dr. Langdon was crying.

Lottie slid down to the floor and watched Dr. Langdon pick up tiny waxy rakes. She wasn't sure what purpose those things had, but Dr. Langdon handled them like beloved, deceased pets, cradling their weight in both hands as she transferred them into a tray at her side.

“Are there any pain meds left?” a woman on crutches asked.

“They took those first.” Dr. Langdon wiped her red-rimmed eyes with the back of her wrist. “Hang on. There are other options.”

Lottie lay against the counter, wanting the spinning station to crush her, and thought distantly about Saravit and Xiao. She was pretty sure letting Xiao go off alone would get someone killed. Probably Xiao.

In a novel, a heroine might be called upon to perform a great feat, like scaling a wall or vaulting a canyon or masquerading as a courtesan. These heroines would perform their deed admirably and feel empowered by it, though they would vehemently state, “I’m never doing that again.”

Lottie didn’t feel empowered. She hadn’t done admirably. If she had gone faster, she could have stopped Xiao’s attack on the pirate ship. The pirates could have already left. She would tell Saravit, “I’m never doing that again!” and he would laugh in agreement, and she would be granted an extra week to create the gravity probe software.

No. She’d failed. And now she couldn’t even get up the energy to tell the doctor her medications. She didn’t believe they’d help.

* * *

Ricky was fussing with the shoulder strap on his gun when a bulkhead opened, and a woman shouted, “Hey, assholes!” Ricky spun to look and promptly fell over. So did Chet. He got a glimpse of a stocky Asian woman in blue coveralls swinging at Doug with a crescent wrench.

Doug fell on him. There was a sound of struggle, a gut punch, puking. Ricky climbed to his feet, his vision dotted with black specks. He swung his fists blindly, the gun, forgotten, hanging from his back. The big Thai bastard was ducking under the next bulkhead.

* * *

It happened fast. Saravit saw Xiao shove her way into the compartment and immediately dart sideways, getting the pirates to turn quickly, using her “super power.”

Saravit tried to say, “Stop,” tried to say, “Wait,” tried to figure out what to say at all, but then Xiao hooked her arm around his and pulled him under the half-opened bulkhead. He felt seasick. They had to stop to pull up the next bulkhead. Someone grabbed a handful of his shirt. He couldn’t look behind to see who or he’d faint. He charged forward, and the shirt ripped. Another bulkhead. Don’t look behind. He could sense the men, feel their breath and their guns aimed at his back.

He kicked blindly at another grasping hand and heard a gunshot. “Where are—”

“Shush.” Xiao muscled another bulkhead open. She dropped a tablet, cursed, bent to get it, and dropped a huge wrench on top of it. The pirates’ feet were visible under the bulkhead behind them.

* * *

Chapter Eight

Lottie watched Xiao and Saravit dive into the infirmary like they were being chased. They fell, the two of them, with their backs against the bulkhead.

Dr. Langdon rushed to them. Lottie tried to care.

Saravit was there, then, touching her face. “Hey. Hey, look at me.” His forehead was bright and un-crinkly. “You’re going to be okay.”

He went away. She heard the medicine fabricator humming, heard him talking to Dr. Langdon about available components. “They took all of it? Well, okay . . . okay . . . what’s left?”

Xiao tapped her shoulder. “Lottie? Hey. Can you do that thing with the security cameras again? Even just the corridor outside, if that’s easier? I’m sorry, but I dropped the tablet.”

Lottie let herself be dragged up to the doctor’s workstation. It had emergency power to access patient records. Well, that would make her job simpler. Step one.

Someone was banging hard on the bulkhead, and everyone else cringed, watching the door. Xiao went to it. She grunted, and there was a groan of bending metal, the sound of plastic breaking.

The fabricator beeped. “Here,” Saravit pressed a pill into Lottie’s hand. “It’s the best I could do. Anyway, it’s cherry flavored.”

She popped the dull white oblong into her mouth. It tasted exactly as much like a cherry as a rubber glove did. Saravit handed her a cup of water. He wasn’t wearing a shirt.

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"I don't know how much longer that will hold them," Xiao said. "I jammed open the low-pressure failsafe. It thinks we're in vacuum in here."

"Did you get both bulkheads?"

"Shit."

Scrambling. Running. Lottie laid her head on her arms. Someone was talking on the station address system, someone masculine who used lots of swear words. Give up or else. His announcements were punctuated by whispered discussions between Saravit, Xiao, and Dr. Langdon.

She didn't know how long it had been when she was being shaken. "Come on, Lottie; we need you, girl!" It was Xiao.

"Let her rest," Saravit said.

Xiao pressed her cheek to the counter in front of Lottie. "They've stopped trying to force their way in here, but we have no idea what's going on. You gotta get us camera access, or we're stuck here."

The medicine was working. Now Lottie felt like she wanted to run her hands through a shredder rather than die. (How long would that hold?) Step One. She knew she would eventually feel better, and better-feeling-her would want her to do this. Step Two. This would make a difference. At least Xiao thought so. Step Three. Remember the first step to the program.

Xiao rubbed her shoulders. "That's a girl. See, Vit, I told you. She's stronger than you give her credit for."

Xiao thought she was strong? Xiao and Saravit talked about her? Lottie wasn't sure which was harder to believe.

Crawl, crawl. Tap into the connection she'd left open and run the most recent command. Step One again. Step Two, again. Remember the number of the corridor section outside infirmary. There.

Lottie was on her knees, now, mentally. Almost ready to stand. "It's clear in the corridor. I can tell you if someone comes. Could I have a glass of water?"

Xiao squeezed her shoulders and dashed off to fetch it.

Lottie flicked through cameras. The intruders looked visibly upset and, in some cases, panicked. They were finding trapped crew, rounding them up and sealing them again in smaller rooms. Each group of pirates had one person clutching a rifle. Xiao shouldn't have kicked away their ship.

"There," Xiao set down the water and pointed to Lottie's screen. "They're in hydroponics. The food. Shit."

"Leave it," Dr. Langdon said, throwing something down. A towel? "If all they want is stuff, let them have it."

"And do what? Eat each other for three months while we wait for a resupply ship?"

"You don't know they won't leave us enough to live on."

"Yeah, well we don't know they will, either."

Xiao crouched by the bulkhead again, fiddling with it.

"You're not going with her!" Dr. Langdon cried.

That woke Lottie. She saw Saravit with Xiao, by the door. She reached toward him.

He came back and took her hand in both of his. "You'll be okay, Lottie. Give the medicine time. Trust that it will get better."

"Don't leave." Her tears welled stupidly. Her nose ran.

Heroines never had runny noses.

Against her ear, he said, "Sometimes, Xiao needs me, too."

And they were gone.

* * *

Xiao was armed with the door-opener and a memorized path to the station operations office. Saravit was by her side. She wondered, with a pang, if Mason could be behind one of the doors they passed or Mason's wife, Jake.

Focus on the mission. Get to the director.

* * *

Lottie wasn't sure what she was looking for, but flipping through cameras was something to do. She found Xiao and Saravit. They were moving up-spin on the ring corridor on level two. They were holding hands. She watched in silent dismay as a large group of pirates converged on them.

Oh. Oh, no. Xiao dropped, kicking out at the nearest pirate. He stepped back. Saravit threw his hands up. Xiao swung with fists and feet. A swarm of bodies formed, burying her and Saravit. Lottie couldn't tell what was happening until the pile began to break up, pirates moving back. One was kneeling on Saravit's back. Another on Xiao's. Her tools were kicked away from her. The pirates were tying them up.

Oh no no no.

Seven pirates were with Saravit and Xiao. Lottie looked for others. Three in Docking Bay A, putting on EVA suits. Another three floating next to them, sweaty and exhausted. Four in the room outside Docking Bay A. A few more methodically robbing the station in twos and threes. A pirate walked past a one-gallon drinking bottle mounted in a slide-in holder. That was odd. It would be an easy take. Water was scarce and expensive, everywhere but Earth and the water-farming colonies.

That must be where these men came from: Enceladus or Ganymede or somewhere else where plentiful ice was harvested.

Lottie filed that away in case it proved useful and reminded herself once again that her actions were worthwhile, the station was not doomed. The pirates had tied up Xiao and Saravit and were standing them up. Maybe they would walk them to an airlock and push them outside. Maybe they would take them somewhere else and shoot them. She could save them, if there was more than one step in the pirates' plan.

Please let the pirate captain regale them with the complete story of what he hoped to accomplish. Mouths were moving, but Lottie couldn't lip read. For all she knew, this was all the soliloquy there would be.

Thought: all their problems would be resolved if she could restart the station's main power flow.

She couldn't pull up a power schematic, just the security system, but there were cameras labeled "power plant."

PowerPlantA, PowerPlantB, PowerPlantC . . . views of incomprehensible equipment, gently lit by glow strips. Xiao would know what to do.

New plan: Get Xiao to the power plant.

Step One: Get Xiao untied.

What could Lottie do? There were almost thirty pirates, afraid and armed. All she had were the ability to watch, and to open bulkheads.

There was a thought. She enlarged the room where Xiao and Saravit were held. Whatever the pirates were planning, the first step was making Xiao and Saravit sit on the floor with their hands tied behind them. Seven pirates. One standing right in front of Saravit and Xiao, two over to the side arguing, four hanging back by the downspin bulkhead.

Lottie opened the downspin bulkhead. Six of the pirates flinched. One picked Saravit up by his shirtfront, threatening him. The man was smaller than Saravit, who looked embarrassed.

The pirates looked distrustfully at Xiao and Saravit, and argued with each other. Lottie opened the next bulkhead away, too. Even through her depression, she smiled. It was like pulling a prank. The pirates moved away from the open doors. She could read their lips as they asked, "Who is doing that?" Radios were held to mouths, consulting others.

Lottie opened the next, next bulkhead. They were now looking down three open sections of corridor anti-spin-ward. Away from the infirmary.

Lottie held her breath.

Behind her, she heard the doctor treating Jennifer's broken ankle pain with a nerve-deadening ultrasound. It hummed pleasantly.

Lottie wondered if the sound was a placebo effect. She wondered if her antidepressant was

working now, or if the sheer silliness of playing with bulkheads had brought her back from the abyss.

The pirates were pacing like caged tigers, looking menacingly at Xiao and Saravit, who must have conveyed their complete lack of knowledge by this point. The closest pirate to Saravit and Xiao never moved more than a foot away from them and kept his radio near his mouth.

Lottie ought to have kept that suit radio.

One of the pirates walked out of view, into the next bulkhead section. Lottie switched to that camera. He was creeping forward, peering at the ceiling for clues. He had grey hair shorn close on the top of his head and a thick neck. Lottie watched him walk all the way to the closed bulkhead. She opened it just before he touched it with one tremulous, outstretched hand.

