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Curse of the Altered Moon

Altered Moon Series: Book Two

Written by

AZ Kelvin

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~I dedicate this book to my late father, Bill Lee~
My dad's dreams were never mine.
My dreams were never his.
Thank goodness that didn't matter to either of us!
~I love you, Pop...always will~

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Chapter One

Beads of sweat stood out just below Star Pilot Gina Riley's eyes and lower lip as she focused her attention on maneuvering the *Altered Moon* through a series of tunnels barely big enough to fly the ship through. 'Oh yeah, big enough to fly a battle cruiser through,' their allegedly reliable source had told her. Tuffy Polenz was known to embellish upon details now and then if it would glean a few more coins for his purse.

"I'm gonna bitch-slap that bastard Tuffy, next time I see him," Gina grumbled through clenched teeth.

"Easy, G, we're down to a meter and a half on the port side," Science Officer Boss Keltzer read from his sensor screen. "One-point-seven on the starboard. Three-point-six to the dorsal fin. Ten-point-four meters below."

Captain CJ Evermore sat at the command station and watched the tactical overlay on the main viewer. "Ahead slow, G, looks like we have a bottleneck coming up."

The head-on silhouette of the *Altered Moon* was basically a triangle with the two wings and the dorsal fin making up the three points. The length of the ship from bow to stern was about two-thirds of the distance, wingtip to wingtip. While nimble and quick in open space, the *Altered Moon* wasn't exactly made for flight in tight spaces.

"Roll one hundred ten degrees to port and drop z minus four meters." CJ studied the projected diagram of the tunnel layout.

"Answering one-ten roll to port and drop four."

Gina maneuvered the ship as CJ ordered so it fit within the confines of the tunnel and could continue a hundred

meters or so further on. The tunnel curved to the right and out of sight, but the scanners showed that it narrowed even further.

“Bring us to a dead stop at the curve and we’ll do a deep scan of the next section,” CJ said to Gina.

“Roger that.”

“Science Officer, deep scan, if you please.”

“Already on it. Deep scan commencing.”

The tactical display updated as the scanners plotted out the tunnel dimensions. A mutual groan came from the bridge crew as they saw the dimensions shrink to smaller than the ship was wide.

“GABI?” CJ called into the comms.

“Here, Captain.”

“You and Cal are going to have to stand by. We’ve run into a snag.”

“Understood, standing by.”

CJ got up from the command station and walked up to stand next to Gina at flight control. They watched the screen as the scan completed as far as it could through the dense rock walls of the tunnels. The wireframe structure on the tactical display representing the tunnel dimensions continued to get smaller as the scanners plotted farther in. He looked over at Gina after absorbing the new data. “Kinda tight, huh?”

“Yup.”

“Up for it?”

“Yup.”

“Okay. Boss, keep an eye on those screens.” CJ returned to the command station. “Switch viewer to starboard cam. Gina, spin us ninety degrees to port, lateral port thrusters. Keep it real slow and take us sideways down the tunnel.”

“Copy that.” She hoped her captain didn’t have more confidence in her abilities as star pilot than she deserved.

“Captain—?” Boss asked hesitantly.

“Only as far as the next section, Boss,” CJ reassured him. “If it doesn’t get better, we back off and send in *Moonshadow* to recon the rest of the tunnel.”

“We need the dark matter beams to get GABI and Cal into the chamber,” Boss stated the obvious.

“Yes, according to Tuffy. We’ve come this far, we’re not leaving without at least seeing if it’s worth coming back.”

“You’re not wrong there, Seedge.” Boss checked his display panel. “Seven meters now below, six meters above.”

“Steady as she goes, G,” CJ said.

“Aye, sir.” Gina slowly slipped the ship sideways down the narrow tunnel.

Gina used short pulses from the port thrusters to move the *Altered Moon* little by little down the tunnel. She didn’t want to build up too much momentum in case she had to come to a quick stop to avoid hitting something unforeseen.

“Another bottleneck coming up, Captain,” Boss read from the detailed scan on his console.

“All stop,” CJ ordered.

“Answering all stop.” Gina fired the starboard thrusters to arrest the sideways momentum of the ship and to bring her to a stop.

“Run a deep scan, Boss, and bring up a three-dimensional readout of the immediate vicinity.”

“Coming up now.” Boss initiated the scan and displayed the generated results of the bottleneck on the main viewer.

CJ leaned forward in the captain's chair to place his right elbow on his knee; he covered his lips with his fingers as he set his chin on his palm heel. He studied the readout, absorbing every protuberance, every contour, every angle, hoping for an answer to be there somewhere.

"Boss, can you shade the open areas with grey?" CJ asked.

"Yeah, sure," Boss said with a slight question in his voice. He made an adjustment on his console and the open areas of the display took on a translucent grey color.

"Now, can you overlay a three-dimensional silhouette of the *Moon* on it?"

Boss made a few more adjustments and an outline of the *Altered Moon* appeared on the screen as well.

"Move it through the tunnel display and alter x-, y-, and z-axes where necessary."

Boss fiddled with some settings and the image of the *Altered Moon* began to slowly move along the simulated tunnel. The crew watched carefully as the display flashed red at points where the simulated ship collided with the tunnel walls. The outline of the ship would stop and readjust its position until it found a way past the obstruction. More than a dozen such adjustments were necessary to weave their way past the bottleneck, theoretically. Bumping up against a wall in a simulation, however, wouldn't tear parts of a ship.

"Deep scan shows a large cavern on the other side of the bottleneck, Captain," Boss reported optimistically. "And, it appears to be the end of the road. Readout shows no other exits. We'll have to come back out this way," Boss added with raised eyebrows and a gleam in his eye. "One wall reads flat and smooth."

CJ shot a look over his shoulder at Boss with his own eyebrows raised. "Can we hit the wall with the moonbeams from here?"

"No, sir, 'fraid not."

"Gina, what do you think?" CJ asked the star pilot.

"I think it's a trap, sir."

"How so?"

"I think it's a lure to get ships in that cavern then seal off the exit somehow. Trapped with no way out and it wouldn't take much to close us in. We barely fit through as it is."

"Yes, that's an excellent point, G," CJ sat and thought for a moment of what they'd already survived.

