

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.”

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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.”

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