He flinched, of course, but only a little. He talked on his radio and crept forward. Lottie opened the next corridor section for him, too. This section was one they'd moved station crew into. Over a dozen women, sitting on the floor. They jumped up, holding each other and cowering backward as they saw the strange man. One was her roommate, Julie!

She hadn't thought about Julie. Her poor wife, waiting back on Earth for Julie to complete her doctoral fellowship and return. Julie read broadly and didn't dismiss romance novels. They should have been better friends.

Lottie turned back to Xiao and Saravit. That same pirate stayed over Saravit, ignoring Xiao, who was squirming. The rest had followed the first one, now that station crew had been discovered. Lottie closed the bulkhead to the chamber holding Saravit and Xiao. Now those pirates were locked on the other side, with Julie.

The pirates reacted, of course, shouting at each other, gesturing. That was fun to see, despite the danger of the situation. Sorry, Julie.

Xiao was the important one. Xiao could fix the station. And now Xiao had only one guard, who was foolishly concentrating his attention on gentle Saravit, yelling at him. Did he think Saravit had caused the door to shut?

The power plant was in the center cylinder so the best path would be up one of the arms that connected the station ring to the center. The nearest one was the C arm, two sections behind them, but the pirates were that way. D arm, then, the one in the other direction.

Xiao could soon get out of her bonds and overpower a single captor, especially one who thought Saravit was a bigger threat. To keep the other pirates busy, Lottie opened all the bulkheads in the ring between where they were now and arm C, freeing several pockets of station personnel. Xiao and Saravit would now be farther down on the pirate priority list.

Lottie took a moment to pat herself on the back. Figuratively. She wasn't that flexible.

Between Xiao and Arm D were two pirates, on their way toward her with sacks on their shoulders. Dang.

She opened each bulkhead behind them after they closed it. They didn't notice. They were talking to each other, shifting their sacks from shoulder to shoulder. It looked like a lot of weight.

When they pointed their remote and sent the signal to open the chamber with Xiao and Saravit in it, she countermanded the request. The bulkhead rose an inch and fell. The pirate shook the remote and pointed it again. She sent the same command again. Again the door lifted an inch and fell.

The other pirate put down his sack and took the remote. Lottie negated his signal request, too. The pirates argued. Both sacks on the floor now. Lottie watched for the remote to be pressed.

This was stupid. This was not the sort of plan you made if you had time to think, and she couldn't think if she was constantly watching for requests to counter. The pirate guarding Saravit and Xiao looked with horror and confusion at the jittering bulkhead. He slapped it with one open palm, shouting. The two pirates on the other side did the same, which thankfully stopped the steady stream of "open" requests.

Now what?

Xiao stood slowly. Her hands were free. Saravit's eyes were on her. He jerked his head down

toward his bound arms. Xiao held up a single finger.

Her attack was too quick for Lottie to follow. She flung herself on the guard's back, and then twisted around him like a scarf, and then he was on the floor and Xiao was standing over him with his gun and radio.

The two pirates with sacks didn't have guns. Okay. Advantage Xiao. Lottie opened the bulkhead.

* * *

Chapter Nine

It had felt good to topple one of the punks, but Xiao couldn't relax enough to enjoy that feeling until the gun was secured. She hated the thing was even on her station. She pointed it at the pirates. "You opened the wrong door, boys. Untie my boyfriend."

As soon as Vit had them tied, she emptied the ammunition and put the bullets in her pockets. Doing that felt good. A danger neutralized. Manipulating a machine got her fingers to stop shaking, the adrenaline to calm. "You boys are lucky I've got better things to do than beat the crap out of you."

Saravit was half bent over, looking queasy. The poor guy!

"Hey," she said, to get him to look at her. "Let's see how far this corridor goes."

Saravit held a hand over the prisoners. He might be about to pat the evil space pirates on the head and tell them it was all going to be all right. "Vit!"

He straightened at last. "We need your tools."

True. The bastards had taken everything she'd been carrying, down to the damn penlight. Unfortunately, the pirate who had been holding her stuff was one of the ones who had left. "Won't be any worse state than I was in before, and I got out of that. Come on. Administration's not far. Maybe Mason found her way out, too."

"We just . . . leave them?"

"Vit! They'll be fine. Their evil friends will find them. Those guys can open the doors, remember?" Not that it was consoling to remember the pirates could come at will.

Saravit slid his hand around hers. "Okay. But we stay close. I don't want one of those bulkheads closing between us."

"Never that."

Just before the divot in the floor for the next bulkhead, they stutter-stepped to a stop simultaneously. Xiao laughed.

Saravit looked embarrassed. "Guess neither of us trusts them."

"Faster is safer than slower. On three. Ready? One, two . . ."

They jumped over the floor-crack, Saravit's height taking him a little farther. They never let go of each other's hand. They got into a rhythm, run for five seconds, leap, check the compartment number, run for five seconds, leap. It felt like a kid's game.

Xiao stopped in front of the door to administration. It stayed shut. The bulkhead behind them closed. Like a hint. Xiao looked for the camera on the ceiling and pointed at the administration suite door. "Come on, whoever. I want to go in there."

"We don't know it's one of us opening the doors," Saravit said.

There was a chilly silence as they both considered this.

There was nothing to do but continue in the direction that was open. Seven sections and they faced a blank wall again. Xiao turned to look back the way they had come. All the compartment doors off the corridor were closed.

"Look!" Saravit pointed up. They were under the hatch for the station arm, and it was open.

Xiao felt helpless, thinking of all the people trapped behind the doors she couldn't open. She kept her tone cheerful, though, for Saravit's sake. "This might be just the thing. There are emergency radios in the arms, and if we can get to the center hub, we can get to the power plant. Gimmie a boost."

Saravit lifted her by her hips and she snagged the drop-ladder, yanking it down. "Follow me." She crawled up.

The entire arm was open. That was odd—these bulkheads were kept sealed—not that they

needed to be, the arms were likely the strongest, thickest hull pieces on the station, but travel up and down the arms was rare, so why not do the safest thing?

Two sections up, Xiao found an emergency radio right where it was supposed to be next to the fire suppression equipment. She hooked her leg through the ladder and took it. She tumbled through every channel the station used other than the one the pirates were using. "Mason? Mason are you there? Director? Director Paz? Anyone?"

She felt Saravit climb up behind her. His bulk at her back was comforting, supporting.

"Oh thank god," the radio said. It was Haizle from HR again.

"Haiz? Shit, I forgot about you. Any news?"

"Xiao? Be quiet and stay low, wherever you are: there are pirates on board the station."

Xiao wished Saravit wasn't behind her so he could see how extravagantly she rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I noticed. Just left three of them zip-tied near the base of C arm."

"Oh my gosh. Are you for real? I've been trying the radio for an hour. All I'm receiving is the pirates! And all they do is cuss at each other. I got the director for a minute. Well, I mean, I spoke to someone who had found a radio who had talked to her. She said there were men with guns in systems control. Then that radio went dead. No idea where security was."

Xiao pressed mute. "It's great to have communication, but I wish she'd shut up."

"Give it to me," Saravit said, "and let's keep climbing."

Two very good ideas. Xiao unmuted herself. "I'll let Vit talk to you about it. We're climbing D arm right now. If I get to the Power Plant, I'll get things turned on again."

Xiao passed the radio down to Saravit. She heard Haizle's voice diminished by distance, an insect version of herself, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

While Vit and Haizle inventoried all the things they couldn't do, Xiao felt herself getting lighter. The transition was always more sudden than you expected, the gravity drop off wasn't a straight line so much as a curve, like cresting a hill. Her next footstep slipped, and her next was barely necessary, her arms enough to pull her weight up.

* * *

Ricky was holding a gun and facing a dozen adult human beings whose confusion and shock would quickly fade, and he didn't know what to do with them.

He called on his radio, "Chet! Someone is taking control of shit."

"The fuck is going on down there? You're guarding two tied up people."

"It's not two anymore. The bulkheads are going up and down on their own."

Doug fumbled with the shoulder strap for his rifle, getting it caught on his neck, in his face, just being an idiot. The women were talking to each other. The one in front looked like she meant business.

"Get the fuck back," Ricky yelled.

The woman in the front held her hands out. "No one has to get hurt here. Think about what you're doing."

"I'll shoot! I will!" Except of course he wouldn't. Christ. Control through fear turned to bullshit so fast. This was how people got hurt.

The woman with her hands outstretched was outpacing the others. She was almost to the last bulkhead line between them. "We're all in this together," she said. Ha, right.

The radio emitted a string of curses, the lights flickered. The woman who had been advancing on him jumped back as the wall slammed down between them.

Somewhere behind her, a woman screamed in agony.

Doug dropped the gun like it was hot. "Shit shit shit."

"Shut up and be calm. Chet just got the doors back, that's all."

Doug dropped to his knees. "She got squooshed. A bulkhead squooshed her. We squooshed someone."

"Don't be an idiot. They have . . . like . . . sensors or some shit to stop that." Didn't they? Ricky wasn't sure.

They'd squished someone. Ricky felt his insides churn. "Shake it off, would you? And stand up. We got work to do still." Ricky turned to face the bulkhead behind him and raised the radio.

“Chet? Uh . . . we might have an injury.”

“Don’t care. I ran the zapper again. That should take care of your problems. Pull everyone back up to the dock. Get some environment suits if you can. Docking is fucking difficult. Guess the dweebs really did know what they were doing.”

“Roger that.” Ricky forced himself to take a long, slow breath. It was okay to be scared sometimes. It was not okay to show it.

Ricky got out the door remote. “Try to stand straight before Tejas sees you.” He used to think Doug was steady. He was good-looking and he didn’t talk much. Ricky had thought that exterior would have more inside it.

Doug twisted like he had to pee, saying, “We squooshed her,” over and over, so Ricky went ahead and hit the remote.

The bulkhead flew open. There was Tejas, and Ephrim and Chang, all sitting on the floor with their hands tied behind their backs.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Ricky said.

* * *

The infirmary door slammed shut. Lottie jumped to her feet. The lights flickered. The camera feed flickered. It took a second for her to realize it was over, whatever it was, and get back to work. Logs showed a spike . . . oh of all the things, the pirates’ attack was a general alert pulse. They were power-broadcasting the shut down code to all systems. What a simple exploit. She could easily block that. Well, if she had access to upload new firmware. . . .

“I can’t take this.” Jennifer hobbled into the treatment area. “Is it the pirates? Are they attacking again?”

“What’s on the cameras?” Dr. Langdon asked. “Lottie?”