Things had gone well for CJ and the crew of the *Altered Moon* in the two years since their involvement in exposing the Kang invasion. Several jobs, most of them legal actually, had put West Becreth Trading Company in a favorable financial position. Boss and Gina's legitimate trading company covered up how the crew 'covertly acquired' rare artifacts. The crew kept the secret and everybody got a cut. Sweet deal: just don't end up caught or dead.

He could ask the crew for opinions all day long, but in the end it would be his decision, his responsibility.

CJ poked the engineering icon on the comms panel. "Chief?"

"Here, Captain, go ahead." Chief Engineer Katy Latimer answered his hail.

"Things are getting tight. Be ready for anything," CJ advised her.

"Roger that."

CJ poked the med bay icon. "Cat, will you come up and take tactical?"

“Aye, sir, on my way,” came the answer over the comms.

“Boss, bring every camera online. I want eyes everywhere.”

Boss worked the instruments on the science station control panel for a moment. “All cameras are up, Captain. Scanners and perimeter sensors are online.”

The hatch of the bridge pressure door slid aside and Chief Medical Officer Zhu Katsu stepped in. She greeted the others as she took her position at the tactical station usually manned by Tactical Officer Warren Caltrop; he was currently on special assignment with the resident self-aware artificially intelligent entity ‘GABI,’ who was also the ship’s operations officer.

“Thank you, Cat. Bring the cannons online and stand by to blast anything that threatens to impact the ship,” CJ said, as she came in.

“Understood.”

“Boss, you call out the adjustments. Gina, just focus on maneuvering. Everyone ready?” CJ scanned the bridge to make sure everyone was eyes up and aware. He got two nods from Boss and Cat and an “aye, sir” from Gina, who was facing away from him. “G, super slow to starboard. Boss, you’re on.”

“Roger that, Cap. G, pitch up twenty-two degrees in ten seconds, five seconds, three—two—one—now.”

“Pitching up twenty-two degrees.” Gina rotated the bow of the ship up to the mark.

“Roll eight degrees to port and drop two meters,” Boss read off the real-time diagram.

“Rolling port eight and dropping two.” Gina maneuvered the *Altered Moon* so the right wing tip and the dorsal fin both cleared rocky outcroppings.

“All stop,” Boss called out.

“Answering all stop.”

Boss studied the diagram for a moment. “Six degrees starboard yaw.”

“Roger, six degrees starboard yaw.” Gina put the ship into a slow flat spin six degrees to the right. The left wingtip moved around a tight corner, which left the ship in a short upward-angled chimney-style passageway.

“Okay, G,” Boss said. “We need a very clean eighty-two meters to the dorsal starboard quarter. No room for movement fore or aft.”

“Understood.” Gina had already gone over the necessary thruster patterns in her head, which at her level of skill as a star pilot, were second nature almost to the point of being subconscious. She knew her job and her ship, and she knew exactly what she needed to do. She pushed the ship up and sideways with the ventral and port thrusters while maintaining attitude control and checking her speed with the dorsal and starboard thrusters. Gina held the ship in a perfectly static position while she slipped the *Moon* eighty-two meters up the angled passageway and brought her to a stop.

“That’s my girl,” Boss said quietly.

“Nicely done, G,” said CJ.

Gina resettled herself in the pilot’s seat, “What’s next?” she asked.

“The crux, actually,” Boss responded. “We need starboard yaw two hundred-sixty-three degrees, pitch down thirty meters, and roll to port fifteen degrees...all at the same time. Then slide to port twenty-two meters, flat spin to port

thirty degrees, move forward one hundred and eighty-eight meters, and drop down into the cavern.” Boss finished with a ‘that’s all there is to it’ tone, which earned him a sour look from Gina over her shoulder. “You’ve got this, G, you’re the best star pilot there is.”

“That is without a doubt,” CJ added.

“Okay, kids, here we go.” Gina mustered all the skill and patience she had to maneuver the ship through the odd-shaped opening. The *Altered Moon* moved through it with little room to spare, as Gina deftly tilted, rotated, and spun the ship around the tight corners. The problem was she would have to do it all over again on the way out.

“Room up front’s pretty tight, Captain,” Boss said.

“Main view screen forward.” CJ leaned back as the image of the rock wall completely filled the view screen. “Reduce magnification.”

“Already at zero mag.”

“Oh...,”

The wall seemed to get even closer as the ship slipped around the sharp rocky corner.

The wall fell away a bit at first, then to a semi comfortable distance, as Gina finished the maneuver and brought the ship into position to drop down into the cavern. The tension on the bridge eased as they went lower and Gina moved the *Moon* into the spacious cavern. She brought the ship to a dead stop a hundred meters away from an unusually smooth and flat surface at the far end of the cavern. She set the autopilot to station keeping and leaned back, rolling her head around to unknot the muscles of her shoulders and massaging her neck with her hands as she did so.

“Thank you, G,” CJ said, as he leaned forward on the armrests of the captain’s chair. “You’re the best pilot in the business.”

“Thanks, Captain, but I’ll hold that in reserve for when we make it out.”

Now for the next step of the plan, which was somewhat unusual in nature and had been a bone of contention between Cal, the one who came up with it, and Cat, who thought it to be reckless and foolhardy.

The obstacle they needed to overcome, other than just getting the ship inside the planetoid, was ‘The Wall’ itself, an apparently seamless wall of solid rock. Unnaturally smooth and flat, The Wall gleamed in the ship’s floodlights. No sensors could read beyond it and the precarious nature of the surrounding rock made such destabilizing actions like drilling and detonations out of the question. Who would build and hide such a wall and what was behind it had been the subject of many stories and speculations. The curious nature of The Wall had been curbed by story after story of the bad things that happened to any person or crew that obtained the map of its location, either through purchase or purloin. CJ and the crew bought the map, regardless of it being cursed or not, from Tuffy Polenz, thinking they had just the ship to deal with The Wall.

The unstable rock and confined space were not the only things that kept fortune hunters from trying their luck against The Wall; no one even knew if there was another side. Maybe it was just solid rock. The truth of the matter was people were just plain scared of the place’s reputation.

Cal had told CJ if they could make a big enough hole in The Wall with the dark matter Moonbeams, they could launch someone in a thruster suit through the hole into the chamber behind it and that someone could then recon the area and send information back out to the ship. That someone, of course, had to be Cal. Why? Because, he explained with typical Warren Caltrop wisdom, ‘Only someone with an ear nubbin pierced with a gold hoop could pull something like this off.’

The description fit Cal himself to a T, due to the loss of his left ear and eye in a battle between the Arzian Alliance and the Kang Armada several years ago. The eye had been replaced with a silver cybernetic implant and, with his characteristic flair of personality, he had what was left of his ear pierced and fitted with a small gold hoop.

The only glitch in the plan, and Cat made sure everyone was aware of it, was that no one knew what would happen to a Human being who’d been exposed to any concentration of dark matter. Chances were nothing would happen, given that items of solid nature like missiles and such had passed through without a problem after the dark matter dissipated.

Cat just didn’t like the man she cared about being the guinea pig in this experiment. GABI had opted to go along as backup in case anything happened to Cal, which made Cat wonder why Cal had to go at all. She knew at the same time this was what he lived for. He was the classic thrill seeker and she loved him for it, but it didn’t keep her from expressing her concerns to CJ when the plan was first hatched.

“Cal,” CJ called into the comms unit, “we are in position and ready to begin work on The Wall.”

“Roger that, Cap. We’re good to go on your command.”

“Very good, stand by.” CJ threw a sly look at Cat. “You want to give Cal’s EV suit a final inspection, Doctor?”

“Aye, sir.” She could barely contain her smile.

“All right, Boss, run a complete detailed scan of the entire cavern.” CJ looked over the image of The Wall in the view screen. “Let’s see if we can solve this mystery.”

~~*

Chapter Two

While CJ and the others analyzed the cavern walls, Cat went back to the shuttle bay to see Cal off on his mission. Cal was going over the equipment again to keep busy while he and GABI waited for the 'go ahead' from the bridge to let the games begin, as Boss was fond of saying. He looked up and smiled as Cat came through the hatchway. "Zhu! How are ya, hon?"

"I'll be better when this wacko caper of yours is done and over with." She checked the thruster suit's life-support systems now for the hundred and first time.

"Agh, you worry too much." Cal waved his hand downward to play off her concern. "GABI will get us back in two shakes if anything happens to me. Won't ya, Gabs?"

"Most assuredly, Cal." GABI's voice seemed to come out of thin air.

Cat looked around and didn't see GABI's hover drone anywhere in the shuttle bay. She looked over at Cal with a narrow-eyed questioning look. "Where is she?"

"Okay, Gabs, you can come out," Cal said with a sly smile. A shimmer in the air slowly dissipated leaving GABI's hover drone hanging in plain sight. "Cool, huh?"

"What's cool?" She didn't catch what the excitement was about.

"Well...", he gestured at GABI's drone, "we found out GABI can record and project what's behind her in real time." He waited, presumably to see if that caught on, which it didn't. "She can disappear, visually, at least. I mean she still puts out an energy signature, but the drone itself is invisible."

Cat raised her eyebrows and nodded her head slowly. "Yeah that's cool, Cal."

“Well, I guess you gotta be a tech weenie,” Cal said.

Cat was thinking something about boys and their toys when a strange idea snuck into her head. “How big of an area can you project?” she asked GABI.

“I am limited to a twenty-seven-cubic-meter area in order to maintain projected resolution.”

“More than enough to hide the drone,” Cal said.

“Yes, but what about someone standing next to her?” Cat asked. “GABI can you turn on your ‘no see ‘em’ field’ again, please?”

“Of course, Doctor.” GABI turned invisible again.

“The *no see ‘em field*, that is perfect! Mmm—,” Cal took Cat’s face in his hands and kissed her, smooching loudly, “I just love you.”

The doctor’s well-maintained demeanor slipped a bit as she blushed from Cal’s admission of love for her. She smiled slyly, as she slipped from his grasp and sidled toward GABI’s location, and then it was as though she had stepped behind a curtain. She was gone!

“No shit! Now *that* is cool! Oh, man! The fun we’re gonna have with that!”

Cat’s image showed up here and there as she moved around inside the no see ‘em field.

“Hey, I can see you—sometimes.”

“Must be when I move behind the drone and GABI picks me up on the scan,” Cat said. “GABI, can you fix that?”

“One moment.” A few seconds later, Cat disappeared again.

“Ha! Stellar!” Cal seemed ecstatic.

“Shuttle bay, this is the bridge.” CJ’s call came over the comms unit.

“Cal here, Cap, go ahead.”

“We’re powering down and engaging the moonbeams. Prep for EVA.”

“Understood, Cap.”

GABI shut down the no see ’em field and moved over to the thruster suit to settle onto an anchor point Cal had installed to fit GABI’s hover drone. The interior lighting turned to a hard whitish-blue as the ship shifted to the Dark Matter Engine and the captain began to erode the cavern wall with beams of concentrated dark matter they dubbed the ‘Moonbeams.’ Cat walked over to Cal and took his hand in both of hers. His hands were always so warm and hers were as cold as an asteroid. She held his hand to her chest and reached up to stroke his face. The blue lighting made his cybernetic eye look like a silvery-blue ornament.

“You be careful out there.”

“Always!” he cheerfully kissed her. “I’ll see ya on the flip side.” He used one of Boss’ ancient Earth phrases. She knew Cal had no idea what it meant, but he liked the sound of it and had adopted it for his own.

Cat looked at him for a second longer then let her cool-headed doctor persona slip back into place. She turned and left the shuttle bay, shutting and sealing the pressure door as she left. By the time she got back to the bridge, the process of eroding the cavern wall was underway.

The Moonbeams originated from a pair of dark matter emitters mounted to the front of both wings. The emitters focused concentrated dark matter particles on a relatively small area of one to two dozen meters per emitter. Dark matter’s natural tendency to fill any and all gaps at the atomic level was discovered, developed, and utilized by Nelson

Moon, shipwright and designer of the *Altered Moon*. When the focused dark matter beam contacted the surface of a physical object, the dark matter would infiltrate the molecular structure, break the material down into smaller individual particles, and then separate them.

Nelson once told CJ, “Imagine that you pick up a clot of dried dirt, one piece of dried dirt in your hand. Now you crush the dirt with your hand and the clot breaks into a thousand smaller particles, some big, some very tiny. You have broken the molecular bond of the one bigger piece and now have many smaller pieces. That is what focused dark matter does—it infiltrates and breaks apart. It does not disintegrate.”

CJ thought of that conversation at this very moment, while he watched the Moonbeams work over the surface of the odd cavern wall. A small cloud of particles began to form around the target area that obscured the view of both impact sites.