Lottie bit her lip, reopening connections that had blanked. Cameras, check. Still no one in the corridor sections immediately outside of the infirmary doors. Xiao and Saravit were trapped near the top of the station arm. She sent the command to open the bulkhead in front of them. Nothing happened. She sent it again.

No! She tried opening other bulkheads. She couldn’t. Saravit and Xiao might as well be back in the infirmary for all the good they could do there.

“Lottie dear? You’re making me nervous. Please say something.”

This wasn’t fair. She had forgotten to orphan the process, and it had died with the shutdown. She’d have to reconnect bit-by-bit. So many steps! She was crying now, messily.

Lottie had pinned all her hopes on Xiao. She was an obvious protagonist. She’d helped Lottie through EVA. She’d fed her and gotten Saravit for her. She was her knight in coveralls. Lottie was the weak love interest, a waif tangled in trailing lace, watching her hero from a high tower and now her hero had been devoured by a dragon.

She stood, wiped her hands on her pants, and glanced around. Dr. Langdon looked at her like she was afraid what Lottie might do. What was the point of treating depression if people reacted to you in a way that made you naturally depressed? Lottie asked her, “Do you have a portable screen?”

An attempted smile, attempted calm. “Do you need that? We’re safe, here.”

Lottie could still open bulkheads, individually, from a few feet away with the tool she’d improvised earlier. “I’m going to save us all.” Lottie grimaced. That came out melodramatic. “I mean . . .”

Dr. Langdon was impervious to melodrama. “Drawer to your left,” she said.

Lottie quickly transferred the door program to a tiny medical pad. Sometimes, the love interest had to save the hero. Those were the best books.

“Do you mind sharing your plan?”

“Get a radio,” Lottie said. That was the first step. The second step . . . would depend on what the radio told her.

Dr. Langdon stood too close. “I’ll look through the station cameras, identify any wounded so we can get to them quickly when the power is restored.”

Lottie liked that Dr. Langdon said “when.” She wished she had that confidence. She ceded

her seat and didn't look back, even when Dr. Langdon called out a question about how to control the display.

* * *

Xiao stared in horror at the bulkhead that had come down close enough to graze her knuckles. She didn't want to look behind her. Was Saravit okay? Had he fallen? Had he been in the way of the rear bulkhead when it closed? She didn't dare breathe.

A reassuring squeeze on her calf. "I'm fine. That scared the piss out of me, though."

Xiao would have fallen, if his arms weren't there. She turned into his hug. They hung together, nearly weightless, in a tightly locked cylindrical room, just a few sections down from the top of the station arm. "I should have gotten my damn tool belt while we had a chance. We're trapped. Again."

"It's okay. Give yourself time to react. To feel."

"Asshole." Xiao mock-cuffed his ear. He knew she hated it when he talked "therapist" at her. He pulled himself up even and kissed her. "You'll figure this out."

Haizle's voice, tiny on the handset. "Hey, what happened? There was a clang and you got all silent. Are you okay?"

"We're fine," Saravit said. "The doors all closed again. Give us a minute."

Xiao couldn't help adding, "Seriously, Haizle. Stop calling if you don't have anything useful to say."

"Well, I'm trying! I can overhear the pirate guys and that's it. No one else must be near a working radio. And let me tell you, those potty-mouths have nothing useful to say. They keep going on about some B-I-T-C-H who cut their getaway ship loose."

Xiao couldn't help a moment of quiet pride at hearing that. Saravit raised an eyebrow. "I'll explain later," she said.

Haizle said, "OMIGAW I knew it had to be you."

"I'm not saying it was, but if—"

Another voice cut in, quiet but intense. "I'm climbing into the maintenance airlock now."

Saravit frowned. "Lottie?"

"Give me that." Xiao snatched the radio. "Lottie, what are you doing?"

A grunt. A clang. "I'm in the maintenance airlock. I'm going outside. It'll go faster. There are too many places where the pirates are blocking the way."

"She's so right," Haizle said. "This place isn't designed to avoid people. Believe me. I had an ugly breakup with a girl in security."

Lottie's voice came with heavy breaths. "I have . . . a tablet with my . . . door-opening program, and . . ."

Xiao took the radio from Saravit. "You can't EVA on your own!"

"Too . . . late. Tools from the tool locker. I grabbed the whole kit. I'm bringing them to you."

There would be no talking her back inside. Xiao could tell. "Be careful. Tether every step. We're in D Arm, section . . . shit I am starting to need glasses . . ."

"You're in section 34. I was watching you."

Xiao shivered. For some reason, Lottie watching her wasn't 100 percent a nice idea.

"She can do it," Saravit asked, "Right? She can get to us, and we'll be safe?"

"This is her second-ever space walk, Vit." Xiao relaxed against his chest, letting him support her. "Chances are just as good she'll float away to die."

* * *

Chapter Ten

Lottie's mother had wanted to be an astronaut but had failed to make it into training. Her father had wanted to be one, too, but had never tried. They met working in aerospace engineering. Neither said that Lottie had to realize their lost dreams, nothing so bold as that. Her mother, passed up for a visa application, might say, "I was going to see the stars." Her father, angrily muttering about some new star in his field, "I could have done that if I had an off-world lab."

Lottie got the message: don't be disappointed in yourself twenty years from now! She applied herself. Her freshman year, she discovered a loophole in the registration system that allowed her

to overload her classes and complete half her sophomore requirements at the same time as her freshman requirements.

Study Above wouldn't let her in until she reached junior standing, so she took summer classes to become a junior a year early. Only then did she let her workload fall to a normal level. In hindsight, it was fortunate that she had exhausted herself those first two years.

She had a physics test the day of the mandatory centrifuge ride. It seemed silly to experience heavy g just so you knew what heavy g would feel like before experiencing heavy g. That was like eating candy before Halloween. So she'd hacked the registration system and marked herself as having attended. Robbing herself of advanced warning.

So single-minded, young Lottie! So firm on her path. Her one indulgence a novel a week, read to rest her mind after class and before dinner.

The liftoff was what changed her. The extra g force never ended when they reached space. Her body lifted against the restraints, but her mind stayed pressed down, and she was convinced, all at once and for certain, that nothing she did would ever be meaningful. She cried, and the tears would not stop, the sadness was a physical thing like gravity, it affected every part of her body from her hair to her toes.

Lottie learned later how mental illness can be triggered by a stressful event. How a shift in brain chemistry happens and then fails to un-happen. At the time, though, it felt more a magical thing, a curse of the fates, a flaw within herself cracked open. She was a terrestrial being, and it was unnatural for her to fly.

* * *

Lottie knew she was still in a depressive state. The pill was taking the edge off of it, but she had that slow, heavy feeling, like every action required a moment of gritted teeth. She wanted to lie down and never get back up.

This was not the feeling to have before dropping out of the maintenance airlock with no one to catch her.

Lottie knelt by the airlock and fumbled to open the door. Being close to the hull meant slightly higher gravity-like force, and though she had heard you could not detect the difference, she felt the pressure in echoes of fatigue in her fingers, wrists, shoulders and back.

She was struck suddenly by the awareness that she had no idea where she'd left her toothbrush.

She looked down at the open airlock, at its circle of nothingness. If she glanced across it, one could imagine it was a pool in the room, a bottomless well. Looking in made the question of what was "up" and "down" silly. Constructed human reality was a plaything of delicate paper, spinning in a vast sea of eldritch forces.

Her knees were locking up.

She'd done this before, she reminded herself, and she'd been naked inside the suit when she did.

The tether hook clasped the third time and she tugged on the cord. It was good this test worked, because doing it she fell into the well. She squeaked, involuntarily, and found herself hanging on to the lip of the airlock with her elbows while her feet kicked in the airless void.

"Lottie?" Xiao, on the radio.

"Fine. Fine. Exiting Airlock. Uh . . . um . . . where is the control to close it?"

"Just spinward of the opening. A handle in a blue circle."

"I see it," Lottie said, even though she didn't. She was still hanging in the airlock. She wanted Xiao to think she'd gotten further. She remembered safety lectures about not hanging around in airlocks, about getting in or out as fast as possible because every second you dallied the interior had one less line of defense.

Why had she decided to come to space, again?

To make herself go crazy. Not helpful to think about, Lottie dear. No self-blame unless you can hone it into a masochistic sword of redemption. She was the heroine now. Xiao and the station were counting on her.

Lottie crawled painfully over the airlock lip. She was gripping everything too tight. That was

going to tire her out too fast. She was already tired. She couldn't make herself grip any looser, though. Think about Xiao. How Xiao moved.

The blue circle was obvious, in front of her face as she inched away from the airlock. She had her feet hooked in the safety rungs this time. It made it easier. She'd thought of that. See? She wasn't useless. She gripped the blue handle. "Do I turn it?"

"Righty tighty, lefty loosey," Xiao said.

"WHAT?"

"Turn right to close a hatch. Turn left to open a hatch. They all control the same."

It was insulting, to have such a bad mnemonic. You didn't just add a y to the end of a word and say it was a rhyme! That wasn't how rhyming worked. She was trusting her safety to people who had never learned to use a thesaurus.

As she turned the handle, she calmed herself, thinking "right" and "tight" did rhyme. Just remember those two. Right is Tight.

"Hatch is closing. Moving . . . to ladder."

"Which hatch is it? C-4 or D-1 is the closest to where you want to be."

"The one we went out before."

"Well, that's going to be a problem because we're on D arm and you're in C-1 hatch which is a quarter of the station away. Get on up to the top of the ring; it'll be easier going. You can walk the roof to D arm."

Easier said than done. Sharp pains ran down her arm, and she had to hang a moment and shake it. Lottie did the bare minimum of the required fitness program. She liked jumping rope (admittedly too much), and she didn't mind jogging on a machine if she could read a book while she did so, but she quietly avoided all strength training, which was what she needed right now. If she lived through this, she would do all the push-ups the physical fitness director asked.

Her shoulders burned, climbing up the side. "Is D up-spin or downspin from C?"

She could feel the annoyance in Xiao's silence before speaking. "Downspin. Don't forget to tether."

Like Lottie would! "Yes. Coming."

"Easy. Take the time you need. Vit's standing on the downside bulkhead. My throat's sore from yelling at him. What if it opened, eh?"

She heard a soft rumble that had to be Saravit's voice some distance from the microphone. Xiao barked a laugh. "This guy."

They were letting her hear them, as they were alone together. Lottie felt a surge of tenderness toward them that helped her pull herself harder.

Lottie re-tethered. She was at the roof edge.

A new voice broke into the radio. A male voice, gruff and low and menacing. "There you are!"