“Overlay a particle scan,” CJ said to Boss.

“Roger that.” Boss made the necessary adjustments to bring up the display. A confusing matrix grid display appeared showing the positions of thousands of particles; they slowly expanded around the target area. A steady buildup of the particle cloud crept its way back along the stream of dark matter from the Moonbeams toward the ship.

“What’s causing that?” CJ asked.

“The majority of the ejected matter is being released straight off The Wall,” Boss answered. “Without the influence of atmosphere, the particles will continue to advance unless acted upon by an outside force.”

“Any threat to us?”

“Unknown. Essentially it is planetoid dust. Makeup is—one moment,” Boss ran several quick scans, each one making him frown a little bit more. “I take that back, I’m getting readings on something under the rock. One moment.” He ran some additional scans on the new material.

“Captain, I have a bad feeling about this.” Gina spun around in the pilot’s chair to face him. “This whole score got off to a bad start with having to deal with that tart-scarfing idiot, Polenz. We travel all the way out to this forgotten corner of the cosmos only to find the ‘monstrous tunnel that we can fly straight into’ is no more than a tunnel fit for a worm, and now the rock wall we came to beam our way through isn’t rock after all. What a surprise! This is fu—”

“Captain.” Boss quickly cut in, most likely to bring the attention back to the expanding cloud of fine debris, but also effectively cutting off Gina’s minor rant. The passage of time hadn’t been able to tame the fiery passion of the Irish one bit. “Only the outer surface is rock. The substructure is something completely different. The inner layer is a synthetic framework filled with a silicon and graphite alloy, lightweight and very strong. It’s laced with small metallicrylic spheres clustered in thousands of groups, containing a number of elements and minerals: sodium, nitrogen, oxygen, hydrogen, potassium, magnesium. I’m even picking up traces of carbonado.” Boss pondered the odd readout.

“Black diamonds?” CJ looked at Boss in surprise. “Why would someone put black diamonds inside a wall?”

“A wall full of potentially explosive materials.”

“Anything on thermal or spectral analysis?”

“Checking—no, the cloud is growing quickly, though. There’s a buildup of particles now that’s lighting up the screen with feedback. They’re deflecting the scans.” Boss

worked to clear up the readout. “I can’t get a reading. Visual is obscured now, too. The cloud is too dense to see anything.”

“Blast! Okay, shut down the emitters.” CJ set his lips and sighed through his nose. He was beginning to appreciate Gina’s point of view. He didn’t believe in curses or the supernatural, but Gina was right—this score had been a pain in the ass since the onset.

They finally made it to their isolated and mysterious destination, squeezed through the just barely big enough tunnels to reach the objective, only to hit yet another snag. Plan A was to make a hole in the wall with the Moonbeams big enough for Cal and GABI to make it through with a thruster suit to recon what was on the other side. That idea had not only come up short, it seemed to have failed utterly.

CJ poked the shuttle bay icon on the comms panel. “GABI, Cal, I’m calling the game. Stand down from EVA operations and report to the bridge.”

“Serious? Okay, copy that, Cap,” Cal replied.

“What about different scans, Boss?” CJ asked.

“I can’t break through the interference; the cloud has completely engulfed us now. It’s like a bazillion tiny mirrors floating all around us and bouncing our scans in a thousand different directions. It’s weird. Sometimes they seem to interconnect with each other for a second then break apart again.”

“A bazillion—that many?” CJ smiled, as he yanked his science officer’s chain.

“Yes.” Boss peeked around from behind his readout console. “Give or take a smoot.”

“You two are awfully lighthearted considering we’re in the middle of a ‘bazillion mirror’ shitstorm,” Gina chided them

both. "Sirs," she added after she got the 'commanding officer look' from each of them.

Cal, Cat, and GABI stepped onto the bridge just as CJ poked the engineering icon. "Chief, we're going to main power. Come up to the bridge for a sitrep."

"Copy that. On the way."

"All right, secure from dark matter operations and bring up main power," CJ said. "Let's shed some light on this crud and see what we can see."

The light from the *Altered Moon's* exterior floods and running lights was reflected back at them from, just as Boss had put it, 'a bazillion tiny mirrors,' all spinning and swirling with seemingly random inertia. It was mesmerizing; the chaotic mass flashed in an ever-shrinking pattern. Just as CJ wondered why the chaos had a pattern, the swirling mass of particles all lined up perfectly, closing a circuit of energy between the lights of the ship and the material of The Wall. A flash of energy sped from the ship and disappeared into The Wall where the Moonbeams had made a hole through the outer layer.

GABI called out in alarm, "Captain! Imminent detonation! Energizing defense fields!" GABI barely had time to get the words out before the entire cavern wall erupted in a massive explosion. The force of the blast propelled the pieces of black diamond and rock wall through space at tremendous velocities in all directions. The hailstorm of tiny diamond missiles tore through the *Altered Moon's* hull like buckshot through an old tin can.

One projectile pierced the main view port, passed millimeters from Gina's head, continued to zoom past CJ, ricocheted off the bulkhead, and shot around the bridge once. Only half a second passed before hull breach and perimeter

alerts started to scream out their alarms. In the next half second, the shockwave from the blast threw the ship upward and to the left before slamming her backward hard into the far wall of the cavern. The brief inferno burned so intently it pushed the damage control systems past their limits, which forced overloaded circuits to short out power junctions throughout the ship. White-hot bits of burning chemicals coursed brightly through the dark cavern and melted their way into anything they landed on, whether it was rock wall or hull plating.

The crew was tossed around the ship like candy pieces inside a piñata. The ship itself slowly spun forward and to the right rebounding from the impact with The Wall. CJ shook the stars out of his head and got up on his knees. There were bloody scratches on his right hand and forearm and the back of his head hurt. He got to his feet and quickly scanned the bridge. Emergency alarms were blaring and sparks and small fires sprang out from wall panels. Boss and Cal were down, Cat was moving, Gina was getting up, and GABI was okay. He turned off the alarms, which left them with the pop and snap of the electrical fires and the high-pitched scream of the air as it was being sucked out through the hole in the view port.

“GABI, close emergency bulkheads!” CJ grabbed an emergency breach seal from the maintenance locker and ran to the view port. “Gina, you need to get us under control before we hit something else!”

“Emergency bulkheads are in place, Captain.”