Lottie clung tight to the safety rungs. She didn't dare breathe. She had to breathe. She had to bring her arm into view of her helmet so she could see what channel that had come in on.

"The fuckers are on our channel!" Xiao said.

Haizle from HR cut in, "They're broadcasting on all channels. I don't know if they know which one we're on for sure. Oh . . . there has to be a way to block them! Right? I remember something about private channels? I'm looking."

"I see you, creep," the man said, unaware or unconcerned with their conversation.

Lottie felt like he was right behind her, floating in space. That didn't make physical sense.

He hadn't indicated which creep he was referring to, but she knew, for certain, he was talking about her. "You think you can go around us, huh? We just wanted food, medicine, maybe some fuel. You couldn't share? You've got more than enough. But no, you had to be assholes. You had to cut off our ship. So now, if any of you comes near us, we will start executing hostages. Do I make myself clear?"

Lottie was hanging half over the roof edge, locked into painful stillness, muscles straining, bathed in cold sweat.

"Answer me!" the man shouted. "Answer me or so help me I will kill this bitch right in front of me. Are. We. Clear?"

A heroine would say exactly the right thing. Find a way out of this by trickery or placation. Lottie jabbed the control to broadcast on all frequencies. “We’re clear!” She cried out. “We are clear. We are so clear. Please I just want to get to my friends. They’re trapped in the D arm, and they don’t have a floor to stand on. Please I’m not going anywhere near you.”

Tejas soaked her face. Her nose was running. There was no way to wipe in the helmet.

Xiao groaned.

The man laughed. “So that’s where you are, you little cheat! Gui, send all your men to D Arm! I don’t know. Check a map.”

“Keep moving, Lottie. Don’t tell me your position,” Xiao said, her voice tired and flat.

Lottie hated herself. She couldn’t move. She was a permanent fixture on the outside of the station now.

* * *

Ricky and the majority of the pirate crew floated in the weightless room just inside the dock their ship was supposed to be on.

Ricky’s gut felt painfully bloated, a balloon. If he farted, would he ricochet around the room? They shouldn’t have opened that sack and shared a raw cabbage on their climb back up the station arm. He’d been starving, though, and Tejas had threatened not to move if he didn’t get to eat.

Tejas—the source of all his woe—lay horizontal in the air, a foot hooked around a bar, hands tucked behind his head. The asshole looked comfortable. “What’s the plan, then?”

Chet hung in the entryway to the airlock like it was a throne. “We let her come to us, and we kill her.” He was acting like he was Sherlock Holmes or something. Taunt her. Yeah, that was original. How about figuring out how to re-dock the ship, genius? Men had been rotating in and out of the airlock behind him, talking about clamps and parts they didn’t have. Some of the bags of booty—the meds, the goods from the administrator’s office—were already on board the ship, ferried via spacesuit. They’d put a tether between the ship and station at least to pull themselves along and stop it from drifting further. They were probably never going to get the ship back on the dock.

Tejas curled up, turned himself toward the wall. “We don’t have to kill anyone.”

“It’s war now, boys. No more screwing around. This is our ground, we stand it.”

Ricky wasn’t some wussy pacifist or anything, but he hadn’t signed up to kill nerds. There was something dead cold in Chet’s face, though. Ricky knew better than to speak up. Hell, it wasn’t likely the nerds would come here, anyway. Right?

Tejas muttered, “I think we should go with Gui. We’re useless sitting here.”

“Go then,” Chet said, “and stop whining about it.”

Tejas looked at Ricky, like, what? This meant Ricky had to go, too? They weren’t a fucking unit. Tejas pushed himself all lazy like a swimmer through the bulkhead, and something about that felt like a reproach, like manners should tug him along after.

Ricky had no intention of going. He’d stay and cling to this bar with the other dozen guys clinging to bars. He wasn’t going to let Tejas bait him into going. He was losing his lunch just floating.

Then a long, musically varied fart escaped from him. It felt good, but the room happened to be completely silent as it blasted, whistled, lowered and rose, and finally ended.

“Jesus.”

“Dude.”

Well, now it wasn’t him giving in to Tejas if he left.

He kicked off, flailing, and managed to get through the bulkhead Tejas had gone through.

He was disappointed the fart hadn’t moved him. It felt like it should have.

The central cylinder of the space station had a “floor” painted along one side, perpendicular to the ring—it was best not to think about the ring. They were spinning in place, too, but couldn’t feel it. No wonder Ricky was nauseated.

He floated into a big squared-off room with flat walls colored brightly; red, yellow, green, and blue, with giant white A, B, C, and D’s on them. It felt like flying into a giant kid’s toy. The

corners were rounded, like the room's cube had been sanded down to protect toddlers. The corridor continued on the other side, leading to the other dock.

Ricky failed to grab a handhold in the colorful room and bounced off the wall and onto the floor and farted again, but with a few bumps and curses, got himself oriented upright and through the door in the red wall marked D.

This room was pie-wedge shaped and had all kinds of Velcro pouches on the walls. Christ, the one nearest him was labeled "Party Decorations."

Gui and his buddies were pulling wires. Gui had been an electrician back at the ice mine. Made him the best tech guy on their team. Tejas was hanging off a cloth strap. He turned to look at Ricky. He was smiling. "Come look at this."

Ricky was floating that way, and it wasn't like he could have stopped himself. Zero-g was a series of trust exercises with inertia. He really hated it. He aimed for a cloth strap to Tejas's left and hit the wall next to it. He grabbed on. His inertia carried him stupidly into the wall, and he swung on the strap, also stupidly, while he tried to orient himself.

"Dude, stop trying to be straight up and down, and it'll go easier." Tejas pointed at a screen on the wall. "There are our two friends. Look familiar?"

The screen showed the big Asian guy and his girlfriend, wrapped around each other like two otters.

"I knew he was trouble. But it was a girl that knocked our ship away. Think it's the one on the radio?"

"Or the girlfriend, dumbass." He shook his head. "You and that guy. It's like you're in love and can't see anyone else. She clobbered me. She's a special kind of mean. I would bet my life she's the one kicked our ship free."

"What do we do about it? Either way."

Tejas looked uncomfortable. He shifted his grip and glanced at Gui. "Gui thinks if we depressurize the compartment above and below those two, it'll be a good way to keep them from coming after us. Then we have an advantage over the third one, the one outside, when she gets here." He chewed his lip. "I'm trying to think of something less risky. This could hurt them, maybe trap them permanently."

Christ. Now Gui was going to think they were both wusses. "You wouldn't get that consideration if the roles were reversed. It's us or them."

"No, Ricky, it isn't," Tejas said, like he was explaining something to a very stupid kid. "It's us, getting our stuff, and getting out of here. We just have to hold them off long enough for Chet to get the ship back." Then, staring angrily at the image on the screen, Tejas muttered, "How much air would you think is in that compartment?"

Ricky had no idea. Fuck though, it was "us or them."

"I think this is it," Gui said, overhead. Ricky stifled the urge to look up. It would only nauseate him.

"Okay, I'm watching." Tejas focused on the camera feed.

"Started. This should be compartment number . . . 33."

Tejas nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, good, no sign of them even noticing. Checking the pressure gauge on 33."

Ricky felt impotent. Why had Tejas even wanted him to come along? "Why don't we just open the hatches between us and capture them?" Ricky felt more at home with a plan that involved punching.

"Jesus fuck, Ricky, these two escaped twice already. You know what the definition of madness is?"

Ricky's stomach made a long, plaintive whine. The definition of madness was trying to survive in space.

Gui shouted, "Do you have the pressure reading yet or not?"

Tejas said, "I had it a second ago. They could have designed this interface better. There. Yes! Pressure in cabin 33 is down 10 percent. Is that enough to keep it sealed?"

"Not sure. Let's keep bleeding until it's all the way."

There was a soft, resonant “thunk” on the wall. “I’m afraid I can’t let you do that,” said a reedy woman’s voice, echoing out of every radio in the room like an army of ghosts. “Open the bulkheads between my friends and your location now, or I will do something we will all regret.”

* * *

Chapter Eleven

Lottie liked books about women whose lives were circumscribed by strict gender roles. Their struggles were tied to matrimony, patronage, and proving who had faked the old lord’s will or run off with the dowry. There was always a passage decrying confining dress or trailing skirts, an anger laced with vicarious delight for the modern reader longing to play dress-up.

Lottie wondered if there were other novels where women such as herself decried the cumbersome nature of their EVA suit, the limited motion in the joints, the shoulder too far down the arm, the visor always short of where you wanted to see.

EVA was worse than the most impractical ball gown. It felt like crawling through tunnels in a gauze dress, dripping wet and wearing Velcro. No one would want to fantasize about saving the day in this.

Her anger was good; it grounded her, kept her moving. So much for her “planned mania” last week—had she but known she would have held off until today!

She was sitting on the ring roof, resting. She’d walked halfway to the D arm, and her legs went from wobbly to giving out so, yes, breaks were needed. She looked up at the cylinder. She should have climbed up C anyway. The arms were closer to each other on top.

She sighed. “Haizle?”

“Yes! I’m here! We have a private channel: 98.5 megahertz.”

Why did they make it so hard to put your arm in front of yourself to see the radio controls? She switched to the private channel.

The station cylinder was unfairly far above Lottie. She had Xiao’s toolbox. She had her tablet, albeit inside her suit where she couldn’t get at it until she’d reentered the station. (She’d thought that would be safer. She didn’t want to lose it more than anything. It bumped against her ribs like a playful, square pet.)

She got to her feet. Her knees felt loose. The pirates knew she was looking for Xiao and Saravit, and they knew Xiao and Saravit were in D arm. There wasn’t a maintenance hatch on the arm so she had to go up to the cylinder. There had been pirates in the cylinder. Had they stayed near A Dock? She wished she could see her screen!

Lottie reached the arm. She took hold of a ladder rung at eye level. Her arm twinged, muscles objecting to the end of rest. Well, bother. She set her foot on a rung and started to climb. Her arm shook like it was palsied. It would get easier. Everything would eventually get easier. “I’m heading up to the top of D arm. Wait . . . is Xiao on this channel with us?”

“Gosh, I forgot to check on her. We last talked on the other channel. Hang on.”

Lottie kept her eyes on the hub cylinder. She had this hope, this bad desperate hope, that a plan would appear when she got there.

“Oh my gosh!” Haizle said. “They’re trying to decompress parts of D arm, like to keep Xiao from getting to them.”

Lottie was getting lighter, the movement easier, but she felt so slow! The silence was worrying her. “Xiao? Did you hear?”

There was no response. Lottie repeated, “Xiao? They might be decompressing you any second now!”

“I heard you. Just processing. How the fuck do these guys think I’m going to get to them? They think I can eat bulkheads?”

The station arms all ended in the fat middle of the hub cylinder. Inside was a big, colorful room that was used for all-staff meetings since it was the largest interior space on the station. That was where she could get to Xiao. She would have to get there from Dock B, which was on the opposite side of the cylinder from the pirate ship.

Lottie tethered herself at the top of D arm. In front of her was the D branch off the hub room, where the pirates were messing with the air pressure controls for the arm. What she really

wanted was to get in between the pirates and her friends, somehow. It was impossible.

She threw the toolbox. It hit the hub, silently of course, and ricocheted upward to the end of its tether. Well. That had been useful. She opened a radio channel to the pirates and spoke a line she'd heard a bad guy use in a movie. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that." She hoped she'd sounded sinister and capable of violence.

There was no response. She turned up the gain on her radio, heard someone mutter, "Or what?"

Or I'll throw my toolbox again, she thought. "Open the bulkheads between my friends and your location now, or I will do something we will all regret."

She hoped they wouldn't call her bluff. There wasn't a fat lot of anything she could do. She tugged the toolbox's tether, pulling it back to her as she crawled along the cylinder to Dock B. At least she was weightless. Her fingers ached, but her arms only quivered now and then.

"Listen, lady, we know there's nothing you can do."

"No, you don't." Lottie tried to sound intimidating. Gasping didn't help. "I have control of the station's systems. I don't want to hurt you, but I could." She muted herself to grunt as she closed the airlock, but she felt she had to keep talking. If nothing else, if they were listening to her, they weren't working on venting the air on Xiao and Saravit. "You see, I'm an environmental systems engineer. I have the ability to vent the air out of the compartment you're in. Much faster than you can do to my friends. I really don't want to, though. But I . . . I'm not the most mentally stable person here." She was sweaty, and her hands were rubbery as she stripped off just enough of the environment suit to reach her tablet. "Ask anyone. I can get crazy." How she hated saying that! "I haven't had my meds today. Someone took them from the infirmary."

Echoing somewhere beyond the pirate's radio receiver, someone said, "She's definitely bluffing."

Lottie hurriedly pulled up the cameras in the central cylinder. A half-dozen men were in the vestibule at the top of D arm. Between her and Xiao and Saravit. Now what? All she could do was open doors. The pirates looked like they knew what they were doing, pulling wires and tubes from the walls.

"Lottie?" Saravit's voice. "Don't take any risks. We're fine here."

"Speak for yourself," Xiao said. "Stop those fuckers, Lottie. I'm not getting decompressed by fucking accident."

Lottie had a vision: the A airlock opening, the pirates panicked, sucked toward it, then sealed behind a bulkhead between there and here. Would that work? She didn't know how to plan the velocity of the pirates, how to time closing the airlock once they'd been sucked toward it but not out into space.

She was useless. She was less than useless. She hated Saravit just then. If he hadn't given her that shot, she could still be manic today, still feel confident she could fix anything.

Of course, she begrudgingly accepted, there was a chance she would confidently fix everything by jumping rope.

Well, she could get out of the EVA suit while she was thinking. Fumbling, she let go of the tablet and it floated happily away. It dashed between her fingers like a slippery stone. She kicked the rest of the way out of the suit and sailed after it, grabbing it as she floated into the corridor.

The bulkheads were not closed in the cylinder corridor. The pirates must have wanted a clear line of sight. Well, that worked because Lottie was terrified of being seen. She pushed herself gently toward the opening for the hub room and stopped at a handgrip near to it.

She could see the shadows of the men. Her legs drifted into the light. Horrified, she pulled her knees up to her chin.

She tried not to breathe too hard. She opened the tool kit. There were screwdrivers, pliers, and things she didn't know how to use. Even if one of these could be a weapon, how would she use it? She didn't know how to attack a man with a sword, much less a screwdriver!

Maybe she could throw something. Yes. Get them to follow the sound. Close a bulkhead on them. It was a plan.

She tucked the tablet down the front of her coveralls to keep it secure during her daring action. She picked a tool at random. It was a weird little box-thing with little metal sticks inside like it was a mechanical sandwich. It didn't look very useful. She threw it hard. It rotated end over end, on a straight trajectory into the other room and . . . she should have thought about this. It wasn't going to drop and make a noise. It sailed, unperturbed, onward down the opposite corridor.

A man swam into view, peering after it.

"You're supposed to follow it!" Lottie said, which was stupid. Very stupid. He looked right at her.

She turned and pushed hard. How fast could she "run"? How fast could he? Mass acceleration would be affected by arm strength, and did air drag factor? She was slowing. Would she go faster if she tried to pass more hand-holds without re-gripping?

A shot fired.

She'd never heard a gunshot in real life. It didn't sound like she expected, but she immediately knew what it was, that startling pop. Lottie's whole body filled with liquid adrenaline. She spun in place. The man behind her was toppling comically backward, clutching his gun. Another man caught him about the middle and threw him forward. Where had the bullet gone? Oh no, where had it gone?

Lottie, horrified, sent the close command for what she hoped was a bulkhead between them.

The hatch slammed. Someone howled. The gun fired again. Immediately a loud "ping" announced the bullet ricocheting off the bulkhead in front of her. No, no. That was terrible. Why were they shooting? She sent the close command again and again, stupidly, randomly. She let go of her handhold to press harder and spun, helplessly.

In microgravity, a thought really could "throw" you. She found a grip near the floor and stuck her foot in it.

Camera, camera . . . there she was herself, looking far calmer than she would have thought. There was the compartment behind her, empty. There was the compartment in front of her . . . two men trapped. Oh, she'd turned around. That was the compartment behind her. One had his foot in the bulkhead . . . oh no, under the bulkhead. Oh no. Blood droplets floated up around him. He was screaming, clutching his leg. His fellow with the gun was spinning, arms wind-milling. He hit the bulkhead between them. It was a softer sound than Lottie expected. The blood droplets were moving, drifting upward from the trapped man as a slow-motion stream; the air was moving. He had made a hole, then. She saw the free pirate watch the droplets and come to the same conclusion. He floundered, unused to low gravity, following the droplets to the ceiling.

The radio crackled with Xiao's voice on the private channel. "What's going on? Are they still depressurizing us?"

Distantly, like a memory from a book, she realized she'd failed. She'd trapped two pirates. That meant another four were still in Xiao and Saravit's path. She switched the camera to the big room. Yes, there they were. They'd stopped messing with wires at least. They were grouped around the corridor opening. One had a radio.

What if he was calling to bring more pirates here?

She radioed Xiao. "I was trying to get them away from you, but I made it worse."

"How in holy hell could you make it any worse?"

Saravit took over the radio. "Deep breaths. You're safe. Tell me what's going on."

"I tried to get them to leave, and they did, but it wasn't all of them and one of them shot his gun and I closed the bulkheads and they are trapped and I don't know what to do."

The screams tapered off into sobbing. That made her feel worse.

"So . . . okay . . . let's review our options," Saravit said. "You are in the ventral corridor, right? The pirates are, too?"

Lottie checked the camera again. The guy with the gun was pointing the remote he'd used downstairs at the bulkhead his friend was trapped in. It wasn't working. Was it the pressure lock?

“How many of them are there?” Saravit asked.

She told the bulkhead to open. It didn't.

The pressure was too low. The mechanical lock was overriding her signal. These two men were going to die, slowly. It was all her fault. “Maybe . . . maybe . . .” She could picture Xiao and Saravit, listening intently. What had they asked? “How many pirates? I'll call them.” She switched to the pirates' channel. “Hello? Pirates?” Her voice sounded tremulous and thin, like a vibrating wire.

The pirate near the ceiling thrashed in place, getting his radio out. “Lady, if you can get this door open, do it. Tejas's stuck. He's . . . oh god he's bleeding, and I think the blood is going out a hole in the ceiling.” His voice cracked. She could watch him running his hand over the ceiling, losing contact, swimming back. “Do these . . . do these doors have, like, give in them? On the bottom? Some rubber seal? I mean . . . does Tejas still have a foot?”

Lottie tried to keep her voice low and slow. It made her throat tight. “Attention, pirates: Two of your men are trapped. The gun made a hole in the section they are in . . . Section H-44.” She was proud of how professional she was sounding now. Her throat ached. “Please, can you get them out on your side?”

She watched the man shout into his radio. “Lady, I hold you personally responsible. Get us out of here!” Tejas went slack. He'd fainted: that's what it looked like in space, the arms straight. His friend swam toward him and veered off, like he was afraid to touch him. “Fuck this. Fuck piracy. Fuck space. I just wanted to play the bassoon.”

The bassoon? Lottie wasn't sure what that was. An instrument. Something weird and European. She couldn't imagine this thick-necked man in an orchestra. But then she did imagine it, in the processes of thinking she couldn't, and it was tragic how clearly she could see it.

“I can't get you out. I'm sorry. I want to help you, but I can't. The pressure lock is on. Your gunshot must have breeched the hull. Do you see the hole? Do you have anything to plug it with? Maybe your clothes? Please, um . . . whoever was doing the pressure thing, if you could lower pressure in the access arm, can you over-pressurize compartment H-44? It'll buy them time, or make it so we can open one of these bulkheads.”

“Lottie, what are you doing? We're not getting anything from you,” it was Xiao.

Oh right, only the pirates were hearing her. She switched to broadcast on all frequencies. “I'm trying to free the stuck pirates. I think I can do this. I need to open a bulkhead, and that's what I've been doing all day: opening bulkheads.”

“Stop it. They're on their own. You're almost to the power plant. Go there, and I'll walk you through restarting the system.”

She switched to the frequency only Xiao and Haizle were using. “Xiao, where is the mechanical pressure lock?”

“I'm not helping you save pirates when you could be saving all of us.”

“It's the only way to get to you and save you,” Lottie lied. “I have a plan.” Closing the radio connection, “I'm going to try to get you out,” she called. Fear and adrenaline were sharpening her, focusing her. She opened the toolbox and stared at the rows of neat items, each secured with a Velcro strap. She got out the long-handled screwdriver. Steps. Think in steps. Presumably the first step was removing a panel. “Xiao, walk me through this. Please.”

She knew this silence was filled on the other side of the radio receiver with an intense, whispered conversation. She liked to imagine Saravit pleading her case.

“Okay,” Xiao bit the word out. “It's a contact mounted on a flexible membrane. The pressure goes too low on one side, the flexible membrane moves, the contact breaks. The first thing you gotta do is open the panel over that thing. It should be right under the panel we removed for the data control lines, remember? It's like there's a hand's breadth of space under that panel, and then there's another, long skinny panel. You need a vampire screwdriver.”