“Copy that.” CJ turned the breach seal over, pulled the activator tab, and yanked the protective cover off when the indicator turned red. The seal gave off an unpleasant acrid odor as he slapped it over the hissing hole in the view port. The chemical process would hold the seal in place until they

could repair the damage in dry dock. He went over to Cat and helped her into a chair, then poked at the 1MC icon on the comms panel. “Katy? Katy? Chief Latimer respond!”

“I’m here, CJ—I’m here—still in engineering,” Katy said, panting breathlessly over the comms.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to need a lot of help down here.”

CJ took a nanosecond to be thankful she was alive. “Copy that, I’ll be there when I can, bridge out.” He turned to Cat. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay, Captain, just shook up.” She moved her body around to find the sore areas.

“You sure?” he looked into her eyes. “Okay, then check Cal and I’ll check on Boss.” He went over to where Boss lay crumpled up against the wall, a fair distance from his suspensor chair. The big man’s forehead almost touched his knees. His left arm was under his body and stuck out behind him; his right arm was thrown over his legs.

“Boss, can you hear me? Boss?” CJ knelt beside the man who had become his best friend over the past two years. “Oh, man.”

“GABI take flight control!” Gina said. She burst out of the pilot seat and hopped over the railing around the science station, landing next to CJ. “Bernie?”

“Gina, do not move him!!” Cat called from across the bridge where she brought Cal around. “Captain, carefully check for a pulse!”

CJ softly felt Boss’s wrist for a pulse. He cursed himself as a stupid idiot for not thinking of that in the first place, and with great relief he found one. “He’s alive.”

“Be right there,” she answered back.

After she cleared Cal, Cat came over and ran a med scanner over Boss' body, reading off the results as she went. "Okay, okay, okay. The position is extreme, but there is no spinal damage. The neck is okay. His left shoulder is dislocated, and he has a concussion. Okay, the spine is clear. We need to roll him. Captain, you cradle his head between your forearms and put your hands out to support his shoulders and back as we roll him over. Gina, get right here below his hips on both sides. I'll guide the arm out from under him. We're going to lift up, carefully straighten him out, and then roll him over on his back. Clear?" Cat looked up at both of them to make sure they understood what to do. CJ and Gina were both clear and ready.

"Okay, go," Cat said.

The three of them lifted the big man up as gently as possible. Cat straightened his legs and torso as they rolled him onto his back. A feat easier said than done when Bernard Keltzer weighed in at about one hundred thirty kilos these days. "Okay, hold on to him and don't let him move."

Cat moved Boss's left arm away from his body while she kept his elbow bent and his wrist straight up from the floor. CJ winced in sympathy as she gently pulled Boss' upper arm straight out away from his body while rotating his arm so the forearm and wrist were now flat on the deck with the hand palm up, like he was throwing a baseball. Some small careful wiggles and the arm slipped back into normal position and Boss' glenohumeral joint was once more intact.

"We need a stretcher," Cat said, as she ran a medical scanner across Boss' abdomen.

"I'll be back in a flash." CJ stood to go, but Gina laid a hand on his arm.

“No, Captain, you take care of the ship. I’ll get the stretcher.” She gave his arm a quick squeeze and left for med bay.

“GABI, drop any bulkheads to med bay,” CJ said.

“Aye, Captain.”

“You okay here, Doc? What about Cal?”

“Yeah, I’m good, sir.” She took CJ’s hand to clean and wrap the cuts on his arm. He started to complain, but she shushed him. “It’ll take two minutes. Cal took a pretty good blow to the head, but there’s no concussion, so he’ll be fine.”

“Good. I’ll leave them in your care, Doctor, and see to my ship.” He stood after Cat’s work on him was done.

“Aye, sir. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Just get these two back on their feet. We’re going to need everybody.”

Gina returned right then with the maglev medical stretcher. The three of them moved Boss onto it and Cat hit the power button. The stretcher rose from the floor to hover a meter or so above it.

“Gina, help Cal down to med bay, then get with GABI and run a damage assessment on the flight systems. I’ll find Katy and we’ll check the engines and life support.”

“Ohhhh, my head...what happened?” Cal asked, still groggy after being thrown against the bulkhead.

“Come on, I’ll fill you in on the way.” Gina took him through the hatch. Cat, with Boss on the stretcher, followed them out, which left CJ and GABI alone together on the bridge.

“GABI, you have what’s left of the conn,” CJ said wistfully. “Keep us in position and don’t let us hit anything. Just...do better than I did and we’ll be all right.” He turned to start what was bound to be a very long repair process.

“Captain, may I point something out?”

“Yeah sure, GABI, go ahead,” CJ answered, although he didn’t really feel like getting a pep talk on discouragement from his synthetic operations officer at the moment.

“The Wall is open.”

~~*

Chapter Three

GABI's simple statement peeled out like a bell in the night, piercing CJ's veil of disappointment. The Wall was open. He turned slowly to look at the view screen at GABI's station. The Wall was a ways off, but clearly there was a hole all the way through it, and by the looks of it their shuttle, *Moonshadow*, could fly right in. They had done it. They had pierced the infamous Wall. Now all they had to do was explore the chamber beyond, secure any and all artifacts or treasure, and make it out alive. CJ tore his attention away from the tempting hole in The Wall. He knew that he had people and a ship to tend to before he did anything else.

"GABI, bring us in as close as you can and run every scan in the book. I want a detailed analysis as soon as I get back."

"It will be ready, Captain."

CJ left the bridge in GABI's hands and made his way down to engineering, taking stock of the ship's condition as he went through the various bays and compartments. med bay was in one piece. He could see Cat working near Boss' bed as Gina and Cal came out through the door.

"How is he?" CJ asked Gina.

"There's some swelling of the brain," she said with a slight catch in her voice and small head nod. "But, Cat says he's gonna be fine, so Cal and I were just about to start the damage analysis."

"He's in good hands, G. You two start with starboard side outer compartments. I'll take the portside after Katy and I check the engines and life support," CJ said. "Hull breaches are priority one." He turned to Warren. "You okay, Cal?"

“Aye, Cap. Locked, cocked, and ready to rock,” he replied with a gleam in one eye and CJ’s reflection in the other.

“Very well, carry on.” CJ smiled at Cal’s indomitable character. “Gina, situation report every thirty minutes.”

“Roger, sitrep every thirty.” She and Cal started down the corridor.

“Oh, it worked. The Wall is open,” he told them.

Gina and Cal looked at each other when they heard the news and couldn’t help but smile. “Copy that,” Cal said, as he looked back at CJ. “When do we go?”

“Ship repair first, fun later. Carry on,” CJ answered with his own smile. Cal and Gina talked excitedly about the news until they were out of earshot.

CJ continued on to engineering. Along the way, he thought about how lucky they were to be alive. *Luck, huh. I think we stretched it a bit today. More like I stretched it. Lucky no one was killed. Maybe I should have left this one alone. Risk everything we’ve done in the last two years for what? I don’t know if there’s even anything in there.*

CJ’s love for mysteries and the unexplained had been the driving force behind some of West Breth Trading Company’s recent good fortune. Several of the ‘investigations’ yielded not only rare and valuable artifacts, but a few handsome rewards as well for recovering lost or stolen items. After only two years as captain of the *Altered Moon*, his hunger for action and adventure was nowhere near sated. Boss, Gina, and GABI were the veterans of the crew with ten years aboard and Cat wasn’t too far behind them. CJ, Katy, and Cal had all joined up one way or another around two years ago, just before the thwarted invasion of Human space by the Kang, a hostile alien race of war masters.

CJ and more-than-crewmate Katy Latimer worked together when the Kang attacked the MT&T Super Liner *Istraulis*, which was boarded, looted, and then destroyed. Thousands of people were abducted during the raid, Katy being one of them. CJ saw Katy as she was grabbed by her arm and lifted off the floor by one of the Kang warriors just as the monster fired an energy weapon at him. The concussion of the blast collapsed the corridor around him and CJ was forced to launch in a life pod to escape the destruction of the ship. Fragments of bulkhead framing tore through the outer layer of the life pod as it shot from the jettison port, which caused power overloads and a hull breach. The life pod was picked up by the *Altered Moon* just seconds before CJ's life-support systems failed completely.

Boss was captain of the *Altered Moon* back then with a different crew, half of which betrayed him shortly after that and tried to commandeer the ship. The problem with the crew of the *Moon* started with the rescue of CJ from the damaged life pod jettisoned by the *Istraulis*. The shit hit the fan a few weeks later when Boss decided to make CJ a member of the crew. The mutiny ended up with Gina and Cat set adrift in a life pod, CJ injured and unconscious, Boss shot in the back and left for dead, GABI initiating an emergency self-destruct, and the mutineers killed in a freak shuttle bay accident as they tried to escape before the ship exploded. CJ, an engineer's mate aboard the *Moon* at the time, was made captain by a strange twist of fate as the leader of the mutineers left the doomed ship.

Dylan "Trigger" Treesh, who had taken over command during the mutiny, kicked the unconscious CJ in the head to relieve some of the irritation at having to leave the ship behind and flee for his life. "I guess that makes you captain,

piss-ant," he'd said sarcastically, meaning that CJ was the last one on board and destined to go down with the ship. The main computer system of the *Altered Moon*, in its emotionless way of processing information, took Trigger's statement as a transfer of command authorization to CJ Evermore.

Trigger Treesh would have been amazed, actually irritated more likely, if he knew what his sarcastic remark set into play and how it would change Human history. At the moment of command transfer, the main onboard computer attempted to reset all systems. GABI, who had accessed the drive systems to destroy the ship at Boss Keltzer's last command, was seen as a security threat and attacked by the mainframe's guardian programs.

During the final nanosecond in the battle for bytes, two things happened: the main drive was shut down and the self-destruct was averted, and the grappler arm in the shuttle bay snagged on the outer door. The grappler assembly snapped its anchor bolts and crashed to the far end of the shuttle bay. The shuttle, *Lunar Mare*, was crushed by the crane with all mutinous hands aboard. GABI was never able, or perhaps never willing, to explain just how that happened.

CJ Evermore awoke in a puddle of blood and, with a pounding headache, managed to get Boss Keltzer to the med bay and rescue Gina and Cat with GABI's help. Boss suffered a permanent injury to his spine and gave CJ command of the *Altered Moon*, but stayed on as second in command. To CJ's great amazement and joy, they found Katy Latimer alive and mostly well on Cantankerous Base, an outpost run by none other than the rumored dead shipwright of the *Altered Moon* himself, Nelson Moon. It was here that they had their first encounter with the Keect'na, a race of crystalline beings that were already at war with the omnivorous Kang monsters.

Katy agreed to sign on as chief engineer, as well as Warren Caltrop, who signed on as tactical officer. CJ, together with the new crew of the *Altered Moon* went on in an attempt to discover what happened to the MSL *Istraulis*. Instead, they uncovered a galactic plot between his former employers, Merilee Travel & Transport, and the Kang Armada to enslave the Human race. The discovery sparked an adventure for CJ and the crew that exposed MT&T as traitors to Humankind, brought an end to the Kang invasion, and started an age where Humans were no longer alone in the cosmos.

All of that seemed so long ago now—two years, give or take a month. CJ shook his head and rubbed his face to clear out the ghosts of the past from his head. He had to focus on the here and now to get his ship and crew out of danger. He had cleared his mind by the time he stepped through the hatch to the engineering bay. His eyes moved to the dozens of critical status warning lights that flashed on the ship condition panel. The large panel stretched across most of the wall and displayed status readouts on every compartment of the ship, many of which were red, indicating damaged areas. The indicators that flashed a red circle around them showed the areas where the hull had been breached, the biggest concerns at the moment.

A majority of the breaches lined the front of the main fuselage, the leading edge of the wings, and peppered the ventral hull plating. Various other points indicated power loss or decompressed compartments. CJ crossed his arms heavily and sighed out, “Damn.”

“It’s not all that bad...considering.” Katy seemed to appear out of thin air, standing right next to him.

“Holy jumpin’ catfish! Geez, make some noise next time will ya?” He took Katy in his arms, hugged her tightly, and kissed the top of her head. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“What the hell, Seedge? You just keep on banging up my ship!” She yanked her captain’s chain a bit, just to let him know she still loved him.

“Your ship?” he replied in kind. “I suppose I deserve a ribbing from somebody over this one.”

“What happened out there? A booby trap, best guess,” he said. “Set to go off if anyone penetrated the wall.”

“So we’re in?” She smiled and peered out of the corners of her eyes.

“Yep and still live to tell the tale. We’re lucky the projectiles were black diamonds. They could have torn us apart.”