The long-handled screwdriver wasn't right. It ended in a plus-sign top, and the screws had pairs of dots on them.

Oh, what was the point? She wanted to curl up.

“How's it going?” Xiao asked.

Step one. With unwanted care, Lottie opened the tool kit, secured the wrong tool and pulled out another, checked its top, put it back, failed to secure the strap, saw it rise eagerly out of its pocket, strapped it down. This . . . was not the way to save people. She was sweating heavily. The next screwdriver was the right one, ending with two little round metal pegs that fit the holes perfectly. She wrenched the tool against the screw and flipped herself.

Right. Stay braced. She put a hand on the wall as well as her foot in the hold on the floor and tried again. The screw gave, and she let the darn thing float away. That was against safety regulations. She unscrewed three of the screws and loosened the fourth as a pivot, the way Xiao had. “I have the cover off. There’s . . . wires inside, and a switch plate, and a box.”

“Good. That box is the housing for the pressure sensor. Top screws off. Lefty loosey.”

Of course. Under the removed top was a circle of concave rubber. It had a gleaming metallic disk in its center. A delicate filament stood up in front of it, just shy of touching. She didn’t need Xiao to tell her she had to put something conductive between to close the circuit. She pushed the screwdriver in. The tool floated away. She looked through the tool kit. There was tape. She tore off a piece of tape and stuck the contact wire to the center of the contact. She hit the open command again.

The bulkhead flew open. Her hair blew into her face, and she drifted forward as the pressure equalized between them.

The scene was more immediate, more frightening than she expected. The gun, floating loose on a strap, was still present. The man near the ceiling was shirtless now. It wasn’t right, pirating shirtless, like wearing a fur coat in a swimming pool. The bassoonist. He was thinner than she thought he would be with his shirt off. His shoulder blades stuck out like wings, and he twisted like a hairless cat, trying to see behind him without letting go of the wad of fabric pressed up against (presumably) the hole the bullet had made.

Tejas was whimpering, no longer unconscious. He floated sideways, what would have been his “top” foot crushed under the door, the other tucked up as he held his wounded leg, trying to make a tourniquet of his hands.

His face was red, his eyes standing out like marbles. “Get it off.”

What would Saravit do? He’d try to calm them. Talk about the plan. “We need to get both of you out of this compartment fast and seal it again,” she said.

“We’re going to die,” the man on the ceiling said. “Thanks for trying, but let’s face it, we’re going to die.”

They were, of course; everyone died eventually, but she didn’t think it would help to say that. She searched through the tools. There was a spray can labeled “sealant.” She quickly read the side of it. “Take your shirt off the leak, if you can, if it hasn’t frozen in place. I suppose it might have. If it has, leave it. Or tear it away. Either way, spray this on the hole.” She considered throwing it to him, regarded her earlier failure with microgravity ballistics, and kicked up to hand it to him.

He looked at the can. He had one hand on the shirt, one on a handgrip nearby. He looked afraid to let go, like he thought he might fall. “Will that work?”

Lottie had no idea what the fault tolerances were on sealant spray or how large or dangerous the hole was, so she repeated what she’d read: “Shake well, hold six to eight centimeters away and spray in a steady back and forth stream.” She turned her attention to the other man.

She couldn’t bear to look at the crumbled mess of his trouser leg. The lines of narrowing folds, the capillary action of blood on cloth. Was there even any foot under there? She supposed there had to be. There were grooves in the floors where the bulkheads went down, so if nothing else, there was . . . space to fill with his flesh.

Tejas’s squeezed his eyes shut, white wrinkly scabs with eyelashes protruding while he chanted, “Get it off. Get it off.”

She found the panel over the pressure lock and opened it. She found the cover and removed it.

She remembered there were more men on the other side of this bulkhead. Maybe with more guns.

“Get it off. Please please have mercy get it off.”

Tejas had a short curly beard, darker than his eyebrows and hair. She got out the duct tape and pulled a few inches off. “When the door opens, it might hurt worse. The loss of pressure might increase your blood loss.”

“Don’t care please please please.”

Lottie taped the pressure sensor. Now the door would open, if she sent the command to open it—or if the men on the other side did.

* * *

Chapter Twelve

Lottie looked through the camera for the chamber beyond. Four men were watching the bulkhead intently. One had his feet tucked into holds on the far wall, a rifle held across his body, aimed at the bulkhead. Aimed exactly at Lottie.

Why did they even bring those guns into space? Lottie’s fists trembled.

“Is this enough? Hey, lady! Did I do it right? Are we not going to die?”

The bassoonist waved his shirt at her. He looked oddly like he was drowning, flailing around to catch her attention and trying to stay in place.

“Just a second,” she said.

Tejas’s lips moved in a silent litany of “pleasepleaseplease,” his eyes closed tight.

The bassoonist tugged a lock of her hair. He was stretching, reaching for her while he held onto a ceiling hold. “Is this seal holding? It’s not bubbling anymore but that could mean the pressure’s too low. Does it feel like low pressure in here? Do I sound like I’m gasping? I think I’m gasping.”

If she opened the door, she would be outnumbered by the men with guns.

If she didn’t, she would have to accept that she was leaving this man trapped and possibly bleeding to death. After everything. After all this.

She could open the all the bulkheads and vent them all into space. Take Tejas out of his misery. It would be worth sacrificing her own life, if it saved someone, if it stopped the pirates from shooting more.

It didn’t feel quite so bad, killing people if you killed yourself, too. Somehow that was more virtuous.

Or was that depression talking? Oh, she couldn’t kill herself if she didn’t know she really wanted to.

She tugged on Tejas’s sleeve. Tejas’s eyes slit open. He gave her a tight nod. She tore the sleeve off at the shoulder, jabbing the tear with a screwdriver to speed it, and yanked it down his arm. He shook as he let go of his leg briefly so she could get the sleeve free. Then she tied the fabric around his leg below his gripping, white fingers. She pushed the screwdriver through the fabric and twisted. Tejas gave a grunt of pain with each twist as she tightened the makeshift tourniquet.

A hand on her arm. Hard. “That doesn’t look like saving Tejas. You got the other door open, why not this one?”

Lottie couldn’t even feel threatened anymore—all her emotional receptors had tripped, burned out like fuses. “I need you to hold him. When the door opens, you need to be ready to pull him free with all your might.”

The bassoonist was very close. Half-naked. Savage with his muscles and grey hair on his chest. He stank of sweat.

Slowly, he nodded.

He crawled down her to Tejas. It was uncomfortably intimate, thick hands gripping her shoulder, her arm, her side, her thigh, but Lottie couldn’t blame him; she had a foot hooked near the base of the door and was therefore a convenient ladder.

“When I open the bulkhead, you’ll need to pull very, very hard. Do you understand? As hard as you can.”

The bassoonist grunted, bracing his feet on the floor. Lottie looked behind them and tried to calculate how fast they could clear the bulkhead before the other pirates fired their gun.

Lottie hit the button with her eyes closed and pushed hard with her feet. Gears groaned. Tejas howled, a new animalistic sound. They flew like snapped rubber bands. She pressed the button to close the bulkhead again. She didn't look back. She was reaching for the next ready surface to push off and keep moving. She felt the bassoonist's hair against her foot and kicked off of him, too.

She imagined he would slow down, friend freed. She imagined the bulkhead had been open for two seconds or less, but what if that were incorrect? What if there were more than two pirates behind her now?

"What the hell was all that?" Xiao asked.

"I may have saved those two guys a little bit," Lottie said. "Maybe. I don't know. Where is the power plant?"

A pause that felt like reproach. "I take it you're heading away from us, toward the end of the cylinder?"

"Yes. I'm in section . . . 46 . . . almost 47."

"Keep going. The power plant is section 50, right before the dock. There's a security door with an iris-reader, but there's also a pass code for emergencies like these. Let me know when you're there and I'll describe how to uncover the number pad."

What had happened when Bulkhead H-44 opened? Had blood gushed forth? Had a severed foot floated away? Anything would be better than the vivid, detailed imaginings her brain cooked up.

She couldn't help it. Like Orpheus, she finally glanced behind herself.

And screamed.

The bassoonist was inches from her, his grim jaw clenched, Tejas under his arm, limp, arms stuck out straight, like a mannequin being transported. Blood orbited them, and sweat. His foot . . . the only word for the motion it made was "flapping." Lottie felt her gorge rise. She windmilled her arms, trying to back away from them.

"He's still bleeding. Give me your kit." The bassoonist pawed the toolbox on her hip. "Hold him!" he commanded, pushing Tejas at her.

Tejas was clammy in her hands. It felt like touching a gross thing: a worm, a slug. But he was human. He had a slight paunch, but she could feel his ribs, too. He was a softer man than his friend. His face was slack with unconsciousness.

Men. Close. Scary. She couldn't do this.

Calm, the man spoke. "I'm Ricky." He wrapped duct tape around Tejas's leg, making a fake boot, a cast. The shape had a grotesque dent in it where the ankle got far too thin. Would duct tape even help that?

Ricky tore the tape off with his teeth. "Don't die, you asshole." He looked up Tejas's body, holding the legs to his chest. "We need medicine. Antibiotics and shit."

"Pirates stole it all." Lottie pushed off of Tejas. "I have something to do."

On the side of the corridor was a narrow oblong bulkhead—an old-fashioned single-person door like gravity might instate itself.

She got out the radio. "I'm here," Lottie said. "Bulkhead H-50."

Xiao answered immediately. "There's a panel above the door. You need a hex key to open it. You still have a maintenance tool kit, right?"

"Yes."

"Good. The hex keys are in a set together, folded up. They're black and the holder is red. Should be in the first pocket in the front-right corner."

Lottie turned the soft tool bag around. She dug into the front corner pockets. One had a spool of wire. The other . . . was empty.

"Um . . . did this hex key thing look like a metal-bits sandwich with red rubber bread?"

"It looked like a stack of hex keys! What the hell do you think that looks like? It's kinda . . . no, Vit I am the right level of angry. It looks like a stack, yeah. Red, black metal bits, red."

"I threw the hex keys at the pirates."

"Look again. It's a flat, stacked thing, big enough to hold in your palm. I . . . shit that does

sound like a sandwich.”

The panel in question had four little indents shaped like hexagons. “How do I get this open without it?”

“Knife. Back, middle left pocket has a multitool with a fold-out knife. Use the knife point like a screwdriver in the hexes and pray that fuckin’ works.”

The radio cut out and Lottie imagined Sara-vit calming Xiao.

She found the knife. It took her several tries to get it open.