“Diamonds? Really?” Katy’s interest peaked and her eyebrows wiggled. “Do I get to keep any that I dig out of the hull plating?”

CJ laughed a little and shook his head. “Always looking for that silver lining, aren’t you?”

“Nothing keeps me down, you know that.” A brief shadow crossed her face despite her positive statement. CJ thought of Katy’s robotic arm, which replaced her real one that was crushed by a Kang warrior. Katy patted his chest, gave him a wink and a smile, and went to gather the tools she needed to continue her repairs.

“So how are we?”

“Well, we’ve got some work to do, but, she’ll be right as rain, long as nothing else goes ‘bang’ right away. Main engines are okay. Portside thrusters are down. These breaches are the critical repairs: here, here, and here. They’ll have to be sealed before we can get under way.” She indicated only a few

among the many breaches of the main fuselage shown on the condition panel.

“Gina and Cal are already working in this area, so I’ll get started on the portside repairs.” He plotted out the points on his datpad. “I’ll check back with you in a bit.”

“Roger that.”

The next thirty-six hours crept by as CJ and the crew patched and sealed the small holes left by the high-speed black diamond shrapnel. The repairs weren’t as easy as the bridge view port where the breach was out in the open and easily reached. Most of them required an EV suit and decompressing the adjacent compartment before you could enter and dismantle wall panels just to gain access to the damaged area. The process was time-consuming and tedious. Katy went through behind the other three and repaired or rerouted the power systems as needed, and little by little the indicator lights on the condition panel changed from red to green. The critical repairs necessary to get underway were completed and the repair crew broke for a much-needed rest.

Chief Medical Officer Zhu Katsu was still watchful over Boss’ improving condition, as CJ and Gina came into the med bay. The concussion Boss had suffered caused his brain to swell and his condition to worsen. Cat placed him in a medically induced coma and worked diligently to keep the pressure inside Boss’ head from damaging the brain. Her efforts had paid off. The intracranial pressure had subsided and she’d discontinued the induced coma a few hours ago. Now, it was just a matter of time and recovery. Gina stood over Boss’ bed and stroked his face.

“He’ll be okay, Gina,” Cat said, as she leaned against a different bed looking weary and tired.

Gina walked over and hugged her friend to show how much she appreciated Cat right now. Cat gratefully returned the hug.

“You are my very best friend and I don’t know what we’d do without you,” Gina said without letting her go.

“Me either, Cat,” CJ agreed. “Is there anything you need? What can we do for you?”

“Nothing, thank you, Captain,” Cat answered with a smile at both CJ and Gina. “Boss is past the danger now and I can get some rest. How’s the ship?”

“Holding air,” CJ said optimistically

“That’s a good thing,” Cat returned.

“Yep, yep, we’ve got some dents to pound out yet, but we’re ready for preflight check.” He was still optimistic, but he felt the fatigue he’d held at bay finally creep over him.

“Ungh...” the sound came from Boss as he came out of the anesthetic.

They gathered around his bed as he began to open his eyes. He focused on CJ’s face and drew his eyebrows together. “Who the hell are you?” he seemed alarmed. He saw Gina next. “Gina, thank the Stars! Where’s Trigger?”

CJ drew back with a wounded look on his face. Cat drew in half a breath and held it. Gina turned her head slightly and scowled at Boss out of the corner of her eye. Boss’ look of alarm shifted into a sly smile as he let slip the joke. CJ just shook his head as both he and Cat smiled at their friend’s characteristically jovial behavior. Gina, on the other hand, while visibly happy that Boss was okay, let her ‘Irish’ bubble up at the moment.

“You know”—she planted both hands on her hips and glared at him—“you’re an ass sometimes.”

“Aww, come on, G, I was ju—” Boss tried to say.

“Bernard Ephraim Keltzer! Not everything is a bloody effin’ joke,” she scolded him. “We’ve been bustin’ our asses for two days straight just to keep the air from leaking out into space and you...” Her anger seemed to cool as soon as she locked eyes with him. He was making puppy dog eyes and holding his hand out to her.

“Oh, stop it.” She took a quick swipe at her eyes, as she took his hand and sat beside him on the edge of the bed. “Idiot.”

“I’m glad you’re still with us, Boss.” CJ clapped the man on his shoulder then moved to the door. “I’ll be on the bridge.”

“I’ll be there momentarily, sir,” Gina said.

“Negative. You get some rest. GABI and I can handle preflight, and then I’m hitting the rack for a few hours. We all need the rest. I expect you to be on duty at”—he checked the time—“zero-eight-hundred. That’s six hours from now. Understood? Because that’s when I intend to take *Moonshadow* over and find out what’s on the other side of that wall.”

“It’s open, then?” Boss asked and swung his fist through the air. “Whoo, shut the front hatch!” The effort of which made him dizzy for a second.

“See, just relax,” Cat cautioned Boss.

“That could be tricky flyin’, Captain,” Gina said, not quite innocently. “You should have a fully trained star pilot at the helm.”

“Yes, I should, but I should have her here at this helm, so she can fly in and get my ass outta trouble.”

“Captain,” she resisted.

“Gina,” he insisted.

“Aye, sir.” She reluctantly gave in before he had to make it an order.

“I can help too, Captain,” Boss said, as he tried to sit up.

“No, you can’t,” Cat said so firmly that Boss just lay back in bed with only one small complaint about missing the party. “Twenty-four hours. Not a second sooner.” She crossed her arms, tilted her head, and raised her eyebrows.

CJ leaned toward Boss slightly and put his hand up to the side of his mouth. “Surrender now,” he whispered loudly to tease the unbending doctor. He straightened up and smiled at Cat to soften the joke. “We’ve got it covered for now anyway, my friend. You rest up. Don’t worry, we’ll get you a headset and a monitor so you won’t miss anything.”

“And some popped corn too, then. If I am to have a show, I will need some popped corn,” Boss said, with an important hand flourish.

“I think we can manage that and you’ll be sure to get a visit from our chief engineer if you do,” CJ said. Everyone knew of Katy’s love for popped corn and that she could track it down anywhere on the ship. “Good to see your eyes open, Boss. I’ll check in with you before game time.”

“Thanks, Captain.” Boss held his hand out in a stationary ‘wave’ as CJ turned to leave.

“Bridge, zero-eight-hundred,” CJ said and pointed at Gina as he left med bay.