Was Tejas still alive? Was Ricky close behind her or still where she’d left him? Would he be afraid to see the knife and attack her? Don’t look back. Not this time.

The knife point gouged into the softer metal of the plate. Her first attempt to unscrew chewed up the hex-shape.

She moved to another hex-hole, and this time she dug the knife in deeply, hard against one side of the hex, before she tried to twist. Lefty-Loosey. Oh no, now she was using that idiotic mnemonic.

“I got one loose!” she announced.

“That’s great,” Haizle said. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“You should be able . . .” the knife slipped and helicoptered away. She had to drop the radio to snatch it back. She dug the point back into the next hex. She adjusted her feet, her hands, and pulled the radio back by its tether. “Dr. Langdon has access to the security cameras. See if you can find all the pirates, where they are, what they are doing.” If they were bleeding to death because I crushed their foot.

Saravit’s voice finally came on. “How are those screws coming?”

“Two down.”

Haizle said, “Yes! Doc patched me in. I think they might be listening to us. I see a bunch of them bent over a radio. And . . . oh yeah that is exactly how someone looks when they hear the person they are eavesdropping on say ‘I think they’re eavesdropping.’”

“Doesn’t matter,” Saravit said. “What can they do about it?”

“They could try venting the air in this compartment,” Lottie said. “Like they tried to do to you. I almost have the third screw . . . yes. I’m opening the panel.”

It was stubborn; the fourth screw wasn’t exactly loosened, but she wedged the knife between the plate and the wall and pried it open until it turned.

She definitely felt someone approaching, a shadow growing over her shoulder. She heard his labored breath.

She kept her eyes on the panel, twisting it off. There was a wedge-shaped opening now. “I see a number pad.”

“Okay. Great. Type in nine ones.”

Lottie stopped trying to open the panel further and used the screwdriver to hit the one button nine times. “Then what?”

“Then hit the green button.”

Lottie did. The door opened. Ricky grabbed the edge of it and pushed himself through.

Tejas was floating behind and above her. At least he was unconscious for this. What could Ricky be doing? Lottie felt sick. She followed him into the power plant. To Xiao she said, “That’s a horrible pass code.”

“Yeah, well, look how much I didn’t forget it. You’re welcome. Now, when you enter the room, look to your left. There’s a freaking enormous handle on the wall. It’s probably pointed up. Pull it down. That resets the breakers.”

Ricky floated in front of the enormous handle. “What does this do?”

“We’re restoring power to the station.”

He held onto the switch and turned his back to it. “Then all your station buddies swarm us. People get shot. Maybe die.”

“Maybe. Or maybe the doctors come. Maybe no one dies.”

Ricky shook his head, slowly. He still had that gun, but it was floating forgotten by his hip. “We worked hard for this. We suffered for this. All we want is some food and medicine. All we

want is to live.”

Lottie bit her lip. She looked him in the eyes. “I thought you wanted to be a bassoonist.”

“We don’t all get to be what we want.”

Shivering, her sweat long turned cold, Lottie pushed off the wall, toward him, her hands out and open. “I couldn’t kill you. I have to believe you can’t kill me.”

“That’s your mistake.” But he didn’t stop her from reaching behind him. He flinched away like he was afraid she was going to pinch him. He kept his hand on the handle. She put her hand next to his.

She pulled. Ricky grunted, fighting to get purchase with his feet and hold her back.

“Your friend is dead if you don’t let me do this. Do pirates have doctors? I bet they don’t.”

She saw Ricky thinking about it. She put her feet on the wall on either side of the handle and tugged. It lifted, and then moved easily. She lost her grip and sailed. Ricky caught her. She tried to smile. He looked away from her, disgusted.

Xiao’s voice, “Are you done?”

She hung from Ricky’s fist, away from the wall. The handle wasn’t all the way down yet.

“Let me get it,” she asked him.

“What do I get for helping you? Where are my guys? How is our ship?”

Deliberately, so he would see she was showing him what she had to offer, she lifted the radio. “Haizle? Can you tell medical to come to the power hub as soon as they can?”

“Oh no,” Haizle said. “Oh guys . . . oh no this is . . . I can’t watch this.”

Lottie tried to plead with Ricky with her eyes. How did you do that? What would Sara-vit say? “This isn’t who you are.”

He let go.

Lottie kicked off the ceiling like a swimmer doing laps. The lever clicked as it hit bottom, and the emergency lights blinked, then got brighter.

Xiao said, “Great! Now I need you to go to the keyboard on the wall to your right, the black one under all the dials and switches, not the red one. Type the word ‘reset’ all lower case, and hit enter.”

The instructions were a lot simpler than she’d feared. What was she expecting? Some shape puzzle or strength test? She looked at Ricky. He went to the wall in question. He typed one-handed. “Done.”

The main lights came on, making the room impossibly bright. Blinding.

On the radio, Haizle was sobbing.

Lottie felt exhaustion crashing through her, like she’d thrown the reset switch on herself. Ricky put a hand on her back, a gentle touch. “Now what? How do we get out of here?”

The air filled with noise. Multiple voices. Haizle’s crying broke. “I just . . . okay, okay, I’m doing this. Medical help needed in ring section 30, second floor, ring section 80, first floor. Gravity Lab 3. Someone respond if you’re on the way to one of these places. Ring section 30, second floor, ring section 80 . . .”

“This is the director. Thank you, whoever restored power. Everyone please remain calm.”

“This is Dr. Langdon, medical personnel, please report in to me.”

“Taking Arm A. We’re engaging hostiles.”

“Who sent that message? Security? Security, you are under no authorization—”

“This is Mason. You can reprimand me later.”

Lottie stared at the speaker on the wall. She hadn’t noticed it before. It was odd, hearing station-wide alerts after so long.

Ricky took the radio. “We have an injured man. We’re going to take him to the infirmary.”

Xiao said, “Lottie, stay there. If they zap everything again you’ll have to reset the breakers again.”

She was overwhelmed. “I should stay here,” she repeated to Ricky, even though he had to have heard Xiao.

“No,” said Ricky. “I need you to help get Tejas to a doctor.”

“I think D arm is closest, but maybe you should take A.” She felt like she was giving directions

ANALOG

in another language, pausing to translate.

“Your people will shoot us.”

“We don’t have weapons.”

Ricky kicked off the wall. In the corridor, he gathered up Tejas, who flinched and moaned, but might still be asleep.

Chatter everywhere. She looked down at her tablet. She could see Saravit and Xiao. She could see people running. She could see blood, bright in the now well-lit corridors. She didn’t know what to do. She’d done so much, hadn’t she? But she wasn’t a heroine, and Xiao wasn’t a knight, and Ricky wasn’t a monster. They were just people, and the danger had not passed, may never pass.

Saravit’s voice. “Lottie? Are you there? Are you okay?”

“There’s so much blood,” Haizle said.

Lottie, curled tight as a bean, let herself float.

* * *

Chapter Thirteen

In hindsight, from the moment Tejas had fainted in his arms, Ricky was an ex-pirate. Your thinking changed when you had a life on your hands.

“I got ya.” He pulled the both of them from handhold to handhold back toward the center of the station.

Someone had opened all the bulkheads. He could see all the way to the colorful room. “Gui?” No answer. No motion. Had they moved out? He picked up his radio. “Gui? Chet? I’ve got Tejas. He’s in a bad way.”

It wasn’t Gui or Chet who answered. It was some reedy-voiced jerk he didn’t recognize. “We’re pulling back to the airlock. Move it or you’ll get left behind.”

Ricky maneuvered Tejas to float in front of him as he kicked gently off a bulkhead. “Chet got the ship docked?”

“Sorta. Not exactly. No. We’re going across in EVA suits, six at a time.”

Tejas’s arms stuck straight out as he floated limply. How would you get him in an EVA suit? Blood seeped along the edges of the duct tape on his leg, quivering like gel.

In the colorful room, Ricky put up a hand and stopped himself. He could see Gui’s abandoned wires and shit in the wedge-shaped room behind the D wall.

Ricky took a deep breath and tried to sound calm. “You didn’t get the ship re-docked, all this time?”

“Fuck you,” reedy-voice said. “We’re getting our asses kicked here. There’s too many of them, and no places to hide and no line of sight. Ricky was right, rifles are shitty in space stations.”

“Jesus Christ, *I’m* Ricky.”

He expected some answer from that, but he didn’t get it. Whoever the other guy had been, he clearly decided he had something more important to do than talk on the radio.

Shit, they were facing active resistance, trying to run for it across a gap of vacuum. He liked to think the guys were being stoic about it, orderly and shit. He wasn’t so sure, though.

Ricky heard shouts and fighting not far away.

“I sure hope this isn’t a stupid decision,” he said and grabbed a handful of Tejas’s shirt as he pushed off toward the D access arm.

* * *

Xiao had done all she could and failed to open either bulkhead. The insides of her elbows, her hands, the backs of her knees were all sore from taking turns holding her reduced weight on the ladder rungs. Tears were prickling behind her eyeballs. “I fucked up, Vit. I’m sorry. I fucked up.”

It was one moment more of helplessness than she was willing to take. “It’s all my fault,” she choked out.

Saravit’s chin brushed her cheek. “You didn’t make this happen.”

He’d say that. She did make this happen. Not the pirates being here in the first place, but the part where Lottie was all by herself in the power plant instead of her. “I had to be st-stupid and

attack their ship. I never fucking learned to stop and think. Cuz I always gotta be the one fixing things. If I don't save the day, people'll hate me, Vit. They'll hate me."

He squeezed her firmly. "Saving the day's a pretty high price for not being hated. What does actual 'like' cost? The universe?"

"Screw you." Damn. She was crying like a baby. She rubbed her cheeks.

He took her hand and kissed the wet knuckles. "You're physically the strongest person on this station. You're intellectually one of the smartest. But emotionally, you're an idiot."

"I can't, Vit. I can't give up. I can't wait for someone else to fix things."

"You can. Isn't that what we're doing right now?"

That was more therapist bull, but it worked. She nodded.

The lights flickered and then brightened. The bulkheads groaned, then slowly parted. Lottie did it! "Don't tell me that was the magic of accepting my limitations."

"Let's never go in these arm corridors again," Saravit said.

If only she weren't maintenance chief! She climbed up. It felt so good to be moving.

Saravit wasn't with her. She looked back. Vit hadn't moved. He was talking into the radio. "Lottie? Are you there? Are you okay?"

"Vit! Come on. I will not watch you get stuck in that compartment again!"

He looked up. "The radio is going crazy."

"I don't care." She returned to squeeze him hard. "I want off this ladder already."

She climbed to the top. She heard fighting in the distance. Maybe it wasn't safe. She inched back down. "Lottie's in the aft power plant. If we stay low and to the right . . ."