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Gina replied with a small salute.

“GABI?” CJ called over the comms unit on his datpad.

“Yes, Captain.”

“I’m on my way to the bridge.” He rubbed his temples to ease a tension headache. “Begin a ship-wide diagnostic.”

“Acknowledged.”

CJ poked the icon for Cal’s comms unit. “Cal?”

A second or two passed before Cal answered, “Here, Cap, go ahead.”

“Did I catch you napping?” CJ said lightly.

“No, sir, I’m, ah...at the submarine races,” Cal told him candidly.

The unwanted image of Warren Caltrop with his bald head, gold earring, and silver cybernetic eye seated on the toilet with his pants around his ankles as he talked on the comms, while most likely in the middle of a graphic e-novel, flashed across CJ’s mind. The visual was like drinking sour milk while being sprayed in the face with skunk musk.

“Oookay. Shuttle prep at zero-seven-thirty. Wheels up at zero-eight-hundred,” CJ told him as quickly as possible.

“Copy that, Cap. I’ll be ready.”

CJ shook his head to clear the image, as he walked the short distance to the lift and poked the ‘up’ icon on the control pad. The illuminated icons flashed a couple of times then slowly dimmed to off.

“Ugh, shhhit.” CJ’s shoulders slumped as he stared at the door of the nonoperational lift. *What else is going to go wrong?* he wondered. *Just a little superstition, nothing to worry about.* Curse-schmurse, Tuffy Polenz had told him with a nervous little laugh. *I should never have brought us here. Gina’s right. This place is cursed.*

He turned aside, opened the hatch to the access ladder, and climbed up to the next deck. He made his way through the crew compartment and looked longingly at the door to his quarters as he passed it by. *Not yet*, he thought, *but soon*. CJ groaned as he suddenly thought of the size of the entry he would have to make to bring the logbook up to date.

He walked through the hatch and onto the bridge of the *Altered Moon*. He stood and looked around for a moment at the mess and the breach seal stuck to the view port when a sharply dressed woman with black hair and thin-rimmed glasses shimmered into view at the operations station.

“Good evening, GABI.”

“Good morning, Captain,” she replied.

Two years ago GABI had been limited to the Captain’s quarters and was unknown even to the crew of the *Altered Moon*. Boss thought it best to keep the sentient artificially intelligent ‘persona’ a secret from everyone. After the thwarted mutiny attempt of Trigger Treesh two years ago, GABI had become a regular member of the crew. A short time later, ‘She’ received a hover drone from Nelson Moon on Cantankerous Base back before the Kang invasion that gave her the freedom to float around under her own power. Now, she was the operations officer of the *Altered Moon* and had a dock built into the operations station, which allowed her to project herself in every compartment, except crew quarters of course. Since she didn’t need sleep, she was the perfect backup for every position on the ship.

“Yes, it is morning isn’t it? Sitrep, if you please, GABI.”

“Ship-wide check is complete, Captain. Results are as follows: Ship systems overall are at ninety-two-point-six percent operational. Life-support systems are operational and secure. Dark matter propulsion systems are ready and standing by. Inner system engines are operational. String field drive and quantum jump computer are available at your command. Main thruster system is seventy-six percent operational with twenty-five portside thrusters disabled. Portside burst emitter has been destroyed, which leaves special tactic options inoperable. Particle cannons are

operational. Portside forward missile port is damaged. Three compartments are currently decompressed with emergency bulkheads in place. Emergency defense fields are energized and the shields are holding at fifty-two percent.” GABI looked at CJ and finished her report with, “No fatalities.”

No fatalities, he thought to himself. The statement seemed to trigger the fatigue of the last day and a half. “Very good, thank you, GABI.”

“Preliminary scans are complete. The analysis is available on the command station readout.”

“Thank you.” CJ sat down heavily in the captain’s chair and brought up the analysis. The more he studied the report, the more confused he became. “What’s this? Cargo containers? Dozens of cargo containers. All empty?”

“It appears so, but why would anyone go to such lengths to hide empty cargo containers?” GABI asked rhetorically.

Disappointment and irritation, followed by anger, ran through his mind. After everything they went through to get here, there could have at least been something shiny. *But noooo, rusty old cargo containers is what we find. Cursed is right.* CJ leaned forward and put his head in his hands with his elbows on his knees.

“Ugggh, I’m tired.” He yawned and groaned. “I’m going to have to sleep on this one, GABI. Set autopilot to station keeping and stand down ship’s operations. Resume at zero-eight-hundred.”

“Understood, sir.” She set thruster control to maintain their position and then engaged the periodic scans and perimeter alerts.

“I’d like to have a moment alone, please, GABI.”

“Of course, Captain.” She nodded and shimmered away.

CJ liked to sit alone on the bridge when things were quiet and listen to the sounds of the ship. He leaned back in the chair and put his head against the headrest. He closed his eyes for a second and felt the muscles in his neck and shoulders relax. His mind began to wander. He saw Katy and himself meeting for the first time at the crew muster for the *Istraulis*. He’d fallen in love with her immediately. His body recoiled in the chair as the image of a Kang warrior ripped through the scene, grabbed Katy by the arm, and shot a weapon at CJ. The blast blew him out through the hull and into space. He tumbled ass over applecart through the void.

“How am I still alive—still alive—still alive—still alive...?” he asked with only an echo for an answer.

He tried to turn around only to find his old nemesis, Trigger Treesh, laughing while he kicked CJ in the head. He reeled backward from the force of the kick and bounced off the hull of a Marlacuer Imperial Security ship, landing in a cargo container that constantly overflowed with an endless supply of black diamonds. Suddenly the cargo container was gone and he was surrounded by dozens of ships, all bearing down on him with weapons hot. They fired at him once and CJ cringed in a vain attempt to escape the oncoming barrage just as someone called out to him.

“Seedge!” Space <blink> bridge <blink> space, “CJ!” space <blink> <blink> bridge—Katy.

“Katy?”

“Hey, why don’t you come to bed? Come on.”

CJ sat forward rubbing a stiff neck, “Uh, that was a trippy friggin’ dream.” He smacked his lips to try to relieve the dryness from sleeping with his mouth open. He got up

from the captain's chair and put an arm around Katy. Too tired to worry about the empty containers, he smiled and said, "Good idea."

Together they went off and left the discovery of the century for another day.

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