And that was when a body sailed into the air over their heads, followed by a frantic, shirtless pirate, who was steering his companion like a battering ram. Xiao quickly got in the way to protect Vit.

The pirate tumbled after Xiao's punch, and only then did she see he had a gun, dangling after him. "Get it, Vit!" She had to stay on the pirate.

Saravit had gone for the body instead. "This man is unconscious!"

"Using one of your own guys like a shield, you coward." Xiao had a hold on the pirate, eyes on the gun, which floated behind him. This was back in a world she understood, one where you can hit your problems.

The pirate held up his hands between them. Weirdly, there was a roll of duct tape around his wrist like a bracelet. "Please. I'm Ricky, that's Tejas. I need to get him to a doctor."

"Screw you, asshole."

"Xiao!" Saravit put a hand on her ankle, pulling her down, toward him. "It'll take all of us to get this man safely down to the ring."

Xiao cut her eyes between Saravit and the enemy. "You aren't serious about helping these guys?"

"If he was going to shoot us, he would have already."

Maybe. Or maybe he hadn't thought of it. Xiao would have to let go of him to grab the gun, but she could snatch it, use its strap to bind him. Yeah. She tensed to move.

"Xiao!" Saravit snapped. She wasn't used to that tone from him. "I'm going down. Help or get out of the way."

Xiao felt the tears returning hard. The pirate—Ricky—said, "Please." He looked plain scared.

"Hand over the gun first." Xiao let go . . . with one hand. "Then we'll help."

The man looked like he thought she'd shoot him with it. There was an awkward pause. He got tangled trying to take the strap off. Then he threw the gun. It sailed wide. Xiao snatched it and let her momentum carry her to a handhold. "After you."

Ricky groped and flailed and managed to get himself down toward Vit, overshot him, and grabbed the ladder a few rungs below. Xiao followed. Into the godforsaken arm again.

The start went quickly, floating and grabbing. Soon they could feel the "down," and Saravit got on the ladder below the body, supporting it from below. Ricky held Tejas's shoulders, and Xiao climbed after him, the gun on her back.

Xiao had to split her attention between watching the space above them, should an ambush

come down from the pirates in the cylinder, and watching the asshat below her, should he do something crazy like drop his buddy, and making sure that Saravit wasn't lingering at any bulk-head crossings. Because he would.

"This is too heavy," Saravit said. Tejas crumpled down into him, Ricky panicked, obviously struggling to hold Tejas with a one-armed hug around his middle.

"Stop. Hold on." Xiao looped the gun's strap under Tejas's arms and used the gun as a handle, holding him from above.

It felt a lot like trying to get an unconscious body out of a swimming pool. She'd had some experience with that, back on Mars. Those damned failed air factories. Deadweight was never quite dead enough. This bastard, for example, dropped his injured leg between two rungs.

Ricky hurried down to pull the foot out again, gentle as taking a baby chick out of its nest. It was hard to hate him when he did that.

He stayed on the side as Xiao approached, getting the arms untangled as they inevitably flopped.

"You even try to touch this gun, and I'll break your neck with it," Xiao said.

Ricky gave her such a weird look, like she'd insulted his mother.

He didn't try to touch the gun, though.

There was a hard, bright knot of pain in the middle of her back, and Tejas was getting floppier and heavier. "Fuck!" Saravit almost lost his grip on the ladder. Tejas dropped, nearly fell. He grunted in his sleep as Ricky threw his arms around his knees, hugging him to the ladder.

"We need to stop," Saravit said. "This is too hard."

Xiao hooked one arm backward on the ladder, stretching her back. "Got any better ideas?"

"Relay," Ricky said. "One of us crawls down, we pass the body down. That person waits, we overtake, repeat."

"I'm not letting you touch this gun."

"For god's sake, lady, unload the piece of shit."

She was doing it again, wasn't she? Being stupid-stubborn. She could tell from how Vit was looking at her. She sighed. "Right."

She lowered the gun to Vit while Ricky scrambled down a body-length, where he received his buddy's boots.

Xiao climbed down the edge of the ladder, past them all. She watched with her heart in her teeth as Vit passed the gun to the pirate and then followed her path on the side of the ladder.

Ricky held the gun by the middle, using it as a handle. He handed it down to her. Maybe he was all right.

"This guy pretty special to you?" Xiao huffed, as he crawled down past her.

"He's a fucking asshole," Ricky said.

Xiao laughed. Okay, then. She liked the guy.

* * *

Lottie didn't register who found her, who turned her around like a globe without a stand.

"Are you okay?" Of course not.

"Are you injured?"

Lottie knew she should answer, or they'd waste time looking for wounds. She managed a slurred, "Leave me."

They didn't leave her. They tugged her back to the hub room and made her climb the ladder down.

She considered letting go, falling. How far would she get before the spin knocked her into a wall or someone caught her? Probably not far enough.

She was led, unresisting, back to her bunk, and crawled in to sleep.

She dreamed about drowning.

* * *

The bed depressed. A heavy hand settled on her. "Hey."

Saravit.

"You need to sit up. I have some medicine for you. It'll help you feel better."

“You have other people to help.”

“Yes, and the sooner you take your medicine, the sooner I can help them, right?”

She hated that he was right and didn’t even sound smug about it.

He supported her as she scooted up in her bed to sit. She accepted the medicine. She accepted the water.

“I killed a man,” she said, to hear it said. There was something contradictory in the sound. Like she was punishing herself and bragging about it at the same time.

“Are you sure about that?”

He was smiling gently, teasing her. This was no teasing matter!

Saravit shrugged. “The security chief is doing a full investigation. A marshal is on her way from Mars. No one has said anything about anyone killing anyone, least of all you.”

“I closed a bulkhead on a pirate. It crushed his leg. People will say I did it because I’m crazy, won’t they? But it wasn’t like the things I do when I’m manic. It was a decision. A sober decision.”

“No one is saying anything about you, I promise, other than that you are a hero for restarting the power plant. The director wants to give you a formal commendation. Quite a change from two days ago, huh?”

“But what about the pirate?”

“The odds are good that he’s okay.”

Lottie didn’t feel lucky enough to trust odds. “Did people die? Someone died, didn’t they?”

His face was unreadable a moment. That was a yes, then. “There’ll be an all-staff meeting. And a memorial. You don’t need to know all the details right now.”

She wanted to ask specifically about her roommate. Julie wasn’t in her bunk. She had a vague memory of her being in particular danger. Someone was going to get a memorial. At least one someone. “The bulkheads shouldn’t close on people.” It felt like shifting the blame.

He squeezed her hand. “The station is designed to protect the many at the expense of the few. Do you feel any better now?”

“No,” she said, but she was sitting up on her own, which was a sign of recovery.

“Come see me as soon as you can. I’ll be in my office until 1800.”

He stood. She rolled into the warm depression he’d left behind. He ruffled her hair. He left.

* * *

Lottie awoke, vaguely aware that she smelled. She should take a bath.

That . . . brought problematic memories. Also, she had no idea where her shower kit was. She peeked across the room. Julie’s bed was made, her stuff put away. Had she returned and left, or had someone else done it? Lottie rolled the other way and checked the clock. It was almost noon.

Her stomach made a low, plaintive gurgle. Weren’t people who did and saw awful things supposed to lose their appetites? Her stomach had no conscience.

She put on a clean uniform and slippers. She stopped by the shower room, and her basket was there, minus her toothbrush, on the bench where people left forgotten belongings so others could find them.

The little wire basket seemed a forgotten comrade from a long-ago war. She put coconut oil on her hands, rubbing it in. Then she sprayed on some deodorant and brought the basket back to her room, taking the time to go the proper, long way around anti-spin. She crossed one hundred and sixty bulkhead joints and was aware of each one.

A crew was replacing the emergency lights outside her room. They stopped their work as Lottie walked by, but they didn’t say anything. They looked like they wanted to ask her questions, like she knew some answer they had to give on a quiz.

It was creepy. She went straight downstairs after stashing her things.

Outside the cafeteria, a janitor in biohazard gear scrubbed a bulkhead groove.

Lottie half ran the rest of the way to the infirmary.

How different the scene was from the last time she’d been there. No mess of supplies on the floor. It was clean and bustling. Nurses and med techs ran back and forth, including a few

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biology researchers in scrubs. One of these stopped Lottie in the door. “Can I help you?”

“I was wondering if there was a pirate named Tejas—?”

A nurse gestured from the workstation. “That’s Lottie. She’s supposed to see Saravit.”

“Yes, but . . .”

Too late, she was hustled to the soft pink partition. Saravit stood up. On the sofa opposite him sat Xiao, unrecognizable in her non-duty clothes. When Xiao looked up, her eyes were wet with tears.

“Lottie,” Saravit said. “I’m so sorry. We were already talking. Could you come back in a few minutes?”

“No.” Xiao rubbed the heel of her hand under her eyes. “Let her stay. I’m done with my blubbering for the week.”

Saravit looked like a dancer who had forgotten his choreography, hands at both sides, like he was trying to figure out which way to jump. “Would you . . . like to talk together? About what you both experienced?”

Talk? With Xiao?

Xiao held her hand to Lottie. “Come on, girl. There’s room on the couch.”

“What about Tejas?” Lottie asked.

There was an awkward pause.

Saravit spoke very slowly and carefully. “Tejas . . . was the pirate you injured?”

“His name was Tejas. And there was another man, Ricky, who helped me start the power plant.”

Xiao, alarmingly, laughed. She patted the sofa cushion next to her. “Tejas’s fine! Shit, I carried him half the way myself. He’s in the other room. Oh, Lottie. You have no idea. Ricky’s locked up in a storage closet waiting for the marshal to collect him. Poor bastard. Oh, I’m so glad to hear you say that. It’s stupid, but you get friendly with someone when you help them carry a body. You’ll talk to the marshal, yeah? Help us get him off the hook?”

“I . . . yes?”

“You are a gem, Lottie. A real fucking heroine.”

Lottie sat down, dazed as Xiao launched into a story. A story about Lottie. About Lottie the heroine. “And she looks at me, dead serious, and says, ‘I’m going to send it a signal. *With my toothbrush.*’”

Was that really her? Funny? Clever? “Let’s never do that again,” Lottie said, and Xiao raised her arm, letting Lottie fall against her in a hug.

Marie Vibbert has sold over seventy short stories now, including multiple appearances in Analog, F&SF, and Lightspeed. Her debut novel, Galactic Hellcats—a bout an all-lady biker gang in outer space rescuing a gay prince—came out this March and was called “a rip-roaring space heist” by Publisher’s Weekly.